

Max Anton Brewer  
911 Old Crown St  
Corona NM, 88318  
530.925.6522  
Livinglibrary@riseup.net

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SIGNAL: A Book of Secrets

by Max Anton Brewer

Brewer / SIGNAL /

For Jorge Luis Borges,  
who was given a library and struck blind.

For Philip Kindred Dick,  
who saw the truth and died trying to explain it.

And for Sir Terence Pratchett,  
who created a world and lost himself in the process.

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## 1 Information

Kit found the letter after Lewis died. His hands shook as he read the envelope. The last remnant of Lewis Postie. The unfinished business of a ghost.

The paper was brittle with age. It creased under his white-knuckle grip. He could barely make out the words through years of dust. "Oss Richardson, of the Dams, in the Future." No return address.

Stranger yet, the express-mail stamp in the corner. Hand-inked, the arrows and curlicues sketched hurriedly. No one but a Postie would know that symbol. A Postie like Lewis.

Or like Kit.

In all their adventures, Lewis had never spoken of this. Why had they not traveled to this Dams place? How could this urgent delivery lie buried for so long? It must be decades old. Time-delayed, yes. Until when? The Future?

Either the Future would never come, escaping from grasp like the horizon, or it was here already. No time like the present, Lewis used to say. This shouldn't be lingering in storage. It should be delivered.

Postie rule number one: All mail gets delivered.

Kit decided he would take it. Find the Dams, find this Oss or

his descendants. Finish the business. Give Lewis a good send-off.

He secured the letter carefully in his satchel. Then he said good-bye to the golden hills of Califa, ignited the RIGG, and rumbled north along the shattered high-way.

#

"He just fell," Kit said, staring at his feet. "Out of nowhere. Lewis was a great climber. The shale just slid out from under him. I couldn't carry him, his body, back up the cliff. So I buried him there. At the bottom of the ravine." The memory choked him.

"I'm truly sorry, son. Things happen that way. World's made of accidents." Great Margot peered at him from under her parasol. "I'm sure you did right by him. He did love those Califa mountains."

Kit wiped his nose on the back of his hand. Looked away to hide his face. He sat on the deck of Margot's ship, *Impatience*, in Cascadia Quay. Masts and riggings cross-hatched the sunset. Gull screams twined with groaning timbers and the slap of the surf. The sun was high and hot and Kit felt his skin pinking. He tipped his white Postie hat to shade his nose.

"He did. And the Califans loved him. I went around, you know, one last circuit. After. And everyone was real sorry to hear about it. Apologetic. But they didn't care about me. They would

take their mail, some of them tried to buy the RIGG, but I got no outgoing."

"None? In all of Califa?" Margot tried to hide her surprise. Kit understood. Califa wasn't like Cascadia, messengers on the roads thick as bees. It was rougher country, drier, with more bandits. Folks usually jumped at a chance to send a letter.

"None. Not in Cascadia, either. I keep asking, but people just size me up and shake their heads. Doesn't matter that I've been on the route ten years. Lewis was a Great and Trusted Postie. In their eyes I'm just a kid."

"Is that what you wanted to ask me about, then?" Margot leaned back in her deck-chair. "Looking for work? We all start out somewhere, ain't no shame in prenticing a while longer. You know anything about boats?"

"No! I mean, no, thank you, that's really kind of you. I never really pictured myself a boat Postie. Besides, I've got the RIGG. It was Lewis's baby, you know, and it's up to me to take care of it. Nobody else knows the workings of it. What I came to ask you about..." He slid the wrinkled letter from his bag. "You know anything about this? Everyone I've asked, they say it's a myth. Supposed to be upriver somewhere, in the Gorge."

Margot held the letter in spidery hands, tilting it this way and that, lips pursed.

"I mean," he went on, "even the other Posties in Portall won't talk about it. They clam right up. That's why I came to you. You know Cascadia better than anybody. How can an Cascadian city have no mail service at all?"

"That's the question, isn't it." She squinted off into the distance. Upriver. "First off, the Dams ain't a Cascadian city. Hasn't been since the Crash. While we were fighting with Califa and New Bethem, they took the opportunity to build a wall. Controlled the Cascadia watershed with their Dam, held the Gorge hostage. The Council tried to open negotiations, but it was a lost cause."

Kit looked around, at the wide estuary where the Cascadia and the Wellmet merged into the risen sea. He gestured at high-water marks on ruined skyscrapers nearby.

"It doesn't look like they're damming the waters now," he said. "Those algae stains tell me that the tides are pretty regular here."

"Sure enough," Margot allowed. "River's as predictable as it ever can be. Nobody knows if they're still up there."

"Well, hasn't anyone gone to check?" Kit knew he was overstepping his bounds. He wanted this information, bad, but Margot was a Great Postie. She ran her tongue across her teeth for a while. He would have to let her pace the story. "Go on," he

sighed.

"Well, the Bethemites sent a force through the Gorge. History don't say what kind of weapons they were using, but one side must have had something right nasty. Forest been out of control ever since. Bandits, critters, overgrowth. The Gorge is downright impassable. We built other routes across the mountains."

"What about the Dams? Did they survive?"

"Couldn't say. We lost all word from them after that. Not many folk headed east, not after the plague in Bethem."

"What about the Posties? Nobody's ever tried to go there? I mean, Postie rule number seventeen is —"

"'Try every door.' Thank you, I know the rules. Made that one myself, matter-fact. Tell you that story sometime, if you're lucky."

"But of course we tried that door. Likely a big one, seeing as they've got such a big wall. Couple Posties have made that trek. Lewis once told me he went there, back during the War. Course he always was a spinner of tales. Some others since, though I been at sea too long to know their names. Brave souls all."

"So? What happened to them? What did they learn?"

Margot squinted at him from under her umbrella. Kit squatted



to face her.

"We don't know, Kit. They died, I reckon."

#

Kit set out in the morning, freshly stocked with food and drinking water and two cords of plastic for the RIGG. The sun blared down through the open windows of the cab. The road was treacherous. The Dams was only a hundred miles, but it would be a day's ride from Portall.

He climbed over shattered plates of asphalt. He slid sideways through a thick deposit of clay, remains of a washout. The river was low, wrung dry by summer sun, but in the raintimes these steep cliffs must gush with waterfalls and rockslides. He hunched over the wheel, staring through dark goggles at the high ridges of the south bank.

There. A flash of motion, a shadow snuffed out on the rock face.

Bandits.

Kit resisted the urge to slow down. He drove with his knee while rummaging for his weapons. Grabbed his hat from the passenger seat and screwed it onto his head. He cleared his throat, hummed a few notes to wake his voice up. Time for a show.

The ambush was predictable. Kit came around a blind corner into a runnel. Two carts blocked the road, massive goats

impatient in their yokes. He considered ramming them, until a pair of feral children reared up from behind the barricade, aiming blowguns. Not for the first time, Kit regretted the RIGG's lack of a windshield. He slowed carefully.

Five men were behind the RIGG. They surfaced like roaches from some crevice. They eyed the truck, circled cautiously around both sides. The kids kept a bead on Kit. Kit watched the men in his mirrors. He identified the alpha, a tall man with a roughly shaved head and hundreds of piercings. The man oozed metal. He jangled. He was a walking suit of chainmail, rings hooked through skin hooked through rings. Where his skin could be seen, it was thick with soot and tattoo, as were his less-gilded henchmen. Kit waited until the big man was right below his door, grinning up with sharpened teeth. Then he made his first move.

"Hello there! I'm Kit Postie, your faithful friendly Postie with the mostie. What can I do you for today, outgoing ingoing got a special on overseas and do you need an envelope? We do take all donations large and small, pens paper envelopes bicycles or magic hats. Tell me your names, gentlemen, perhaps I've got a letter for you here!" He fanned a sheaf of envelopes in his left hand.

"Not likely," said the pierced man with a snort. "We the Wolves. We not doing paperwork. But since you ask, I am called

Fistula. Today, we'm taking donations as well." He smiled again, not an expression of pleasure.

"Fistula hey? Let's see, Fistula, Fistula." Kit flicked through the envelopes quickly. "Actually, we do have a Fistula here, Fistula at Hood River? That you?" Before the Wolves could respond, he kicked open the door and dropped lightly to the ground. He flourished the letter, bowing just a little to accent his messenger hat.

Fistula eyed the letter. Crossed his arms.

"Ah, of course, would you like me to read it out loud?" With the utmost pleasantness, Kit tore the edge of the envelope. He pulled out a thick white card. Then he spun it at the man's chest and hit the ground.

The explosion was small, as explosions go. Not enough to kill the man. The shock wave knocked him down and the sparks would probably give him a good burn. The sound and the smoke distracted the others.

Kit rolled twice and hit a large red button underneath the RIGG. Like other buttons, found in other interesting places around the truck, this had the effect of powering up all the various lamps and flares mounted on the bed and cab. Kit squinted even through his goggles as he leaped back into the RIGG. He revved the engine.

The kids and goats stampeded downhill in fright. The carts jounced and shattered on the rocks. Kit drove around the bend, calmly and without haste. He turned off the arc lamps. He put his hat back on the passenger seat, his hand trembling.

Something landed on the roof with a thump.

Kit braked quickly. The attacker grabbed the edge of the roof and landed catlike on the hood. Before he knew it she was inside with a knife to his throat.

"Keep driving," she said. Kit kept his face forward and his foot on the gas. He eyed her sidewise. A Wolf, her face smeared with black soot. Hard to tell more than that, wreathed as she was in cloaks and rags.

"Don't you mean 'turn around'? Or do you have more friends waiting up ahead?" Kit could feel the knife against his neck, but her grip wasn't firm. More theatrical than threatening.

"You shut up. Just drive. You drive, or you die and I drive. I do not care which. Do you?" Her voice was husky but young.

"I think that's a false dilemma. Let's look at the logic of the situation." Kit swallowed. The knife was sharp enough to shave what little stubble he had.

"If you know how to drive this thing, and you want to kill me, then your best chance to do that was before we started talking. So either you're not a killer, or you're not a driver.

Or both. Which means you're not going to kill me. But you're still threatening me. So either you think I'm going to fight back, try to kill you first, or you're afraid I'll leave you behind. I'm not exactly in a good fighting position, driving as I am at nearly twelve miles per hour. Therefore –" That was when she punched him. Right in the ear.

"I said shut up. I'm not killing you today. But I can hit you in your head lots of times. You drive. You only talk if I ask you questions. Yes?"

"Is that a question?" Kit's head still spun, but at least she had put the knife away.

"Yes. Question two: where do you drive today?"

"I'm going to a place called the Dams. Do you know it?"

She laughed. "Now you are asking questions. Do you want more punching? But, of course I know it. The Dams is where you will take me. Understand?"

"That's barely a question. Can we just talk like normal people?"

"Do you understand, the Dams is where you will take me?" She was angry, ready to hit him again. Kit thought back to Postie training with Lewis, what to do in a conflict, subcategory moving vehicle: find emotional fulcrum and appease until next possible stopping place. Emotional fulcrum.

"Yes, of course I'll take you to the Dams! We always pick up hitch-hikers. I mean, I do." The thought of Lewis hurt him somewhere deep in his ribcage. He sensed the young woman relax. "Really, though, what's your name? Mine's Kit."

She turned to face him, sideways in the seat. He glanced over to see astonishing silver eyes staring at him from the creosote face, tangles of hair writhing in the wind like snakes. She looked back to the road.

"Maya," she said.

#

Kit delivered Maya to a spring a few miles from town. They sat in the shade of an outcrop and drank deep. It was that time of day when the world is inebriated by the sun and the horizon wobbles unsteady. Mosquitos droned.

Kit didn't want her to go. He knew it as soon as they started talking. Yes, she was a forest bandit, and probably a runaway at that, but who was he to judge? And when she spoke, the calm ferocity of her voice gave the impression of wisdom.

"These, are false fir. This one, cedar. Over there with white flower, is dogwood." She pointed with her face, scanning the woods with her whole head and jutting her chin at the trees Kit asked about.

"Okay, I've seen those in Califa. But across the river, that

huge one, what's that?"

"It is gingko. Very good for memory. I grew up drinking this, tea of leaf. Why my memory is so strong." She smiled. Her teeth weren't filed, but they did look sharp.

They had been in the truck for hours, and barely a word had passed between them. Now she was in her element. Kit looked at Maya, her small lithe frame crouched inside ragged robes. She must have been scared silent on the ride, he thought.

"Have you ever been in a truck before? Any vehicle?"

"I have been in auto, yes. Many times the Wolves have taken these things from boys such as you." Her eyes twinkled as she teased him. "Not so much while they are moving. Mostly we hang them from trees or bury them deep for a cold house."

"Okay, so you scrap them down and use them for structures. Is that what your friends were going to do with my RIGG?"

"Not friends. Fistula, his pack, they are, to me, cousins. Uncles. Not friends."

"Then why were you with them on the road?"

Maya glared at him.

"With them? I was not. They were hunting auto. Boy stuff. Stupid waste of time. They understand not of the true work to be done. Too busy with pain-games to notice the Mother dying. Too afraid of the Dams, so they take small pickings from other boys.

Like you."

There it was. Kit had been waiting for her to speak of the Dams again. He knew he couldn't be the one to mention it, the way she clammed up last time, but now that she had broached the subject he could extract some more knowledge about the situation. Maybe even get her to come with him, as a guide.

"Afraid of the Dams? Why would anyone be afraid of the Dams?"

Maya looked him in the eyes for a moment. He held her gaze, watched as her nostrils flickered. Her eyes drilled into him. Kit unconsciously groped for the burning-lens on its cord around his neck. He finally felt sympathy for the ants he had studied as a kid, understood the feeling of being watched very closely from a great distance.

"You are idiot." She got up and turned away, reaching deep into brambles and finding ripe berries.

"I'm not an idiot," Kit said. "I just got here! I'm trying to do something, something big, and I need to know what I'm going into. You're the one who's been living here for ages. Please, tell me what you know."

Maya looked at Kit over her shoulder. Kit realized he was pleading, his gangly arms spread wide in helplessness. He pulled the brim of his hat over his eyes and looked at the ground. After a moment's embarrassment he walked over to the RIGG and started



stocking the gasifier. He performed the ritual smoothly, unlocking the lid of the red-hot barrel with a pair of thick gloves and stuffing a bag of garbage down its throat.

"The Dams is power-hungry city full of shitballs run by mega-shitball." Maya said this with such gravity that Kit nearly burned himself laughing.

"Oh yeah? What does mega-shitball call himself?"

"He calls himself King."

Kit locked the lid, stowed the gloves, and stepped down from the flatbed. He cocked his head at Maya, waiting for her to say more.

She held forth her hand, wordlessly offering him a blackberry. Her fingers were stained pink with juice. He took it carefully and popped it in his mouth, the warm sour flavor flooding his saliva glands, and smiled involuntarily.

Kit saw her hands as she washed them in the creek. Tattoos covered them, a fine filigree of script. Tiny words, hundreds, tight packed, wandering up her wrists and out of sight. He took a little breath, not a gasp, but she heard. Shot him a glance, eyes wide. Fear.

Maya clutched her cloaks and waterskin tight to her body and darted into the woods.

The Dams was not hard to find. The forest had been thick for the last hour, overgrown on both sides of the river. Here the sky opened up. The river bent to the south, abruptly sliced by a gray blade of concrete. Kit drove slower as he passed farmlands and ruined suburbs. Level 3 Ruin, he guessed, a city destroyed and scavenged and repurposed, a baby bird nestled in the ashes of a phoenix.

He thought of what Maya had said. A King. That implied a feudal system. The power structure of a kingdom would require a standing army, a fortress, a city full of tax-payers, and a countryside of serfs. Best place for a fortress would be the Dam itself. City would be next to the fortress. Concentric circles of power around that, out to the deep wilds where the Wolves roam. He imagined Lewis sitting next to him, smoking a roll-up, congratulating him on his deductive powers.

Then he clenched his jaw and just aimed for the giant wall.

Kit coasted the RIGG in the last stretch before the wall. Strangers tended to be touchy about large barrels of fire moving at speed toward their towns. He could see smashed cars at the base of the sharpened poles that made up the wall. He estimated its height at twenty feet. Nice square guard-tower above the gates.

The sun was setting behind him, casting sharp shadows. Kit

squinted through his goggles. That shape, irregular and pointy: definitely a person. Aiming a gun.

He stopped a good distance away. Slung his satchel over his shoulder. Donned his hat.

"Hello there!" Kit shouted from the ground, hands wide in the air. "I'm a Postie. Peaceful visitor to your town. I bring word from far away. May I approach?"

"You can stay right where you are." The man squinted down at him along the rifle barrel. A wiry old fellow with a worn-in sneer. "I can kill you fine from here. No Posties allowed in the Dams."

"You really don't have to do that. I am unarmed and alone. Nobody knows I'm here." Kit winced. Didn't mean to say it like that.

"Where the hell did you come from, kid? Why you pretending to be a Postie?"

"I'm not pretending! I am a Postie. This is my RIGG, this is my mailbag, this is my hat. I have a very important letter, and I'm here to do my duty. I demand you stop interfering with my mail service!" Sometimes this worked on the military types. "I want to speak to your commanding officer."

The guard lowered his gun, cocked his head at Kit. Laughed without humor.

"Unlucky for you, I'm Captain of the Guard. The only man I report to is the King. And he don't like Posties at all. Now, I think we're going to have to arrest you." He shouted to the ground, and men in white uniforms began streaming out of the gates. "Charges of: unlawful delivery of information, violating the Vagrancy Act, and combustion without a permit. All of which carry the penalty of death. We'll have the trial in the morning, followed by the execution."

"You can't just jail me! I'm here on a diplomatic mission. I have a letter, carrying the express mail stamp, for someone named Oss Richardson!" The guards were still pulling him along, patting his body for weapons, but the captain was struck by that name.

"Halt, men. What did you just say?"

"Oss Richardson. This letter. Express —"

"That's what I thought. You're in trouble now. Charge of: taking the Lord's name in vain. That carries a penalty worse than death."

"What do you mean, worse than death? Lord's name?"

"Divine rights is what I mean. You can't be stepping on somebody's divine rights. Now you'll have to have an audience with the King." The old soldier actually shuddered. "I don't envy you. But hell, I guess you'll get your letter delivered. Only I recommend you call him 'King Osric' when you hand it over. Or

better, 'Your Majesty.' Hit him, boys."

They hit him.

## 2 Attention

Maya dropped lightly from the wall and landed in a dim alley. Her heart beat so loud she feared it would wake the Damfolk. Flattening herself to the wall, she crept toward the lights.

So bright they were, and so steady. She had seen lectrics before, but never so many in one place. Even Kit's array of weaponized light would pale before these bulbs. Maya hesitated at the throat of the alleyway, memorizing her route. South through the forest, avoiding the Barracks. Careful across the crushed autos and metal caltrops, then hasty with the rope ladder and up over the wall. Into the Dams. She made note of the brewery across the street and the colors of the houses bordering the alley. Then she cinched her robes tight and began to climb.

From the rooftops, Maya mapped the city. The wall encircled it neatly, opening only at the west and east where its gates crossed the old high-way. Barracks Gate to the west, downstream, where so many Wolves had lost their lives in ill-planned skirmishes. Hunter's Gate to the east, before the Wilderness. The Smithy due south at the wall's edge, its chimneys trailing the only smoke in the city. And of course the Palace, north, spilling like a tumor from the Dam Itself. In the last of the twilight

Maya saw the water trapped behind that giant concrete tourniquet. So much water. So much power. And these people would keep it all for themselves, and waste it making the night bright as day, and strangle the life out of everyone downstream.

Maya's upper lip curled and she spat at the city. She growled. She looked down at her hands, chanting to herself softly. She thought of the fires of the Wolves dancing in these streets. Of the river flowing freely to the sea.

"Hey! Is somebody up there?" A man's voice, thick and sloppy. Maya shrank back from the edge of the roof.

"Who are you talking to?" Now a woman. "Horace, get inside."

"No, someone just spit on me. I'm sure it weren't rain, there's a cloud in the sky. Get down from there, you kids!"

Maya ran on the pads of her feet. She slid down steep shingles and leapt across a gap to another building. Now glad that the wall held the city so tight, that the Damfolk lived so disgustingly close to each other. She aimed for the taller buildings around the central plaza. Slowed down, as she determined no chase was on. Looked for a hideout, to wait until the darkness came.

#

Maya did not know how to turn off the lights in the outfitter's, so she broke them. A thick towel protected her hands

and muffled the sound. She hoped no one would notice. It was after midnight and she could not imagine anyone still being awake, but still the lights burned. A whole city of children, afraid of the dark.

Street-light swam through the thick glass windows and into the shop. Maya stalked the aisles. She shoved a small back-pack into a larger one and continued filling it, dry food and jerky, steel knives, soap and rope. She found a drawer full of electric head-lamps and dumped them all in the bag. No matches, of course, not unless she wanted to go to the Smithy. She would have to improvise.

In the apothecary, thankfully lit only by an old eled, Maya fingered through hundreds of vials and tiny drawers. She smiled occasionally and slipped a jar or bundle into her pockets. A few drawers she emptied entirely. The snores of an old man echoed down the stairs, covering the clinking and rustling of her theft.

At the glassmaker's shop she found what she wanted. A hand tool, with two arms like pliers. She clicked it a few times, satisfied with the tiny bolt of lightning that jumped across the ends. Then she thumbed the light switch and slithered out the back window. Up the drainpipe, across the farrier's roof and the stable, then through the crown of an oak and onto the high roof of the church. Her hideout.



Maya sorted through her prizes, carefully packing the tools and food into the larger back-pack. She took the small pack and slid back down to ground level. She returned hauling more than a few pounds of steaming chickenshit.

"Hello." The voice came from behind her. Maya spun around, horrified.

It was a girl, or young woman, in a clean white dress. Not armed. Her hair was long and straight and kempt. When she stepped closer, Maya could see she had two different eyes, one green and one brown.

"My name's Iris. I'm sorry to startle you. Only, you look like you're going on an adventure, and I was wondering where you're going, and also if I could please come along. If not, I will scream."

Maya was struck by this blatant coercion. She could not help but smile.

"That is beautiful threat. Please do not scream. I am Maya." She held her hands out in front of her, a peaceful gesture.

"Well, I don't want to scream. To be honest, I don't want to be caught out here any more than you do. But the worst they can do to me is lock me up again. As for what they'll do to a Wolf caught inside the wall? I don't even want to find out. So please, take me with you." Iris had no malice in her voice, just

desperation.

Maya thought about it for a moment. Of course she could not adopt a soft Damfolk girl. But perhaps a little hope would keep Iris quiet.

"Okay."

"What?"

"Okay. You come with me. But I have more things to do here, to prepare. And you will need real clothes. Meet me at this place again tomorrow night. Understand?"

Before the girl could reply, Maya shouldered her bags and folded into the shadows.

#

She decided to plant her bomb at the Dam Itself. The Palace would be a good symbolic target, but she wanted to see the water break free of its shackles and rage down the valley. Maya sneaked through the streets, taking the roofs and back-ways when she could. The morning was coming, she could smell it. She was hesitant even in the darkest alleys.

The buildings here were taller, and more grand. Some were built entirely of bricks, real bricks, prized from a hundred different buildings and stolen away from their dying neighbors to be interned here with strangers. Bricks from different centuries, from warring nations, from whatever structures had once reigned

in this place, before it was the Dams, before it was a kingdom of fear and waste.

The heaps of garbage in the narrow back-ways created their own walls and baffles. She wondered when someone would come to pick it up. Probably not during the daytime. These alleys were here to provide a sight-out-of-mind so the rich Damfolk could enjoy the illusion of clean streets. If a garbage-man were coming, he would be here before dawn.

Maya's foot hit something that rolled. She crouched, picked it up and sniffed. An apple. Not rotten, or moldy, or worm-eaten. How was this garbage? She savaged it with her teeth.

She rounded a corner and found the wall. Not an easy climb, but she had always been a good climber. She made her way to a corner and from her robes she pulled the rope ladder. A gift from Catalpa, it had been rolled up close to her back for months now. She weighted one end with a rock and threw it across the vertical poles of the wall. A tricky bit at the top, where she had to find footing on the sharpened points of the posts and reel in the ladder. She dropped it down along the outside of the wall and made her way to earth.

She was very near the river. Lazy splashes sounded from the concrete of the Dam. The water must have been much higher once, rising to the edge of the basin and spilling over. It was still

more water than she had ever seen in her life. So much that she could not imagine wading or even swimming across. Stretching miles away to the east, glimmering slickly in the starlight.

There was a strip of ground between the wall and the south bank of the river. Some sort of defensible space, she assumed, in case of invasion by water. Only rubble and shards occupied that strip. Dynamite had done its thing to whatever had been there before. Nearby, the last remnants of the former city hulked between her and the Wilderness.

Maya crouched in the lee of a vine-covered ruin. She made a strange compost pile in the smaller back-pack, layering the chickenshit with diverse chemicals and powdered metals. In a copper bowl she mixed a batch of powder. Massaged into a length of cord, this made a fuse. She stowed the pack of supplies under the broken spar of an ancient phone-pole. Then she took her bomb to the Dam.

Two guards stood on the bridge that spanned the wall and connected the Palace to the Dam Itself. Maya saw a sensor-light and flattened herself to the wall, hoping to stay out of its line of sight. She crept along that beach, in full view of the guards, counting on her huntwalk to keep her invisible. Once under the bridge she let herself breathe again. She could hear the men's voices.

"I thought I would die laughing. When that kid waved his hat at us, like, I'm just a little Postie who don't know where he's at, please don't hurt me. Innocent messenger." He had a nasty laugh, with whiskey and knives in it. "Thought that was all history. Captain said the King's going to grill him before he kills him. But I reckon we'll never find out what his story was."

"His story? He's a con man, it's that simple." The other guard had a reedy voice. "Probably one of the waste-wanderers. Stole that hat and that truck off some other luckless fellow. Lying to us so we'll feed him and clothe him up, bring him into our flock. He wants to give us false hope about the world outside and sleep with our women. Same thing these people have always done. Someday they'll understand the word of the Last Few Days, and make their peace with civilization. Like the parable of the ants and the grasshopper, as you may know."

"Yeah, yeah. I didn't say I wanted to be preached at, I just thought it was funny. You don't expect to see that sort of foolishness anymore. But I'm too tired for your preaching. Look, the sky's blueing up. Almost done here. Another day another dawn, hey?"

"Another day another dawn, brother."

With her bomb affixed to the wall of the Dam Itself, and loops of fuse scrawling up the riverbank, Maya wondered what

would happen to Kit. She had rather liked him, after he had driven her to the Dams. She felt bad for not telling him the truth. But her mission was so important, and he was such a good distraction, that she could not let the opportunity pass. If he really was in trouble, she thought, then hopefully her success would provide him with a distraction in turn. He would get away in his RIGG. Anyway, nothing she could do about it now.

Maya lit the fuse with the electric tool she had stolen. It took a few tries to get the spark at the right angle. The clicking of the machine seemed too loud. She took nervous glances at the bridge above her.

Finally it caught. Not a moment too soon, as the sky was getting lighter and she would still need to make an escape.

She had to watch. The fuse sizzled down the riverbank, sulfurous smoke pouring from it and dripping upwards. The guards would smell it, but not soon enough to stop her. Maya rubbed her palms together in glee. The fire reached the bomb.

Smoke began to retch from the back-pack. It popped. It sputtered. Something blew out the side and made a high-pitched wheeze. Maya watched as the bomb failed, completely, to detonate.

"Do you hear that?"

"Yeah, that can't be good. Hit the lights, will you?"

Maya shrank back into the shadow of the bridge.

The Dam erupted in lights. Sirens sang. The city awakened.

## 3 Noise

Iris slipped into the Palace by the workman's door. The handle was locked, but the mechanism inside had long been corroded. She tiptoed through the narrow halls of the servant quarters. She could hear the cooks and stewards snoring in their rooms. A fleshy drumming came from one apartment. Try as she might, she couldn't unhear the whispered blasphemies from the voices in that room. She hurried on, mounting a staircase to the terranean levels.

Iris spiraled up the stairs, looking for footprints or candle drippings on the carpet. Starlight leaked in through arched windows in the dining chamber. She squinted at it, as the brightness of her own nightgown illuminated the space.

Another staircase took her to the dormers. The hallway loomed before her, clausttric, ribbed with doorways, the carpeted throat of some terrible beast stretching impossibly to the horizon. Iris walked down it, her heart racing. She could hear the Princes and Princesses in their suites, sounds of sleep and sex and sobs. The Palace was huge, and their rooms were much more spacious than those of the servants. Yet she heard everything. She saw the air as it moved, ripples of suble colors, shimmering ethereal patterns that she could never escape. Even if she closed her eyes



and plugged her ears, she knew she would feel the sounds on her skin.

Far down the hall she stopped at a certain door. No different than the rest, it stood seven feet of solid oak and was heavily bolted into the cement walls. Iris knelt in front of the lock and slipped a few clever wires from the seams of her dress. She closed her eyes and slid the picks into the lock. A few seconds of listening, prodding, twisting and scraping, and the door yawned open.

Inside the suite a night-light glowed. Iris winced as her pupils adjusted. She eased the door shut and carefully locked herself in. Returned the picks to their hidden pockets. Walked softly to the bedroom.

Iris collapsed on her silken sheets and began to cry.

#

Hours later, Iris arose and began to pack. She had not slept, just reviewed her encounter with Maya. The brave woman, dressed in tattered canvas, preparing for a great adventure. Tattoos swarming her face, black soot running in rivulets from her temples. Silver eyes glowing in moonlight.

Iris knew that Maya was lying. The keen senses that kept her insomniac, that had her locked in this room under the pretense of being Quite Ill, forced her to perceive the truth in people's

faces despite their false words. She had thought about it, here in the never-dark prison of her suite. Decided that it must be tonight, that Maya would not spend a whole day waiting around in a city where Wolves would be killed on sight.

"I'm sure I can find her," Iris whispered. She had wandered the sleeping city for years, her only escape, skulking the streets of the Dams at night, watching, listening. She had seen the Wolf girl running across the rooftops all night, hiding in shadows and climbing in windows. If Maya would leave tonight, then Iris would go with her.

She dressed in an outfit cobbled together from many nights wandering. Lightweight leather boots, trousers and jerkin, vest and tie, hair pinned under a working man's cap. Secreted her few tools and prizes in the pockets of her vest. Gazed sadly at her few tattered books, adventure stories all. Too big to carry.

She didn't bother to lock the door on the way out. By the time any of her maids or tutors arrived, she would be deep in the Wilderness.

On the way to the dining chamber she had to pass the throne room. As she stepped off the staircase, Iris could hear Grandfather's voice. His tones were quiet but simmering with rage. She must have laid in bed for too long. The old man always got up before the dawn.

Iris crept around the corner. She heard another voice, a young man, responding with false pleasantry. She came close to the arched door of the throne room and peeked inside. From this angle she could not see them, but she caught a reflection on the bald pate of a brass bust.

Osric hunched in his throne, leaning heavily to one side. Stringy hair dangled from the sides of his skull. A lush robe wrapped his scrawny bones. He held a pistol comfortably in his right hand.

His interlocutor stood tall and lanky, with a shock of red hair poking out from underneath a white hat. His hands were tied behind his back. The prisoner. From her window she had seen the guards driving his mad vehicle, the boy unconscious and draped across the hood. He gulped air now, and spoke rapidly.

"Well if you do have to execute me, and I do understand rules are rules and suchlike, although I can't say I see why you would completely ban your community from contact with the outside world and kill all outsiders but nevertheless, you're the King, Your Majesty, and since the letter I have is only for you and no one else is here to know it, would it offend you greatly to just open it and allow me to go to my death with a last bit of honor in my own chosen profession? Your Majesty."

"It offends me greatly that you even exist, little webworm.

We have done such things for this place. For decades we have kept all wastelanders from defiling this place with their lies and deprivations. And you would bring back such filth, have them wander in our streets and prey on the minds of innocent citizens. There is no honor in what you do, child. Yours is the path of destruction." His leathery face twisted with disgust.

"Mhm yes I hear Your Majesty. Nonetheless, I see you do have the letter right there. Your soldiers already rummaged my satchel and found all my mail-bombs and other Postie tricks. You can see for yourself that it's a very old letter, and addressed to Your own Majesty or so I'm told no offense to your divine rights intended. Aren't you just a little bit curious?"

Grandfather made a sneering wobble of his head, like a vulture. Iris knew that gesture. Her fingernails dug deep into the flesh of her palms. She waited for the gunshot, the spray of blood.

No blood came.

"We are not curious. We know all that is to be known, we are the Chosen Mind of the Dam. There is nothing new under the sun in these Last Few Days.

"However. . ."

Osric opened the letter with his teeth. He held the letter between two fingers, as if it stank, and spat the envelope into a

waste-basket. The pistol never wavered.

Iris wondered if she could steal the prisoner's vehicle after he was dead.

#

"Where did you get this letter, boy?" Grandfather's voice was unsteady. He held the single page in his left hand, the gun slack in his right. His eyes bulged as if staring down a mountain-cat. "Who gave it to you?"

"It was passed on to me by my post-father, Your Majesty. It was... part of his estate. I found it after his death, and it was post-dated to this year. It bears a stamp of utmost importance. I brought it to you as fast as I could. Would you, perhaps, like to read it out loud?" The prisoner leaned forward, straining against the ropes at his wrists. He was itching with curiosity. Iris smiled sadly at his puckish optimism.

"Never." From some compartment of his throne Osríc pulled a box of matches. His hands shook as he ripped the page into a fistful of shreds. The gun sat, hammer cocked, on the throne's arm. He took three matches in his fingers and struck them all at once, torching the papers. His eyes locked coldly on the boy as the flames licked his fingers. Iris cringed as Grandfather crushed the embers in his fist.

Klaxons screeched like morning birds. Lights flared outside

the windows.

The Postie ran out the door headfirst, arms tied behind his back.

"Guards!" shouted the King.

Boots stampeded toward them already. Iris heard them, two bends up the corridor. The boy was running the wrong way.

As he passed her, Iris stuck one foot out of her hide. The Postie tripped and landed prone, sliding roughly on the carpet. Iris yanked him up to his knees. She snagged his hat from the floor and jammed it onto his head. Looked him in the eyes.

"I'm a friend. I know where your truck is. I'll help but you have to take me with you."

He nodded. They ran together toward the dining chambers. Shots rang out as they passed the throne room door, but Osrice was too frail to give chase.

"I'm Iris."

"Kit."

"Down these stairs. The kitchens."

Kit was surprisingly graceful, double-stepping the stairs with his hands tied. When they reached the kitchen four cooks greeted them with bleary surprise. Iris grabbed a long narrow knife.

"Nobody move!" She pointed at them with it, and the cooks

shrugged their hands into the air. Iris sliced the ropes from Kit's arms. He rubbed his wrists and thanked her. She slid the knife into her belt, grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the exit. As they ran, he shouted back to the kitchen staff.

"Thank you! Good luck!" Iris questioned him with a look. "It's a Postie thing," he explained. "Besides, they're going to need it."

Moments later they burst out the side door into alley dawn. Indigo light outlined the blackness of towering buildings. Iris ran toward the road, but Kit yanked her back just in time. Six guards ran past, heading toward the Dam. He pushed her shoulder gently and they advanced into the brilliant streets.

The truck was parked out front of the Palace. A paunchy guard idled next to it.

"Shit." Kit fussed with his hat. "The flue's been open all night. It's going to take a second to get the burner started. How are we going to get past that guy?"

"Let me take care of it. How many seconds do you need?"

"Realistically, once I'm on that truck there's no one can take it away from me. But I can't fight that big fella and stoke the burner and operate the defense systems all at once. You sure you can handle him?"

Iris didn't even bother to answer. She ran out into the

street. Even under the bright lights she was sure her disguise would work. At least on Horace.

"Horace!" She tried to put on her best man voice. It sounded terrible, more like a frog. He didn't seem to notice her at all. "Horace! Get over here right now, the prisoner's escaped! We gotta get the reward!" The guard snapped awake, his one large eyebrow jumping like a squirrel. He came running on bowlegs. She led him on an easy jog to the south, away from Kit. About the time he started puffing and hollering slow-down, she began sprinting. Over the McCumber fence, slide under this hedge, round the corner by the grocer, backtrack the alley by the farrier and out into the plaza. Kit was just clamping the lid back onto the barrel. She could see the letters on the front grille, gleaming in the street-light: RIGG.

Kit was already pumping the engine when Iris leaped into the cab. He handed her a bag of glass vials, each one sealed and full of some yellow liquid. The liquid wobbled with the vibration of the engine. Iris was deafened by the sound. Blinded. Her eardrums itched. She felt dizzy, nauseous.

"Stink-grenades!" he shouted as he pulled on his goggles. "For those guys!" He jerked his thumb behind them. Iris swallowed bile and turned around.

A carload of guards pelted down the street, nearly tipping



over as the driver corrected for all their weight. There were eight or ten of them, all packed into a little white buggy. Iris heard the faint whirr of the electric motor under the ripping noise of the RIGG.

Kit wobbled knobs and flipped switches. He revved the engine one, two, three times, then dropped a large lever. They took off, tires spinning in the dust.

Iris held tight to handles welded on the cab. She hung halfway out the window, chucking glass vials at the road behind them. The buggy appeared and disappeared through clouds of yellow gas as the Dams gave chase. The guards that weren't vomiting were shooting.

Mostly at Iris.

## 4 Catastrophe

Kit hightailed it out of the Dams with his lights off. The sky was tinged with blue and he could see well enough to evade. The buggy still following them. Iris shouted directions, sudden turns that Kit squealed through on two tires. They kept ahead of the guards, always out of sight, but Kit knew the roar of the RIGG would not let them hide.

"How do we get out of here?" He had to holler over the wind and revving engine.

"Hunter's Gate. Left! The only other way is through the Barracks. Where you came in."

"Where the guards live."

"Yes."

"Where does Hunter's Gate lead?"

"To the Wilderness. The Upriver. Don't you know?"

"Kind of just got here!" Kit swerved to dodge around a donkey cart, the apples in back gleaming under eledes. The fruit seller danced out of the way, shouting obscenities. The donkey was unperturbed.

"If we're lucky, Hunter's Gate will still be open. Dawn and dusk are the only times it draws. If not we might have to escape on foot." Iris leaned out the window, looking behind. She lobbed

a stinkbomb underhand, then dropped back inside with a satisfied smile.

"We can't leave the RIGG. It's everything I have."

"Your life is everything you have. Don't waste it on this truck!" Iris pointed a quick left and right, and the east gate heaved into view. "Look!"

The heavy wooden gate was both drawbridge and wall. It was hinged at the bottom, twenty feet long, attached by chains from its far corners to the top of the wall. The gate was closing, rising from the junkyard moat outside. Large counterweights sank from the guard towers, metal platforms just big enough to carry one guard each. Which they did.

Kit slapped a row of switches, charging every lamp on the front of the RIGG. The guards withered in the onslaught of light. He shifted gears roughly, the engine complaining, and threw all his torque into the last stretch. The men on the wall gathered their composure enough to ping bullets off the hood of the truck. Kit lowered his head and threw out his right arm, pushing Iris back into her seat. Then he hit the ramp.

The drawbridge jounced as it took the weight of the RIGG. The chains tightened with a scream. The guards were thrown from the wall, their posts yanked back upward at speed. Kit felt weightless as they arced into the air. They landed with a crash

and he bit into his tongue. Tasted blood. He glanced backward out his side window. The drawbridge was slowly opening.

"Kit!" Iris grabbed his shoulder and Kit turned back to the road. A figure stood before them, waving frantically. Maya.

He slammed on the brakes. The tires screeched. The weight of the back end took momentum, and the RIGG fishtailed sideways. Maya leaped aside, eyes alabaster in alarm. Kit cringed as he felt the back tires, bump bump, and heard Maya howl in pain. Finally the truck stopped, sideways, blocking the road. Iris opened her door and jumped out, running for the puddle of rags in the street. Running to the fallen Wolf.

#

I killed her, Kit thought. I killed her and now she's dead and I'm a murderer and a fugitive and Iris is shaking her and taking too long and she's going to get killed too and then I have to die or flee and if I flee I have to live with myself—

No. Maya was moving. Iris was lifting her, putting her own body beneath Maya's shoulder as a crutch. They hobbled toward him ever too slowly. Kit watched their silhouettes as spotlights strobed in the background. The gate was nearly open, the guards on the other side jeering and taking potshots. Kit put the truck in reverse, backing carefully toward them, straightening out for the getaway. Finally Iris boosted Maya into the cab and hopped in

and slammed the door.

Kit peeled out, ignoring the shattered road and the small trees whipping against the bottom of the RIGG. Maya was doubled up in pain, sobbing and moaning, her leg interfering with his gearshift. Iris was looking back, throwing the last of the stink bombs. Kit flipped on the arc-lamps on the tail, hoping to blind the driver of the paddy wagon. Trees loomed. They entered the Wilderness.

Kit's head swam. The adrenaline was still burning through him. He aimed as best he could for flat ground and high speed, but each section of highway was even more ruined than the last. Fortunately the electric buggy was even less capable of managing this terrain. It looked like an ungainly chicken egg trundling down a weak incline. More than once Kit looked back to see the whole thing tipping comically, but the driver seemed to know what he was doing. Occasionally some of the men would jump out of the buggy, hoping to overrun Kit on an especially slow climb, but they were conserving their bullets now and Kit outpaced them.

Iris had her eyes closed. She wasn't sleeping. Kit glanced over at her a few times, and when she finally opened her eyes he was surprised to see they were a mismatched set. One brown, one green. She looked away.

"Their batteries are going to run out soon. Those carts

aren't meant for long distances." Sounded like she knew what she was talking about. Kit wanted to ask more, whether they had stepper motors or brushless, what kind of batteries they used. But he heard his own engine sputter, and did a quick calculation in his head.

"We're going to run out, too. The RIGG burns a lot of fuel going this fast. I usually take lots of breaks to feed the burner but it's not like we're going to pull over out here." The trees were thick with shadows and vine. Kit could no longer see the river to their left, just sensed it as a coolness in the morning air. The buggy was trailing now, dropping behind the curves of the road, but still coming.

"Burner? So this really is a combustion engine?" She looked over at him sharply.

"Of course it is! Lectric motors wouldn't pull this much weight. It runs off plastic, that's why I've got so much back there."

"So it's a real fire? Not burning petro?"

Kit laughed. "Where would I get any petro? I'm a Postie, not an army. It just burns trash and routes the vapors into the carb. My post-father built it." He swallowed hard at the thought of Lewis. Hit a hard bump, careless for just a second, and Maya gasped with pain.

"Shit, sorry. Okay. We need to do something about this. There's no other roads out here, just forest?"

"How would I know? I lived in the Dams my whole life. Nobody goes Upriver except the hunters, and they don't exactly talk to me."

"Well, it's pretty clear that there's mountains on that side and the river on the other. Our best bet is a road up one of these little valleys, or just maybe a bridge."

They hit a flatter part of the road, where time and trees and tectonics had not torn it apart. Kit couldn't upshift without hitting Maya in what was pretty clearly a broken leg. She growled at him when he nudged her.

Humpty-Dumpty and all the King's men rounded the bend and accelerated.

The forest opened to a clearing. A town once, now a Level 2 Ruin. Just the charred stubble of a place, an artificial desert of concrete and asphalt and melted industry. One sign tilted over the road, an arrow, the word BRIDGE.

Kit made a sharp left. He could see the bridge now, ancient-style suspension towers and trusses. The sharp angles of it twisted and criscrossed in his view, shimmering unreal under a thick pelt of vines. He hit the gas. Looked in his mirror for the posse, timing carefully his one last trick.

There. He thumbed a red button on the dash and two lockers popped open on the tail of the RIGG. Thousands of screws, tacks, nails, springs and staples hit the road, splashing across the width of it right before the bridge. Iris whooped, looking backward out the window. Kit grinned with shameless pleasure, then gunned the engine.

As he looked forward he saw the gap. The bridge had once been a raising gate, the middle part adjustable for the heights of passing barges. Now that part was gone, collapsed into the waves below. Too late, Kit braked.

The sun chose that moment to leapfrog the mountain, suddenly gleaming off the water, reflected a thousand-fold off the wavetops, glinting like so many screws and nails. The RIGG floated gracefully off the edge and seemed to hang there for a moment, suspended in silence and sunlight and space.

Kit had the sudden and crazy thought that this was a pretty cool way to die. As they plunged downward he tried to take it all in, the sky pink and blue, the thickness of the air, pungent with jungle and with his own truck exhaust. Then they smashed into the water and everything went everywhere.

#

Kit surfaced and gasped for air. He caught a huge lungful of steam. The gasifier had been red hot when they hit the water. He



could feel the heat eddying toward him, and pushed away from it.

Maya. She wouldn't be able to swim with a broken leg. He dove, risking his eyes in the rapidly warming water. There. A dark form, a ragged twist of rags and hair drifting listlessly downward. He kicked, swam. His Postie hat dragged behind him on its strap, pulling at his neck, fighting his forward motion like a parachute. He reached her when the redness of his heart was flashing in his vision. Grabbed, pulled. Kicked upward against nothingness. She was tangled in a backpack, weighing her down. He reached for his beltknife, but it was gone. Taken from him by the guards, he remembered.

Kit squinted down, into the blackness. No way of finding the bottom, not without staying there. He pulled upward, forward, trying to tack into the river current, then caught a little thermal coming off the RIGG. Finally they broke the surface, gasping and choking. He caught a glimpse of Iris's head bobbing downstream. Another wave struck him, knocking him back underwater. Maya's grip tightened on his neck. Bubbles burst in his ear as she cried out in pain.

Just delivering a package, he thought. A hitch-hiker, a package, a flimsy letter in fact, easy to carry and addressed to The Shore. Rule number one. All mail gets delivered. I even put a stamp on it, so to speak.

Kit dodged boulders and shallows. He held Maya's weight on his back, keeping her head above water as much as he could. He yanked his hat around to the front, over his heart, like a bird's breastbone. More than once he swallowed water rather than let it in his lungs. Finally he felt ground under his kicking feet, and kicked against it. Pushed Maya further, into the shallows where she lay coughing. He dragged himself to his knees and looked around.

Iris was walking down the beach toward them, her hat lost, her leggings and jerkin sticking to her body. Water cascaded from her hair. She spotted him, and smiled a little too much. As if to say, wow, that was fun, we're going to be great friends. He collapsed into the wet sand and groaned.

When a glint of reflected sunlight revealed the Dams posse on the opposite shore, paused at a gap in the trees, the three bedraggled refugees headed uphill. Kit and Iris propped Maya between their shoulders and walked into the protective cover of the forest.

They went further together than any one would have liked to walk. High upon the hillside they came to a clearing, a knoll thrust out between the folds of two valleys. In it stood a curious ruin.

A large ring, a perfect circle formed of stone blocks, stacked atop each other like a house of cards. Massive pillars – Kit guessed about thirty of them – with equally large blocks balanced across the gaps. Inside, a half-ring of obelisks, each taller than a human. At the center, five arches embraced a low altar of stone, cheating out to peek at a pillar some distance outside the ring.

"Wow," Kit said. "A level five ruin. I've never seen one."

"What do you mean?" asked Iris. They kept walking, slowly, into the meadow.

"Well, the Posties have a system for categorizing ruins. So that we can enter a place and orient quickly, know what's important to look for. This... thing, is a level five ruin: anomalous, unknown, mysterious. The woods we just walked through are level four, because they've reverted to a mature ecosystem. The Dams is level three, destroyed but significantly rebuilt. Whatever town that bridge was in was level two, completely destroyed and scrapped."

"And that," he said, pointing across the meadow to a cabin nestled in the treeline, "is, I really hope, a level one ruin. Intact but abandoned."

They skirted the edge of the stone circle and made their way to the cabin. It was small, old, shaped like a letter L. The

inside of the elbow faced the south, affording some shelter from the valley wind. Kit looked for smoke coming out of the chimney, listened for footsteps or voices. Nothing. They set Maya down in the lee of the house, resting against the warm wooden wall.

For the first time that day, Maya spoke.

"What in fuck do you think you are doing running me over? Seriously, you drag us to the Upriver and jump off bridge? Put me in river with broken leg? What kind of escape plan is sitting in the wilderness on wrong side of the river with no truck and two strangers? How did you even get here, little follow girl in man pants? You two planning this all night or what?" She was furious, cornered and crippled, glaring back and forth between them with a serpentine motion.

"I just saved your life like three times!" Kit exclaimed.

"Yeah, what do you mean 'planning this'? You lied to me and I had to find another way out!" Iris said at the same time.

Kit turned to Iris.

"You two know each other? What were you planning? Did you get me arrested on purpose?"

"I rescued you! You got yourself arrested by showing up in a fire-car."

"Shut up you two and answer me! Is this supposed to be escape plan? You think Damfolk are not getting in boats right now or

what? We need to get out of here and stupid-boy broke my leg."

"Actually, I don't think we do."

"What?"

"I don't think we have to keep running," Iris said. "They didn't see us on the beach. I'm sure of it. I have... really good vision." She stared at the ground, hiding her eyes. "So they probably think we're dead. I mean, it was a really big splash, and the water was boiling and everything. We're lucky we aren't. Dead, I mean."

"This is probably the best place we could be, at least for a minute. They don't like the Upriver, especially this bank. Even hunters don't go to the north shore. So we could stay here, dry out, make a plan. Okay?"

She was so calm suddenly. Kit was thrown. He still wanted to argue, to cast blame, but she had a good point.

"Fine. Yeah. I'll get a little fire started, we can dry out our clothes." He walked to the edge of the woods and began gathering sticks. When he returned, the others had splayed out the contents of Maya's pack. It was an impressive collection of gear, especially considering that all of Kit's tools and supplies were now cooked into a sort of trash soup in the river.

Maya was holding a straight stick to her calf and instructing Iris on proper use of splints. Iris had a roll of gauze out and

was fumbling with it, staring at Maya's leg with awe. Her skin, tumbled clean by the river, was laced intricately with script. More words covered her hands, and Kit realized that what he had taken for soot on her face was more tattooed words. He wondered whether the rest of her body was the same, then blushed, and turned away. Built a little teepee full of kindling.

"Um, hey," he said, without turning around, "Do you have any matches over there? My burning-lens probably won't catch the sun strong enough for a couple more hours."

"No matches in the Dams, fool. Fire outlawed. I had a lectric sparker but I lost it. Back there."

"Okay. Can you start one with your hands or something? I've heard that woods people can do that."

"Yes. It requires specific wood and lots of me working. I am not doing that this morning. So we wait, until the sun is strong." With her tone Maya settled the matter. She went back to correcting Iris, but gently.

Kit sat on his haunches and looked around. The trees were swaying and jostling in the breeze, birds and all manner of insects busy at morning gossip. The stones huddled together, a conspiracy of history, wind whispering between them. The sun was up, but not high, and the meadow grass was not yet crisped with summer heat. The cabin was remarkably strong-looking, made of

whole cedar logs and roofed with real metal. He wondered how it long it had been abandoned here, how it could have survived the decomposers of the world, the scrappers and termites and mushrooms and mountain gangs.

"Hey, I'll be right back. I'm just going to look in here, see if I can't find a match or something." He walked away without a glance. Suddenly curious – this looked like a hundred-year forest at least. So how old was this cabin?

The front stairs were sagging, but not rotted. The door creaked, but did not stick. He entered the cottage and waited for his eyes to adjust. No holes in the roof, no brambles thrusting through the floor. He pulled aside a mouldering curtain and the sunlight bounced golden off a million floating dust motes. A room, sparsely furnished, an little counter defining the kitchen beyond. Empty bookshelf, time-worn couch, long low coffee table. And on the coffee table, a book.

A large book, bound in thick red leather, with a few golden words embossed on the cover:

SIGNAL

A Book of Secrets

## 5 Timebinding

Pain throbbed red in Maya's leg. She grimaced as Iris wrapped the final bandage. As the younger woman finished the splint, her gaze began to drift to the words coiling around Maya's calf. She reached for the letters, beginning to trace a line of text.

Maya stopped her hand.

"These letters are mine," she explained. "They are not for you to read or to touch. These words are who I am."

Iris blinked and cocked her head like a sparrow.

"Why would you write so much if you didn't want people to read it?"

"You think I wrote this?"

The girl looked at her in confusion. Not getting it. Maya thought of the other Damfolk she had seen and decided that they must all be in-bred fools. This one had such good threats, though.

"These words are who I am. They are not my words. They are the words that make me who I am."

"You mean someone else tattooed words into your skin? That's terrible!"

"Is it?"

"Well, yes! Why would they do such a thing? Did you want this



to happen?" Iris sat up straight, wringing her hands in front of her heart.

Maya gave her a steady look.

"This is how we do. My people, the proud and dirty Wolves, we carry our words on our skin. We do not have the luxury of your houses and lectrics. We have only our bodies, and the forest that birthed us. So we pass our knowing down in this way. My words have been passed down to me, and someday I will gift them to another. Until then, they are my words, for me to know. To share if I choose. Not for ignorant Damfolk, who think everything is theirs to hoard." With this, she lowered her skirts and hooded her face.

Iris made a choking sound. Maya squinted at her from under hood. She was crying silently, biting off every sob into a gulping hiccup. Tears streamed down her face, dripping to her brown pants.

Fine. Let her cry. Maya had had her leg broken and nearly been drowned today. She wasn't crying. Strong, the Wolves. Stoic. No stranger to the rough and tough of nature. She leaned her head back against the wall. Soon Kit would return, with matches, and she would be warm and dry. She closed her eyes for a moment.

When Maya awoke, the day was bright and everyone was gone. The sun beat down on her, hot even for this season. She jumped to

her feet. Bad idea. The pain was crippling, astonishing, a bolt of thunder, an old cedar collapsing into the canopy.

A few seconds or a few minutes passed. When the wardrums in her shin had marched into the distance, Maya sat up. Crawled behind the cabin, into the welcome shade of the forest. She leaned against a pine and took a few ragged breaths. Located a suitable branch on the forest floor and drew the knife from her belt. With sharp strokes she fashioned a crutch.

Now she could stand, and survey her surroundings. The meadow was a small flat space in a larger family of slopes. Trees surrounded, not all of them familiar. The cabin crouched at the north end like a frog, yawning toward the south. The great stones huddled in the middle of the clearing like a pack of Wolves surrounding a victim.

In the center she saw Iris. The girl was sitting on a wide flat stone, a table or bed for giants, kicking her legs and staring at the sky. Maya was reminded of the ceremonies that her hated uncles performed, to welcome a young boy or girl into the fullness of adulthood. She shuddered.

She laid some of her outer layers on the grass to dry, careful to keep most of her skin covered. She took her time hobbling over to the circle, getting used to the crutch, the swing of the leg, the lightness of resting her throbbing foot on

the ground without pushing off of it until the crutch held her weight on its point. Finally she reached the circle. Her skin tingled when she passed underneath the outer arches. She felt a prickling on her neck, as if the sentinel stones all watched her at once. Without speaking, she propped herself up onto the altar stone and set her crutch beside her. Laid back on the cold rock. Stared into the bright blue sky.

"What do you think it is?" Iris's voice was cheery but brittle.

"The rocks? I do not know. Many things were abandoned here in the wild. Perhaps it was a home for a strange giant."

"I don't think it looks like a house. If it were a house there would be walls, or remnants of them. I think maybe it was a temple. Doesn't this look like an altar? Maybe it was a kind of church for people who didn't have anything to build with except rocks."

Maya perched on her elbows and looked around.

"Why would people who had not but rocks to build with want a church? Church is for city people who do not know the Mother."

"I know my mother, thank you very much. Sometimes I wish I didn't."

"What do you mean, your mother of birth? You wish you didn't know?"

"Yes. She's not exactly the nicest person. She, had a lot of kids. So we didn't have much of a relationship."

Maya was silent for a moment.

"In my people the birth-mother is not the Mother. The parents are the parents, the children are children. When a child begins to show their nature, they are matched with one who has the proper words. So the word-mother is the mother too. But not as much as the earth-mother. The Mother knows all of us and works with and through us. Not important whether the birth-mother is nice person. You see?"

Iris laughed.

"Yes, I see. But that all sounds pretty churchy to me. You wouldn't go to a flat place with a circle of stones to worship the earth-mother?"

"No. Why would I go any place to worship the Mother? She is everywhere. I find her in the blackberry bush and the waterfall. I find her in the cracks of the fallen city. I find her in the river, which is why I do not choke the river with stone and machine. Church is a place to make public apology to the Mother while raping and killing her the rest of the week."

"Okay, I can agree with that. Most of the people who are the holiest at the Church of the Last Few Days are the worst at home. I've watched them, the way they treat their wives and animals and

children. But it doesn't sound much better to me to be given to a stranger and have words scarred into your skin for your whole life. If you don't mind me saying."

Maya looked sideways at Iris, letting the fall of her hair shield her gaze.

"It is not so pleasant either. Perhaps someday I will tell you of it. But please, what is Last Few Days?"

Iris sighed.

"Just the most important thing after the Dam and the King. I guess it's no surprise you haven't heard of it. All the people who have are probably converts, or dead. And your people's invasions are never very informative, I'm sure.

"Anyway it's the Church, the official religion of the Dams. They say that we are in the Last Few Days of the world, that all we have to guide us morally is surviving and maintaining the city, that the blessed end will come soon for all. They say, look at the last few days, have they been any different than the ones before them? Why should we think things will change? The ancients sought change, and look at the destruction they caused. Leave well enough alone, that sort of thing.

"I think they're full of horse manure."

"Yes, shitballs. I have this theory also."

Iris smiled. Her eyes glimmered. She put her hand on Maya's.

Her skin was warm, her palm soft. Maya gazed at the creamy skin, starred with freckles, laying across her bronzed scribblings.

Maya felt a hot bubble of emotion unmoor in her chest and rise up her throat. Her eyes swelled with seawater. She felt the weight of her own last few days avalanching off her shoulders.

Just as she was about to collapse into tears, Maya heard Kit yelling from the cabin. Iris's hand tightened on hers, and they both looked up in fright. Kit was running toward them, his hair dancing in the breeze, waving a large brick above his head and shouting excitedly.

#

Maya glared daggers at Kit as Iris ran across the circle toward him. What is so important about big red brick?

Kit stumbled as he reached the edge of the ruin, and began talking with fluttery hummingbird speed. His words were snatched away by the growing wind. Iris sped as Kit slowed, so that they met just underneath one of the outer arches. Kit made a strange motion, as if prying apart the brick with his bare hands. When it opened, revealing a feathered wing of pages, Maya realized that it must be a book. A real book.

The ground began to rumble.

Maya thought of earthquakes, and pulled her legs up fully onto the stone. She couldn't run anyway, better to stay in the

open center of the ring. But none of the other stones were shaking, and for that matter Kit and Iris hadn't noticed either. They were engrossed in the book, talking eagerly in low tones. Too late, Maya realized that the altar stone was rising from the ground. She was trapped atop it.

She grabbed for her crutch, but only succeeded in knocking it to the ground. She shouted in frustration.

Iris looked up and began running toward her, book in hand. Kit followed suit. He quickly outpaced her, long legs pumping like a deer. By the time he reached the altar, the motion had stopped.

Maya sat atop a ten-foot monolith. The low, flat altar stone had emerged from the ground smoothly, like a cat's claw, revealing its full height. The north-west face, facing her would-be rescuers, was hollowed out as if to hold a statue or a shrine. The whole thing was big enough to fit a dozen people inside.

"What happened?" Kit shouted from below.

"I do not know. How would I know? Here I am peaceful sitting on stone and then you run up with strange book and now I am on an island. Maybe you should know."

"This book is really interesting!" Iris pointed it up at her as if Maya cared. "There's pictures of this circle in it. It's called a stonehenge!"

"Great. Know what it is called. Now we have all magic power over it, yes? So do something! Make stonehenge go back the way it was."

"I don't know how," Kit said, "but maybe I will with a little more study. Listen, do you think you could lower yourself to my shoulders? I'm pretty tall, maybe we can just get you off of there and figure it out later." He stepped inside the alcove and steadied himself against the inner wall.

Maya sighed.

"Fine. Watch out for leg this time, okay?"

She turned around, dangling her legs over the edge while taking her weight on strong arms. Lower, lower, until she felt Kit's hand on her good leg, guiding her to a foothold on his shoulder. She let him take her weight for a moment, bent the elbows the other way, stretched long, and released. She sat on Kit's shoulders like a kid, lightly grasping his forehead for balance.

"Hey, my eye!"

Kit shifted suddenly, reaching for his face. His balance threw off Maya's balance, and suddenly they were wobbling around inside the stone chamber, folding in the middle like a pocket-knife, falling, falling toward hard rock but suddenly Iris was there and she stopped them.



They all paused for a moment. Iris leaned up against them, holding Kit's shoulder with one hand and Maya's back with the other. In her haste she had dropped the book, which lay on the floor of the alcove spread-eagle and facedown.

The stone began to sink. It sank the same way it had risen, silent and inevitable, the gap to the outside world closing by inches every second. They were going to be buried alive.

Now that they were in a hurry, all the talking went away and they just moved. Maya wrapped her good leg around Kit's neck and leaned backward. She grabbed at Iris's elbow and leg for support on the way down, hanging down the length of Kit's back and planting her hands on the ground. Kit slid his foot back and leaned as far as he could, letting Iris take Maya by the waist and lower her to the ground. Finally they were all on their feet and scrambling out the gap. The door was now a window, and Kit climbed out just in time, holding the big red book and gasping.

The stone began to rise.

"Seriously? What is this stupid place? Is this a trap, or trick for children?" Maya, lying on the warm grass, reached for her crutch and gave the stone a few good whacks. It rose implacably. From down here it didn't look so tall as it did from on top.

"It reminds me of something. Not sure what." Kit stared at

the stone, demanding answers with his eyes. This interrogation was met with stony silence.

"It gives me the creeps! Kit said the shack over there has a roof and a hearth. I say we go in there, get comfortable, and leave this stonehenge alone until we know what we're doing." Iris crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. Not to be argued with.

Maya stabbed her crutch into the ground and pulled herself to her feet. She started to limp away to the cabin. Iris and Kit walked at her sides, matching her pace. As they exited the stonehenge, Maya looked back over her shoulder warily.

The stone in the center began to sink.

## 6 Bibliomancy

Iris sat on dusty cushions, in a ray of warm sun, and leafed through SIGNAL. The book was a work of art. The paper was strangely translucent, thin as a razor but soft and almost warm to the touch. Each page – there were hundreds, maybe thousands of them – carried only a few recognizable words. These floated loosely among scores of strange symbols, letters almost familiar and yet totally foreign. Half-finished diagrams and illustrations shouldered their way through crowds of equations.

As Iris explored, the different words and shapes lined up in ever more curious ways. A diagram would brush away to reveal its component parts. Lines connecting notes in the margins were actually a row of dots spaced one to a page. Complex squiggles were repeated in various places, some more often than others, suggesting an underlying grammar to the grimoire.

She flipped faster. Plans architectural and astronomical emerged before her widening eyes. Any one page contained only a fragment of knowledge, but they seemed to stack in a continuous pattern, a kaleidoscopic textbook. Her jaw sagged. Her breath became shallow. She stroked the pages, flowing through them like a breeze, a river, a waterfall.

When she reached the last page she gasped aloud. A single

symbol sat in the center, complex and asymmetrical. It reminded her of the lock on her door at home. She knew she had never seen it before, but its meaning was immediate. She looked up, took a deep breath, and realized that Kit and Maya were still arguing.

#

"Look, I know that. I can't unbreak it, no matter how many times you berate me. So why don't you stop dodging the question: What were you doing in the road?" Kit paced the small cabin, his long steps echoing on the wooden floor. Maya sat at the other end of the couch from Iris, her splinted leg propped on the coffee table, the other folded up close to her chest protectively.

"I heard your truck coming, so I ran to get ride. Simple. Not like truck is very quiet."

"But I dropped you off on the other side of the Dams. That spring was miles away. What were you doing by the east gate at dawn?"

"Running from lights and sirens, of course. Just like you."

"What did you do? What threw the alarms?"

"Nothing. I did nothing, just stealing supplies. Which you can be grateful for whenever you stop being stupid. How about you eat more jerky to keep your mouth busy?"

"Yeah right you did nothing! You sabotaged me. You knew that the Dams has some ridiculous anti-fire law, but you let me drive

right on in. You could have told me. I thought we were going to be friends."

Kit began to backpedal here. Iris raised her eyebrows in amusement. Maya didn't seem to notice as a blush swelled across Kit's face.

"I had to get ride. I told you to be careful with mega-shitball. You would have gone there ignorant anyway, and if I told you maybe you would turn around. Not my fault you have no caution."

"No caution! I asked you to tell me about the place! You're the only person I've met who even knows about the Dams. Other than you, of course." He held out an awkward hand toward Iris. "So if you lied to me once, why should I believe you again? What were you really doing, that set off all the alarms in the whole city?"

Maya set her mouth. She glared at Kit. Iris looked back and forth, watching the flares of energy and the suppressed thoughts, the tension in Kit's shoulders and in Maya's face. She wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do, but she spoke up.

"Maya, what happened to your other backpack?"

"What?"

"Your other backpack. When I met you on the roof? You had two backpacks full of stuff. Why didn't you bring the other one? What

was in it?"

"My other backpack, yes. Of course. I was collecting some things that I thought I needed, but I did not take them. I can only carry so much while hiking."

"But surely you knew that when you were packing. Why would you steal more stuff than you can carry?"

Maya shifted in her seat. She looked around the room, as if spies might hide in the empty cabinets and cobwebs. Then she straightened up and grabbed her crutch, waving it dramatically like a sceptre.

"I will tell you what I did. No more lies. While we all sit here together, we are all outlaws, and so we are all Wolves. What I did was to make a bomb.

"I made it of alchemy and compost and I carried it to the Dam. The hulking monster, the choke collar of the river spirit. I planted my bomb there and I fed it good with fuse and I woke it with fire. I did it for the people of the woods and the people of the water, for the salmon and the cedar and the Wolf.

"My bomb was small. I could not by myself bring down the whole Dam. But my bomb has placed a crack in the heart of the Dam, and tides of Wolves will crash against it until it breaks. My people will besiege the Dams, destroy their machines, free the river and live once again on the fat of the land! I am but the

vanguard of the might of the Wolves!"

They sat silent for a moment. Maya's chin jutted defiantly. Iris was shaken. She didn't like the Dams either, the Church, the Smiths, the Royals. But it was her home. She thought of the many nights she had spent, watching people's well-lit windows, seeing the warm buzz of a family making dinner or playing games or just sleeping. Maya would destroy all that? To bring what? The hard-earned merits of society would dissolve in the stew of sweat and blood and ink that was loosely called the Family of Wolves. She couldn't help but wrinkle her nose at the idea.

Kit, after a suitable pause to let Maya's words finish echoing through the valley, started into his own tirade.

"So that's great and all, always interesting to hear about local politics, but let's just recap real quick. You made a bomb that didn't work. The Dam is still there. Your people, if they ever should take the city and destroy the Dam, will still not know where we are or how to rescue us. Besides which, they might not take much liking to me or Iris. In the meantime, you've cost me my job, my truck, my entire life which I was keeping in the truck, not to mention let me get beat up and threatened at gunpoint so that you could hitch a ride to town. I've saved your life three or maybe four times now, not that I'm counting or anything, it just seems like maybe you owe me a little —"

Iris slammed the book shut. The weight of all those pages made a considerable noise, interrupting the boy's lecture. It also kicked up a cloud of dust that choked them all, so it was a moment before they could speak again without coughing or sneezing.

"Look here," she said finally. "The blame game is a total waste of time. Whether or not anybody's life is saved or ruined, or whatever, depends more on what we do next than what we did last night. We're here now. There's no truck, there's no bomb, there's no one but us and these creepy woods and that stonehenge and this book. We've got a roof and a fireplace. There's a few pots in the kitchen. How about, wait, listen, how about we spend the daylight finding food and firewood, and then do arguing later over dinner? Okay?"

The other two agreed mutely. Kit sighed and began to stride out the door.

"Wait. One more thing. This book."

He turned right back and came to crouch next to her at the table.

Iris opened the book near the end. She flipped lightly through, until she held the last page between two fingers. To her left, the rest of the book was like a crystal with smoke trapped inside. She gestured to the top layer, where the thick mess of



ink clarified to a complex knotwork. Then she laid the last page gently across it, fitting the final symbol perfectly into the negative space at the center.

"It's a key," she said. "This book is a key, and that stone circle is a Gate."

#

In the morning she awoke to birdsong. The eastern light cast strong shadows in the forest outside. Her mind was calm, rested, empty. She smiled, feeling the warble of the birds cascade through her head, tripping and dancing down an endless set of stairs. Just as she stretched, yawning hugely and wriggling her sore muscles against the floor, the sun poured in the window. It splashed across the wooden walls and washed across her upstretched hands, a warm and tingly current pulling her toward the day. She sighed with small joy and sat up. Her glowing hands found the book of secrets on the coffee table.

She held it close in her lap. She felt its weight and thickness. She caressed the smooth leather, brushing dust off the cover. She ran her finger along the fore edge, feeling the tickle of pages, a tiny mountain range. Her finger stopped, seemingly of its own accord, somewhere in the second half. It was as if a magnet held her finger, drawing it closer and then correcting when she went too far. She found the groove that had the

strongest pull, and opened the book.

Her jaw dropped when she saw the diagram. Kit, just waking on the other side of the room, rubbed his eyes and smiled at her.

"What did you find?"

Iris couldn't speak. She looked at him uncertainly, then pointed to the book. He crawled over to look at it, laying almost with his head in her lap. Near-sighted, she realized.

She traced the lines of the image with her finger. He followed her with his eyes. The oblong with the recessed cavity, surrounded by standing stones. The underground system of rails and counterweights. The massive cavern into which the rails descended. The only apparent words were in small script near the floor of the cavern, next to an arrow pointing off-page. They said:

To The Library ->

## 7 Oneography

Maya was captivated by that word, "Library." She had never seen one, but she had heard tales. A Library was a place where words were stored on paper, trapped like the words inside the book SIGNAL. Where the human guardians protected a building full of knowledge instead of carrying the knowledge on their bodies and protecting themselves. To her, a Library was a creature of myth.

The word was not spoken among her people. It was taboo – not demonic, but sacred. At one time, she knew, the Wolves had lusted after a Library the way the Damfolk sought their afterlife. It was the promised land, the place of ease and perfection, the deserved end to the exile of long-suffering Wolves. Not long before she had been born, a prophet from the Sandy River had gathered a large following and set off into the Wilderness for the "place of books and year-round fruit." No one heard from them again. Perhaps they found it. Perhaps she would too.

That would be a triumph, to return with the knowledge of the Library. Better even than blowing up the Dam. If she could find it, maybe she could return to her people unashamed. Maybe she could take them away, some of them, wake them urgently in the night and slip away from their fanged uncle-husbands. Start a new

life, a new pack. The Wolves of the Library.

First she had to get Kit to let go of the book.

"We must go. It is so easy to see that this is picture of stonehenge. We should go down in the stone box and find this Library." She sat across from Kit at the small kitchen table, holding the proper page with her finger. Kit was trying awkwardly to read it even with Maya's hand between the pages. He had been looking at the book of secrets all day and was basically unspeaking. His eyes danced snakelike across the formulae.

Iris stood at the stove, stirring a large pot of soup. The forest here was uncanny: so many plants that Maya had never seen, but also many that she knew to be food. Too many for a regrowth like this forest. It looked as if the denizens of this place had carefully tended the wilds, encouraging those foods they liked.

In the morning Iris and Maya had gone into the forest and collected mushrooms, berries, and edible flowers. Wild onions from the meadow gave flavor. The green leaves of brasca and amarant were too hairy and thick by this time of year to eat raw, so soup it was.

"I don't know if it's a good idea to go down there yet," said Iris. "I'd like to spend more time foraging, now that you've showed me what's good to eat. We don't know what it's like down there. You don't want to be adventuring on an empty stomach."

At that, something in Maya's thorax growled appreciatively. She sighed.

"Okay true, we need food. I have jerky, we can put jerky in the soup. We will feel great. But foraging in the hot part is not so fun. Maybe wait till first sunset, go foraging then. During hot part of day we should go in nice cool caves. Look at tunnel to Library."

"Maybe. What do you think, Kit?"

"Huh? Sources, inputs, outputs, general processes. At least that's what I was thinking about. What are you on?"

"We were talking about the Library. Whether we should go down in the day, or go foraging during the day and go to the Library tomorrow maybe. Did you see anything more about it in that book?"

While Iris talked, Maya tried to steal the book from Kit's grasp. He was still dazed by the return to reality, staring at Iris with brow furrowed. Maya pulled slow, steady, like a spider pulling silk. Kit's fingers unconsciously clamped down.

Maya pretended to sneeze and slapped the wooden saltbox right off the table. Kit let go, bending down to pick it up. Maya quickly swiveled the book around to face her, and flipped back to the page she wanted. There it was, clearly the stonehenge at the top, a huge underground space marked out beneath. Whiskery passages emerged at all angles.

Kit looked back at the book and his eyes crossed.

"Hey, I was looking at that!" He sounded awfully petulant for a grown man. Maybe he was an old-looking boychild.

"You were. For all day. So maybe now it is my turn, yes?"

"Okay, fine. But I think maybe Iris is right. We don't know what we're messing with. That book – wow. It's got such weird stuff in it. What was that quote? Something about the extra-brain-mind-computer. I think that book is an actual Ancient artifact. They had all kinds of science that we don't have anymore. We need to be careful with it."

"Well, the Ancients are also the reason we don't have science anymore," Iris said. "I don't know if we should be messing around with their old weird stuff. I doubt the underground tunnels are even there anymore. There have been so many earthquakes since their time."

"Actually," Kit mused, "if this diagram is anything close to scale, the tunnels probably haven't collapsed. If they had, this whole meadow wouldn't be here. It's surprising actually that a cavern this big could exist this close to a river gorge. You'd think it would be full of water. Maybe it was a lava bubble from the Cascade Range."

"Only one way to find out," said Maya. "We go down there in stone box. Today. We will wear boots in case of water."

"Okay," Kit said.

"What, really? You just changed your mind so fast?"

"Yeah. I want to see what's down there. One condition, though."

Maya looked to Iris. Iris raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

"Give me back the book," said Kit.

#

They carried the rustiest of all keys, and with it they opened the creakiest of all gates.

Kit led the way into the stonehenge, carrying the book SIGNAL. As he passed under the lintel, the altar stone rose. Maya followed, limping bravely on her crutch. Iris tailed her at a respectful pace, wearing the now-empty backpack.

They stood before the monolith, three abreast. They did not look at each other. Maya took a deep breath, held it. Stepped into the chamber. The others followed, and the stone descended.

As the window of light and air closed, Maya shut her eyes and waited twenty count to let them adjust. She crossed her fingers tightly, asking the ancestors to protect her, a whispered charm against the decent possibility of being buried alive. She felt Iris shivering next to her. Kit was breathing slowly, tightly, already conserving air. But no sooner had she opened her eyes than a cool breeze wafted from below. The low grind of stonework

changed tone, echoing into some great space.

It was completely dark. No amount of eyeblinking would reveal any secrets from the shadows. Maya smiled grimly at her own foresight, and turned on a head-lamp stolen from the Dams.

"Ow!" said Kit and Iris both.

"Sorry." She took the lamp off her forehead and pointed it around by hand. The others did likewise. The beams drilled small tunnels of light into the overwhelming darkness. The things they illuminated were worse than the black.

Huge and monstrous devices hung suspended on thick cables, which sliced upward into the receding gloom. Some looked like evolved versions of telescopes and spyglasses. Others were spherical cages big enough to hold humans (thankfully empty). A small gondola, suspended from a giant thumbscrew. A many-lensed buglike contraption. A small car with large feathered wings. A wide dish with an array of pods in the middle, like frog eggs on a lily pad. A statue of two people kissing – or was it a vase? A closet made of glass, reflective on the inside but transparent from the outside.

This last refracted the beam of Maya's lamp, creating a dazzling display of rippling light. For a moment she looked directly into the glass box, and saw no reflection. Instead there was a silver tunnel, infinitely deep, staggered twisted cubes, a



series of tiny glass rooms curving off to a distant horizon.

Maya looked away and thought suddenly that they were moving sideways as well as downward. Her inner sense of upness went screwy and she lost her balance. She fell forward, into open air.

"No!" Kit shouted, and caught her.

Maya dangled above the murky depths. Kit held her by the back of her dress. Her crutch was still in hand, but she had nothing to push against. Her legs kicked uselessly.

Kit threw himself to the floor of the box, pulling with all his strength. Iris sat on his prone legs, to give him leverage. When Maya's head cleared the level of the floor, Iris grabbed her arms and hauled. She slid into the box, yowling a little with every gasp. They all sat there for a moment.

"Thank you," Maya said. "You did save me."

Kit was crying, snuffling into the back of his wrist. He did not look at her.

"It's fine," he said through sobs. "I mean, you're welcome. It's just, my, father fell. My post-father. I couldn't catch him in time."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. It's fine. I'm glad I could catch you, at least."

Iris leaned in and wrapped her arm around Kit's back. Maya wondered at that, for her way was not so touchy. But she felt the

warm glow of being not dead, and she reached out and squeezed his foot.

When they reached the bottom they hesitated. First Kit hopped out, SIGNAL in hand, and hopped back in when it seemed that nothing happened. Then Iris got out, and Kit hopped out and back in. Then Iris got out and Maya got out and Kit hopped out and the great stone elevator began to rise.

Kit made a run-up to jump in, but it wasn't necessary. As soon as he got the book near the bottom of the track, the monolith descended again. He walked back and forth until he found the limit of the effect. Then he stepped back, and watched the stone ascend. It spiraled slowly around a hidden axis.

That helical motion of the elevator had disoriented Maya. If its lower resting place faced the same direction as the upper landing, then To The Library should be... that way. But they were in some vast hall, bigger than the clearing above. The walls were far away, invisible. The diagram had been a cross-section, meant to show the workings of the ascending stone, not a bat's-eye-view map.

She scanned the floor with her lamp. Finally she discerned a shiny trail on the black rock. A path, worn by many feet over many years. They set off into the darkness.

When they reached the wall, a thousand options presented. The

cave was honeycombed with tunnels, infiltrated with doorways. Ladders led to different cave mouths. Some had platforms, with miniature elevators to the highest regions.

Only one doorway was at floor level. It was unmarked. They took it.

"Okay, we need to be really careful to remember where we came from. It's probably better if we don't take any turns, and just see where this goes. So we can remember our way back." Iris spoke with false confidence. Maya was irritated.

This was her mission, she was the only one who had explored a cave before. Iris hadn't even wanted to do it until Kit changed his mind. But the girl was probably scared out of her skin, and so Maya held her tongue.

The tunnel was small. Kit dropped behind, ducking his head, and Maya took the lead. Her leg ached already. She was careful to set her crutch against rough dimples or protrusions in the rock. The ground was not slippery to her feet, but the wooden point skittered across the ancient lavabeds.

On second thought, these could not be lava tunnels. The evenness of the surface, the consistent diameter of the tunnel, were unusual. Too perfect to be made by humans or tools. The old mineshafts generally took the form of squares, the better to be reinforced with wood. These were circular in cross-section. The

stone was smooth but grained, like clothes wrung and stretched. The pathways twisted organically. The beam of her head-lamp was always cut off by the next bend.

The floor was not flat. She could not be sure, but she began to suspect that the floor she was now on had once been the wall, or the ceiling. She attributed this to the thrumming pain in her leg at first, but it began to feel like she was spiraling down the tunnel, gravity becoming unusually generous and allowing the grooves in the stone to guide her feet.

She made it a little chant in her mind. To, The, Library. To, The, Library. Library, Library, Library. She kept up her pace, letting the chant take her forward, foot by crutch by foot. The pain throbbed along with her rhythm. The pain became a bonfire and she gathered her selves around it, making a drum circle, dancing on the inside to the light of flame and thunder.

Suddenly the tunnel opened. Maya stopped short. Warm, dim light dappled her. Kit bumped into her back.

She edged forward into a chamber three houses high. An atrium, wide and beautiful and totally abandoned. Sunlight filtered in through translucent domes set in the vaulted ceiling. A tree stretched twenty feet above the rows of tables, reaching for the sun. The walls were stacked with books and balconies, striped with a variety of ladders. Chairs lay scattered on the

floor. Books and magazines piled like snowdrifts in corners.

On the far side of the room, a stone elevator squatted mutely. Above it was a large sign:

"To The Library ⅃"

Kit asked the obvious.

"If that's 'To The Library'... what is this?"

He was right. This was the most Library place that Maya had ever seen. It was quite beyond her wildest dreams. Her skin tingled in the company of so many words.

"If this is not a Library," she said, "then what else could a Library be?"

When they got to the top of the second elevator, they found out. The Library was a blackened ruin.

They stood in the middle of a burnt-out tower, its steel skeleton arching above them, a nightmare man stripped of his trousers. Huge cogs and chains hung loose in the center like entrails. Beyond, a plaza, overtaken by mullein and blackberry. A gigantic glass dome glinted sun from its shattered surface. A castle or fortress stood the opposite way, its roof bombed out and all the windows long disintegrated. In the distance were other buildings, homes and farms and industry. Crumbled, crushed, collapsed. What had Kit said? Level three ruin: completely destroyed and abandoned.

Everyone who had ever lived here was dead or long gone. Of the books that once lined these collapsing shelves, the only trace was the ashes piled thick on the ground.

"Oh, no," said Iris in a small voice.

Maya could not reply.

#

From then on Maya dreamed of the Library. In the days, they worked, finding food and water and firewood. In the nights and in pain-sodden naps, she returned to the Library.

She followed the twisting tunnels and floated upward through the Reading Room. The Clock above was alive with motion. The glasshouse thrived. It seethed with life. The Museum and the Apothecary and the Laboratory bustled with people. She passed through them, not able to touch or to hear. The people, the buildings, even the plants of the city were gray to her. The only color was in the books.

The Archive was a fortress, designed to keep out any force that would harm the books. Maya passed through the barriers like a ghost. She drifted through the narrow aisles, glorying in the glossy colors of the books.

In one room they were all teal. Their bindings were uniform, each emblazoned with a different arcane symbol. There were no words on the spines, just these strange seals stamped in gold.

Here a book lay open on a table. She paused to peer into it. The words were strange to her, the alphabet unfamiliar. She squinted, looking closer.

Sudden vertigo overtook her. She was very high up, falling, falling into the lines of text on the page. As she fell she accelerated and the words became buildings and the gaps between the words became alleys, she fell in too fast too fast and then slowed, gently, to a stop. She hovered now between high shelves, in narrow aisles, just as before. But the books on the shelves were all bound in orange.

"Maya." She heard a voice from above. Could she get back there, to the teal room? How to begin?

Maya tried walking up the wall. To her surprise, it worked. The Library rotated around her and she was standing on a floor of books and wooden lath. She tried not to look up at the shelf above her, with thousands of tomes mysteriously poised in the moment before dropping to the floor. She hurried forward, with no legs to impede her pace.

"Maya."

Behind her this time. She tried to turn around but her speed was too great. In slowing she began to tumble. Gravity rolled. She just had time to assume a diving pose before she was sucked downward into the bookshelf.

Again she fell, as the spines of books beneath her grew. She pressed her hands together and aimed for a gap between two tomes. Whoosh! Then she was in a narrow aisle, between tall shelves, settling to the ground like a feather. The books were green, here.

"Maya. Wake up."

Wake up? There was no waking up. This was reality, this infinity of enfolded spaces. This was the endless world of which her waking life was merely a chapter.

"Maya!"

Maya awoke to Iris's face close to hers. She could smell the other girl's breath, sweet and salty and damp. Afternoon light stabbed her eyes.

"What?" she grogged. "You wake me why?"

"I need to talk to you. It's important." Such a grave face. Maya wondered what Iris knew. Her heart began to race and she shook herself to a sitting position on the couch.

"What? What is so important?"

"Are you sure? You can take a second to wake up if you want. I'm just worried." She knows, Maya thought. She saw through my lie before and now she will do it again. Her stomach tightened painfully.

"Don't worry, little runaway. The Wolves will take the Dams



any day now, and then we can return as heroes. In the meanwhiles, we can wait here in peace and solve this mystery of the Library. Okay?"

Iris made a quizzical face.

"Oh, alright. I mean, yes, I want to know about the Library too. I don't know if I really want to go back to the Dams." She paused, retracted. "What I want to talk to you about, though, is Kit."

"Kit?"

"Yes. You know, the only other person in this whole forest?"

"Hopefully."

"I'm worried about him. He hasn't been sleeping, just staying up reading that book by head-lamp. It's been days since he really talked to us. And he's been doing that weird sketching thing, drawing in the air with his finger all the time. I think he might be going crazy. I think that the book is bad."

"Dark magic, you think? Book for opening Gate also curses your head and makes you mad?"

"I don't know. He's definitely obsessed with it. And, well, he left this morning. Before I woke up. He didn't leave a note or anything. And he took the book of secrets with him."

## 8 Sigaldry

The book was the most beautiful thing Kit had ever seen. The Libratory was a close second.

He had seen its outline in the pages of SIGNAL. A large central workspace, surrounded by blastocyst offices, the whole thing interpenetrated with tunnels. Above, the mysterious word: Libratory.

A misspelling? Perhaps. But he had to find out.

With a careful mapping and correlation to other clues in the book, he had blazed a trail to the Libratory in his mind. On the fourth day of their refuge, he took the stone elevator to the crypts. He followed the wobbling beam of his headlamp down into darkness. He left a track behind him, dragging a thick charred stick across the wall to his right.

The tunnels were thicker and more catacombed here than towards the Library. More than once he charted through six-way intersections formed by three equipperpendicular tunnels. These were not so steep as to form shafts, but had three steeply downhill sides opposite three uphill. They were lit with the translucent crystal globes Kit had seen in the underground atrium, what the three explorers had taken to calling the Reading Room. He wondered if these were really letting in the sunlight,

and how far down these tunnels truly were. Up and down and left and right began to lose their meaning, becoming backup dancers to the constant crescendo of forward. Perhaps the lights were tech. Some ancient eledee that produced the same spectrum as sunlight, for instance.

Now he sat cheerily in the illumination of dozens of sundomes. The Libratory was marvelous. Instruments gleamed. Books surrounded. Kit rested his feet on a long work-bench, leaning back in a plastic chair. He fiddled with a ball-point pen, biting it, testing it behind each ear.

The room was large, and high of ceiling. Vaulting pillars revealed its cavernous history, but the majority of stalactites had been converted to ventilation hoods, and the stalagmites to tables and furnaces. This gave the room a pleasant organic feel, unlike the science shops Kit had seen in the past. The layout was curvaceous. Kit bit harder on the pen, thinking of curvaceousness.

He got up and explored the edges of the room. Little offices surrounded, round galleries facing out into a huge amorphous plaza. Or like cilia on a bacterium, he thought, looking at a room full of microscopes and tiny drawers.

Eventually he found a comfortable space, with a desk and a Bunsen burner, small enough that he could warm it by heating an

iron retort and closing the door. The water in the retort was old, stagnant, but once boiled it would be fine to drink.

A small bookshelf held stacks of writing paper and drafting tools, along with a few volumes: *The Art of Summary*; *A History of Bestiaries*; *How to Get A Head to Life*. Kit flipped through them for a while, but soon drew SIGNAL from his back-pack.

He had been scrutinizing it for days. He had tried it backward, forward, in chunks as wide as his thumb. It was an infinite book. The transparent pages stacked into three-dimensional maps, or holograms, or terrifying static. Following any line of thought was like untangling one spaghetti strand from a bowlful.

It was like a dictionary. It had row upon row of symbols, arrayed across each other in some correlation. Only occasionally did he find one that looked familiar or straightforward. He attempted to do a linguistic analysis on it, just like Lewis had taught him for dealing with pidgins and creoles. It resisted.

It was like an encyclopedia. Large chunks of text hid in it like icebergs. Taken one page at a time the words were careless. One or two sentences would float freely amidst the imagery and equations. Overlayed across nearby pages, these would form paragraphs. The paper diffused the ink just enough that he could never quite read the entirety of an essay. He had to flip

backward and forward, watching for new sentences to appear in place of the old, for sentences already read to change their meaning in new context. It was frustrating and sublime.

It was like a blueprint. Machines, buildings, formulae, sketches blended together to create a three-dimensional shape he could almost grasp. A terrible geometry confronted him. Kit thought he knew about tech. If there was one thing he knew, better than people, better than Posties, it was engines and clocks and lectrics. It was shameful in many places, after all the harm that Ancient tech had caused the world. But it was always good business, because whatever machinery the locals had still needed maintenance. He had put so much of that energy into the RIGG, hidden so much of his cleverness in its forbidding steel panels. Now he looked upon diagrams of gasifiers and greenhouses and garbage trucks, and tried to make sense of their connection to the occult symbols surrounding them. Some passages described lectric systems as complex as those in the Dams. Others spoke of gods and demons, the proper rites of invocation and banishment. What did windmills have to do with the structure of organic molecules? What were nitre flowers, and what did they have to do with tunnels? How did the physiology of the human brain relate to the "Twenty-Two Realms of the Conclave of the Initiates"? This blueprint would need another blueprint just for

Kit to understand its structure. Or, he thought, maybe this is a blueprint for how to build a blueprint for how to build... something else.

Kit was sure it was a language. One of the things he had always heard about the Ancients was that they had "languages of power". With these secret linguistics they spoke to machines and living creatures and made them move and change. They called the rain, some said. They flew in the skies and the stars. They grew plants of enormous size and vigor by whispering into their very seeds.

The languages of power were lost. Some, like Iris, thought they should stay that way. It was agreed by most that the misuse of these arcane sciences had brought about the Crash, the ruin of the world, the vanishing of most of humanity and the amnesia of the rest. Thus they were self-destroying powers, or they offended some deity, or they were cursed tongues that possessed their speakers and drove them mad.

Kit wanted that power.

He wanted to rebuild the RIGG by waving his arms. He wanted to heal Maya's leg and raise a chair of greenery from the ground for her to rest in. He wanted to slay Osric with a word, to fly above the ragged roads and deliver messages by wing and talon, to read books at a glance. He wanted to set a fleet of golems to

rebuild the Library, chanting words into their heads until they rose on hydraulic legs and walked of their own will. He wanted to delve the secrets of the universe and arrange its forces before him like sharp pencils on his desk.

He wanted the forbidden science.

He shifted in his seat, placing SIGNAL on the table, fussing with it until the shadow of his head lay not across it. He began to take notes, carefully sketching and mimicking the glyphs from the book. He was determined to decipher it.

#

Things Kit tried, to activate the language of power:

Converting a wish into an unintelligible foreign phrase and shouting it

Chanting the same phrase until it reverberated the chamber  
Whispering the phrase into his clenched fist then setting it free

Converting a wish into a pseudo-circuit diagram  
Dancing around in a frenzy staring at the diagram  
Drawing the diagram in midair with his charred stick  
Drawing the diagram with the stick while chanting the phrase  
Drawing the diagram with the stick while chanting the phrase while dancing to a frenzy

Putting some fresh blood from dancing accident onto the

diagram

Putting said blood onto his mouth and chanting the phrase at  
the diagram

Spitting hot water onto diagram after washing mouth

Drawing a smaller version of the diagram and eating it

Drawing a bigger version of the diagram on the floor with  
the stick

Dancing frenzy in the center of the big diagram

Shouting at the big diagram to work

Biting pen harder while thinking up new diagrams

Scattering a dozen diagrams across the floor and dancing on  
them

Spitting ink onto the diagrams after pen explodes

Gargling the phrase while washing mouth again

Insulting the diagrams and challenging their self-worth

Holding head in hands and moaning the phrase hopelessly

#

Hours later, Kit sprawled back in his chair and stared at the  
remains of his experiments. The black taste of ink soiled his  
mouth. He had not brought any food, and boiled water would not  
fuel him any longer. He idly sketched a symbol, a series of  
lines, arrows, and polygons, representing the intention "I will  
get a bunch of food soon." He gazed at SIGNAL, lying open on the



table before him.

Something about this page bothered him. A quote from some epic of old, emblazoned across it in a spidery script. He read it again.

"She scorned him and she scoffed at him,  
she laughed at him unpitying;  
so long he studied wizardry  
and sigaldry and smithying."

It wasn't the first line that bothered him. Sure, Maya had been scoffing and scorning him since the day they met. But he wasn't doing this to gain her favor. He wanted wizardry. He wanted sigaldry.

He wondered about that word, sigaldry. The book was called SIGNAL. But he was sure he had seen this elsewhere: sigal. Signal, sigal. Signaldry? It didn't sound any better. Could it be a misspelling? He doubted it, not in a book this finely crafted.

Kit frowned. He sipped from a beaker of lukewarm water. Something tickled the back of his mind. Where had he seen this before?

Suddenly he lurched forward and pawed through the book, to the table of contents.

Chapter eight: *Sigaldry*.

Strange how he hadn't seen it before. The table of contents

was numbered, but the pages weren't, so he had to guess at the right zone of the book and flick through until he found it.

There. The word, the essay, the diagrams. It all fit together on this page. When he moved back and forth, it became less clear. After a few pages the word itself vanished, in all its morphemes, sigal and sigaled and sigaldry and sigaldric, leaving an incoherent mess of aborted clauses. He found the Goldilocks position and began to read.

After some time Kit snatched up the closest diagram, the sigal for finding food. He looked at it deeply. He tried to make his mind still, to become the "Void Betwixt the Points" and embody pure knowing silence.

Nothing happened.

Kit stared calmly. He willed his monkey mind to stop chattering. He became the fluttering of leaves in the breeze.

Nothing continued to happen.

Kit wondered when it would start working. How would he know? Then he recognized his digression of mind, and focused on his breath. He attended to the sensation of air caressing his nostrils.

Nothing. Still.

Kit held his breath and bugged his eyes. He felt purple and ridiculous and allowed those feelings to pass over him as the

waves across the seafloor.

And nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

The edges of his vision were growing dim. Kit let out his breath in a whoosh and held it out, hearing his heart pound timpani in the pit of his chest. Nothing.

He returned his breath to normal, allowed his body to relax and his eyelids to sag. Nothing.

He sat up straight and thought the word nothing nothing nothing until it was meaningless nothing and nothing was nothing and nothing still happened.

His vision was still dim. He breathed calmly and shallowly, staring at the sigal though it no longer meant anything to him. Why was it so dim? His mind wandered. The paper before him looked almost pink. Something familiar about it, when had his vision been filled with pink light before?

Sunset.

It was sunset pink. The day was over and he had a long trek back to camp and no one knew where he was. Kit looked up from the sigal and saw it inverted, a bright blue burned into his eyes against the reddening room. He had to get back.

Suddenly he heard a thunderous rumbling, a terrible noise

which did not end, as if a stone elevator were about to land on his head, but louder, as if the Libratory outside were crumbling in earthquake, as if the earth whose stomach sheltered him was preparing to digest. It lasted for long moments.

When it stopped, Kit stood carefully. He took a deep breath. He yanked open the door, stepping quickly back in case of avalanche.

No rubble arrived. He looked outside.

The Libratory was gone.

A blank hallway greeted him, stretching away in both directions until it curved out of sight.

Kit packed the paper and pens and implements into his bag. He throttled the fire under the retort. Knocked back the last of the water.

With a sigh, he slammed shut the book SIGNAL and thrust it into the back-pack. Then he grabbed his sharp stick and began to hike, clattering its inky end on the wall as he went.

#

Kit returned to the Gatehouse well after dark. As he crossed the meadow he could see candlelight in the kitchen window.

Heavy-laden, he shambled up the steps and through the front door. Iris was awake. She leapt from her seat in the kitchen and rushed toward him.

"Kit, where have you been? What happened?"

Maya awoke on the couch. Disoriented, she curled up in the corner and instinctively reached for her knife. Her leg stabbed her awake the rest of the way. She barked at Kit.

"Who are you!"

"What? It's me, Kit."

"Where did you get that robe? How do you wear a thing from my dream?"

"I found it," Kit said. "Let me warm up a little and I'll explain. You say you saw this in your dream?"

Maya relaxed, but she did not respond. Iris helped Kit pull the thick gray robe from over his head.

"No wonder you were surprised. I guess with this robe over the two back-packs I probably look like a pregnant hunchback nun." Kit thought this would lighten the mood. It didn't. He sat down at a chair in the kitchen and bent to unlace his boots.

"Where did you get this other pack?" Iris asked. It was large, stuffed full, of Ancient military design.

"I found it, too. In the crypts." He helped himself to some tea from the stovetop. It was a thick brew made of roasted bay-nuts, stimulating and bitter like the coffee of Califa. Iris had clearly been drinking a lot of it tonight.

"Look, I'm sorry I left without telling you guys. I thought

it would just be a little morning hike, find something and come right back, but I got distracted. I kind of had a break-through."

"A break through? Who did you break this time?" Maya spoke from the other side of the counter, where the couch and coffee table defined the living-room. She had claimed the couch as her domain, elevating her leg upon its saggy shoulder. Kit had taken to sleeping in the little cold larder off the side of the kitchen, leaving Iris the empty bedroom.

Iris heaved one of the large pots onto the stove. They had filled these with creekwater daily, boiling it to make it clean. She began chopping roots.

"Iris. Don't worry about that. Look in the bag."

"This one? Whoa."

"What is in the bag? Let me see."

Food.

So much food. Rice, beans, lentils, flour, coffee, sugar, salt, all packaged in Ancient vapor-wrap. A miracle of storage. Spices that Kit had never heard of, thick oils from tropical nuts, freeze-dried neon fruits.

"That was just a little bit. What I could carry. There's lots more down there."

"Kit, this must be a hundred pounds of food," Iris said. "You carried this back here – from where?"

"Down the crypts. I found the Libratory I was looking for. Only, when I had my break-through, I got lost. Sort of. The room I was in got lost. I found the food room when I was looking for a way out."

"The food room?" Maya had ripped open a translucent envelope of dried kiwi slices. She tore each one in half with her teeth before chewing. Kit thought of earlobes.

"Your Libratory got lost?" Iris, skeptical. She poured a whole bag of rice into the pot of water.

"Yeah. Well, a piece of it. An office I was using. It moved. Like the stone elevator, but sideways. I never got back to the Libratory. I just walked through tunnels and weird rooms and eventually came out in the elevator cave. Way up on the wall, with a long ladder down. I nearly fell."

"What made it move? Was it SIGNAL?"

"Sort of. I think I figured out what it does."

Kit paused. He thought of not telling them what he had done, what it would mean to lie to the only people in the world who seemed to be on his side. He wondered if they would think he was crazy.

"I think it's a language. I think it's a way to talk to a machine, a huge machine that's built into the ground underneath us. It's not just a key into the Gate. It's a key to the whole

logic of the place. There's rooms down there, so weird, full of books but also food, or clocks, or cats—"

"Cats?" Iris was so jittery, wound up on bay-coffee and the sight of real food. She was buzzing around the room like a bee, popping bags of food into cabinets. It was she who had named this the Gatehouse, on their second night here. She was desperate to have a home. "I like cats. There were cats at the Palace, they would come into my room."

"You wouldn't like these cats. Trust me, they were freaky. Everything down there is freaky. The books, rooms full of books all bound in just one color, isn't that weird? How do you even find books all bound in one color?"

"You seriously saw this? From my dream again?" Maya clawed the couch as she sat forward. She chewed kiwi and stared at Kit, then swallowed. "Rooms of colored books? One of orange, one of green?"

"Um, I saw red and yellow. But that's right. You dreamed that too? You dream of the crypts?"

"I dream of the Library. Rooms with great big windows full of sun. Many people walking around in gray robes, like you found tonight. Now, all those people are gone, Library burned to ashes, but something lives on in the tunnels. You say you have a language to talk to the crypts? I say you can speak to the dead."



"How could you see that stuff in your dreams? Dreams aren't real, they can't show you things you don't know. You're talking about magic. This is science."

"Yes, I am talking about magic. Science is nothing, bug-collecting, choking Nature and demanding answers. Magic is where true power lies. Speak with Nature, speak with dreams, speak with crypts. That is magic, my friend."

"Whatever it is, it's wrong!" Iris interrupted with her fists clenched, shoulders drawn up to her ears. "You think you can move the earth with words? That you can just toy around with the Ancient machines and see how they work? Kit, there was a reason that place was burned to the ground. We shouldn't be messing around with their left-overs."

"We should take all the food out of that place, all the valuable stuff, and then seal it shut so no-one gets their hands on it. Can you imagine what my grandfather would do with this knowledge? Look what he did with just the Dam!" She puffed with breath. Kit could see her pulse fluttering in the soft skin of her neck.

"Whoa, okay. Calm down. I didn't do anything wrong. All I did was ask the machine, like you ask a shopkeep, I want to get some food." As Kit hoped, the mention of food calmed Iris somewhat. "And I asked it the right way, with the language from the book,

and it figured out how to do that. So, the easiest way for it was to move the room I was in to a place where I could get the food. Then I found my way out, and brought it back here, and now we're going to eat good and Osric doesn't know anything about it. We should take the time to assess this rationally rather than be guided by fear or panic."

He was interrupted by meowing.

"Oh, no," said Kit.

Iris walked to the door and poked her head outside.

"There's something out there in the field," she whispered.

"Don't let it in," Kit said.

"Is it fierce?" Maya asked with a sharp smile. Silently she hefted her crutch.

"No. It's just..."

Iris cooed for the cat. He slipped in the door, a big tom with wild gray fur. His eyes were green pools of acid, his pupils narrow catwalks.

"It's beautiful!"

The cat made a line for the book SIGNAL, which lay closed on the kitchen table. He curled up atop the book, as if to go to sleep.

He yawned – then froze. Mouth open. Perfectly still. A living statue of a yawning cat, the subtlest hint of breath and heartbeat

under his ribs.

A voice resonated from the cat, a warm, scratchy baritone.

The voice began:

"SIGNAL: A Book of Secrets. A Table of Contents. One.  
Information."

Iris screamed.

Kit buried his face in his hands.

## 9 Inkling

The Reading Room was a sunny oasis in the cold crypts. Outside, far above them, the sun beat down unrelenting. The summer had arrived unannounced, and the shelter of the Gatehouse roof could barely protect them from the sweltering days and heavy afternoon storms. Iris kept a pot of soup on the stove there, heating it only at night. They would return to eat, and to sleep, and occasionally they would go foraging in the woods.

The Library was home now. More comfortable than the Palace had ever been. She missed little about the Dams. The visits from bored tutors and fearful maids had never been enough to lighten her life. None of them had ever become a secret friend to her. Her mother scorned her, and her brothers and sisters followed suit. None could befriend her, mutant Iris, discolored freak of genetics, without risking the wrath of Osric. So she had spent her days alone, rereading the few books she had smuggled from the Palace bookshelf.

Now she sat in a wide atrium, curled up at the roots of a tree with her friend Maya. Books enveloped her. Not just the scavenged fragments available in the Dams: there were volumes, tomes, boxed sets, encyclopedias, back catalogs, anthologies, estates. The shelves were packed, stacked, three stories high.

Hundreds of boxes littered the room, spilling with books like dough overflowing a bowl. The Librarians must have brought them down here when the burning began. Saved as many as they could. She loved sorting through them, touching their rough jackets and glancing at their titles. It was overwhelming but arousing. She remembered the crash into the river, the sensation of being totally suffused and surrounded with water, not knowing which way up, carried on a tide of uncertainty. She drowned in books.

*Repetitive Emotion Injuries, Profound Physical Isolation as a Metaprogramming Technique, Patterns of Swarm Intelligence. Anautomaton. Germs of Truth. The Three Princes of the World of Spirits.*

Iris brought anything of interest to Maya, who sat at the foot of the tree. It seemed that her leg was healing properly, and once her mind had cleared she read voraciously. Iris had taught her the differences between the Wolfscript and the common alphabet. Maya had learned it perfectly. One explanation was all she ever needed. Iris was impressed with her recall.

The way the Wolf woman read was unreal. Her attention was laser light, burning the words right off the page. Iris wondered if the books were afraid. Iris was a little afraid, every time Maya looked at her. She felt as if her face were tattooed with her inner thoughts. An open book.

Maya caught her staring. Iris's reverie drained away.

"You ever think about the Dams and this place? How close they must be?"

Iris could feel herself blush. She sat up and looked away. Pretended to shuffle through some books on the floor.

"Not really, why?"

"Just I am reading this book about the Library. It doesn't mention Dams except to say it was called something else once. But I think we must be close. We drove upriver to the bridge, then crashed and swam downriver. No?"

"Yes. I don't know how far it was down the river, though. I guess we could hike to the top of the mountain and find out."

"It is easy for you to say. I will not be hiking more than this tunnel for many weeks now. In fact, I brought bag this time. So we can gather books back to the Gatehouse."

"Good idea. We can fill the shelves up there with the really interesting ones. What else does it say about the Library?" She glanced over at Maya. The book was slender and filled with illustrations. It was called *The Last Library*.

"Hm. It is not real good story. Mostly it is about refugees from the Crash. A little-children version of history, where no bad guys exist. But I am mapping some of the events to stories I have heard before."

"Like what?" Iris laid back on the cool stone and closed her eyes and watched the red-green fires of her own heartbeat in her eyelids.

"Well, this book is from long after the so-called Crash. It talks of the refugees that came to the Library in those days, telling story of how the Library became what it is at the time of writing. In the time of writing it was a great and bountiful city-state ruled by knowledge. Many thousands of people thrived here. But before the Crash it was a small community, maybe like monks. Writer does not know what happened to make the Crash. Not more than anyone else."

"Okay, so what happened in the middle?"

"Harder to tell, because book is filled with suspiciously clever people and unlikely coincidences. I think it is propaganda, fear-words like my cousins make to scare travelers."

"Do you have a guess?"

"Obviously many people came here. They fled the burning cities and the flooded coasts and came here to the river valley. The Library already had farmlands and orchards. The crowds of refugees demanded food and water and shelter, they needed medical care, they were the survivors of the Crash and they would not take no for an answer. So the small town became a large one.

"The different cultures and goals of the people led to

infighting and power struggle. That is where most of this propaganda comes in. Obviously history written by winner. Makes one side out to be the charismatic leaders and others submit graciously in respect of philosophical prowess. Like that has ever happened."

"So skip all of that."

"Okay. So eventually someone wins, some structure of power emerges, everybody is free and happy and studying together. The place has enough resources, the new hands make it easier to grow more food, and everybody wins. Total goat shit. But if this writer tells true, the Library is sustaining thousands of people and operating big science laboratory just three generations ago."

"How long ago was it started?"

"Don't know. Nobody ever knows anything about times before the Crash. But that was six generations ago."

"Really? How do you know that?"

Maya hesitated; after a moment, she pulled up the hem of her shirt. She stretched to the side, exposing her skin to Iris.

"There," she said, "do you see it?"

Iris saw it. Amidst the familiar slanted lettering were a series of small tally marks. One two three four, across five! then six.

"A word-mother has added one of these each time she passed on



these words."

Iris didn't know what to say. The words squirmed, stretched, and vanished as Maya covered herself again.

"So," Iris said eventually. "The Library must have been burned since the writing of that children's book. Otherwise they would have mentioned it."

"Otherwise, they would have never written this book and it would be ashes."

"Yes. That. There's no clues in there about why it was destroyed?"

"No. From everything in this book it seems like Library will just go on forever with infinite resources, playing with science and eating good."

"And the Dams is just a funny little town nearby."

"Yes. They only mention it to say that its lectrics run for miles. It used to power the Library but at time of writing they think they don't need it."

"I wonder why."

"Does not say."

"What does it say about the tunnels?"

"These tunnels that we sit in? The crypts? The Reading Room and the Gate?"

"Yes, obviously these tunnels!"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing? There's miles of tunnels under the surface of this mountain and it doesn't mention anything in there about them?"

"Correct."

"Okay, super weird. You would think they'd put that sort of thing in a children's book."

"I think this is children's book for adults. For simple people who need to believe."

"Oh, like the Book of the Last Few Days."

"Or the book SIGNAL. Kit has been gone a long time. Where did he say he was going?" Maya shifted, propping her leg up on a box of yellow magazines.

"He was going back to the Libratory. He said he found a new path yesterday that was much shorter. I don't understand why he can't just do his experiments here in the Reading Room, where it's safe."

"Maybe he is playing with himself. You know boys."

"Unfortunately. My little brother lived in the room next door until he grew a beard. I learned just to run a bath and practice my singing." Iris smirked. Maya smiled back.

"Tell you what," said Iris. "I'll go take a look. I made him promise to use something better than charcoal to mark his path."

See."

She pointed at a tunnel mouth nearby. A drizzle of red paint emerged from it, like a tongue. The bright paint was easy to see against the dark stone. Especially for Iris.

#

On the way to the Libratory Iris found the cat room. It was not large, overfurnished with bookshelves and end tables and large cushy chairs. It was thick with cats.

She was not afraid of them any longer. Whatever superstitions she harbored, they were nice animals and they couldn't help it that they were weird. Besides, they were all over the crypts now and hadn't caused any harm. She liked the softness of their fur, the rough burr of their accents.

She heard it before she saw it. At a distance she thought it was the roiling of underground rivers. Up close, it was more disturbing. A hundred voices, loudly reading from books. Male and female, with variations but all fuzzy and clicking like grandfather's phonograph.

They were the voices of the dead, transported through time by feline intervention.

The cats filled the room. Each of a different size and stature. All gray of fur and green of eye. They sat on books, stacks of books, towers of books. They insinuated themselves into

shelves, lying coiled atop a row of books and reading them one after another. They didn't turn pages, they didn't even crack spines. They just shut their eyes, opened their mouths, and held forth with endless stamina. The ones that hadn't found a book to read circled about her ankles, their tails making question marks, meowing like normal creatures. She knew they just wanted her to take a book off a shelf and lay it on the ground.

Iris practiced her talent. She ran her fingers across the spines, unfocusing her eyes, letting the invisible magnetism lead her to a special book. Bibliomancy, Kit had called it.

There. Iris reached up high, stretching on tips of toes. She inserted a finger into the top edge and pulled it off the shelf.

*The Girl Who Could See Sixteen Million Colors.*

Iris nearly cried.

She opened the book. It was a story involving a lot of guns and traveling. The main character was a young woman assassin who had hyperchromia. She could see more about the world than the people around her, so she was very good at what she did. But she was forever lonely because no one could share the beauty she saw in the world.

Iris paged ahead. In the middle of the book something surprised her. Letters were missing from the printed pages. She skipped forward and saw more of the same. Not rotten or torn –

all the books were surprisingly well-preserved in these caves. The letters were just not there, as if they had never been printed.

These books were specially bound, covered in orange leather, with thick fine paper, well-organized on the shelf. No one could have missed this sort of printing error.

She checked another book, quickly waving her hand until she felt a tingle. It too missed letters. Whole sentences were vacant. What was going on?

Iris put the books under her arm and walked down the corridor until she found Kit.

He was leaning back in a chair. Iris could see the plastic stretching at stress points.

"Hey, Kit."

"Shit!" Kit sat forward quickly at her approach. He fumbled with his notes. He removed a well-chewed pen from his teeth and stuck it quickly behind his ear. "I didn't hear you come in. What's up?"

"Sorry to scare you. I think Maya wants to grab some books and go home. And you've got the key. That was why I came. But then I walked into this other room, the cat room? And I found something weird. Look."

She lay the books on the table before Kit.

"Do you know about this?" While Kit was staring at the vanished texts, Iris tried to get a peek at his notes. Circles, angles, weird glyphs. Some of the pictures he had drawn looked to her like three-dimensional objects, shifting along with her as she changed her angle of view. "Is this something else you did, with your spells?"

"They're not spells! They're science. Just really advanced science. I thought I was starting to get the hang of it, but then \_"

"Then what? You messed up the books? These books are all we have!"

"No! Let me finish. I really needed these notes I made, for a sigal. One I haven't tried yet. But when I went back to look at them—" here he paused to shuffle through his notes for the right page —" the letters were gone! Not just the ones I needed, but right across the page like that."

The page had a white streak across thick scrawled paragraphs. Iris thought it looked like a snail's trail.

"So it's not you."

"No! It's something else. You said you found these in the cat room?"

"Yes. I just looked for them with my hand."

"You bibliomanced them. That's one of the secrets I found in

the book."

"I don't know. I don't think I want anything to do with that book. I've always been good at finding things."

Kit stood up.

"Whatever. We have to go poke the cats."

"What?"

He was already down the hall.

"Kit, I don't think we should just leave the book sitting here. Kit!"

Iris took a second to examine his notes.

*Books t ook for.*

*Femini sychology*

*Gratu ous Ecstacy*

*Rapt re, Passion, Attachment*

*Al habets of Desire*

No surprises there. She grabbed the book key and chased after him. Her headlamp played shadow puppets in the edges of her vision. The tunnels were cool and dry, with musty air. It took less time than she thought it would to get back to the room of cats and armchairs.

Kit was already skimming through a book, standing just inside the door. A gray kitten scowled angrily at his feet, hair on end.

"This one doesn't have any missing letters. Maybe we need a

bigger cat."

Iris faced down a large short-haired male. He squinted one eye at her and kept reading.

"Shoo! Shoo cat!"

"In the periodic table of fonts, we find the helvetic family to have no serif valences. While, as we shall soon see, this has its merits, the attribution of the garaldic fonts to the scholarly work is precisely because of meaowch—" Iris pulled a book from the stack and the tomcat went down.

No snail trails. No dead letter office. They tried other stacks and shelves, invariably causing a ruckus amongst the local denizens. The cats were not the answer.

The sounds of mewling and growling and cross-lecturing made her head throb.

"We have to get out of here. Maya's waiting for us."

"I have to get my notes."

"I don't want to go back there. I brought the book, see. Maya's packing some more books and then we're going to go home and eat. We'll have a fire. Come on."

"I need my notes! I can't just leave them lying there with this creepy stuff happening."

"So you do admit it's creepy! Go get them, then. I'm not waiting here. See you back at the tree, cat-poker." She left



before he could reply.

#

It was a warm clear night and they sat outside under half-moon. Iris watched as Maya showed Kit how to light a fire. She took a tiny bit of chaff and placed it in a divot on a piece of wood. She pressed her hands around another stick, carefully selected, its bark whittled away by Maya's quick hands. Pushing it down firmly into the divot, she rubbed her hands back and forth to spin the stick. Kit practiced after her, aping her motions with his gangly limbs.

Finally they got it alight. Maya knelt down and puffed at the ember, feeding it kindling until it caught. Soon they sat in cheery firelight.

For a long time all were silent. Each stared into the flames, feeling the primordial fascination of ever-changing light. Iris remembered the hearth in her Palace rooms. Long hours she had sat with it, reading her tiny collection of crumbling storybooks. Reading to it as if it were a child. As if her mother would read to her.

When she was older she told tales to the hearth. She would walk around town at night, spying on the normal people in their normal homes. Somehow the same stupid intrigues that intruded on her sleep in the Palace were miraculously dramatic when she

watched them through the glass windows of the townsfolk. She would come home before dawn's light and whisper stories to the flames.

It seemed that the fire here was the same one. No stone hearth or mantle or walls, just the sticks and the flames on the ground before her, but somehow the same. It was a traveling ear. It was the ever-listening audience, grateful for some feet to warm and the chance to eavesdrop on a good yarn. She smiled. Looked around, eyes hidden by her bangs. The fire was danced also in the eyes of her comrades. Adventurers, travelers. She was one of them now. They argued, true. But they were acting like a team. This could be the story of her life. The nomadic hearth would follow them, eagerly awaiting the next chapter.

She could be a hero. Not a freak. An explorer. Adventure Librarian. Bibliomancer.

"I want to camp out in the Library tomorrow night," said Iris.

"Oh yeah?" Kit said.

"Yeah. I want to see what things are eating the letters."

"You still think things are eating the letters?" Maya had not taken Iris seriously about the missing letters. "You imagine more creatures live in the crypts? Talking cats are not weird enough for you?"

"I'm serious! There's no history of the crypts. There's no rhyme or reason to the way the tunnels are organized." She shushed Kit when he began to argue. "Why should there be such a spidery network of bunkers underneath a burnt-out city? Don't people usually hide in their bunkers, when the city is burning? You'd think there would be people down there, or bodies, or evidence of where they went. Not just a bunch of untouched supplies and unsorted books."

"You've got a point there," said Kit. He held his hand to his chin, one finger over his lips, then began drawing maps in the air. "The crypts don't seem to be centralized around the Library, at least in my explorations. They have a sort of limb reaching that way, with the Reading Room as the main node. But there's tendrils leading all which-ways. Different rooms and purposes, but not well organized. Not like anything planned. More like an ant farm, or a lightning sculpture. You know, where the lightning hits the sand and fuses it into glass? There's a node under the Gate, but no directionality. I wouldn't even say that we're in the center of it. If it's even the sort of thing that has a center."

"How can a thing have no center?" Maya asked. Kit began to go on, but she held up a hand. "Wrong question. Real question is, how can a giant set of tunnels connected to the Library have

nothing to do with whole city of Librarians going missing? What we need to do is focus on the books. There must be answers in them. Something better than crazy-ass book of secrets. Real history."

Maya pulled at her collar, finally relenting to the heat of the flames. She removed her cloak. In the firelight her bare shoulders rippled with text. Iris longed to read it.

"I still want to go down there at night," she said, pulling her gaze from Maya's skin. "I think if I'm quiet they won't hear me. And I'm very good at listening, and seeing in the dark. If they're small I can catch one, and if they're big I can hide. But they're just eating letters and words, so how much of a threat could they be?" Iris rolled some potatoes into the coals. Wild potatoes, found rambling down the hillsides like blackberries. The upriver forest was weird, but it definitely grew a lot of free food. She wondered why anyone would bother to live in cities.

"If you're going, I'm coming with you." Kit puffed up a bit. "It's probably safe enough but I should come just in case."

"Yeah, right, like you will be helpful. Chivalrous swine," Maya said. "I am not going down there tonight. I have things to do. Books to read. My leg does not support your foolish hunt for imaginary creatures."

"You don't have to come. Either of you. I'll be fine. I just want to take a look. There's got to be something going on and I don't like not knowing what it is. I'll find out, and then I'll come back and tell you."

"You're not going down there alone," Kit insisted. "Maya will be okay here for the night. Right, Maya? We can put some of these coals in the stove to warm the soup. I'll grab the book and my back-pack, and we can take some blankets. In the morning we'll bring some more of the book-pile back here. Okay?" He looked at Iris, his face puppy-dog with excitement. The fire twinkled mischief in his eyes.

"Okay," said Iris.

"Fine. Go off to wild goose hunt. I will be on the couch. See you tomorrow." Maya's voice was level, but the look she gave Kit was full of sulfur and nails. Kit did not see it.

Iris did.

#

"It's scarier down here at night, Kit."

"Yeah, I noticed that too."

Iris sat on a stack of blankets, wrapped in a thick shawl Maya had loaned her. She leaned her back against Kit's, in comfortable equilibrium. The Reading Room was dark. The half-moon outside cast wan rays through the domes overhead. They did not

penetrate as far as the floor. At night the place was more obviously a cave. Iris could barely see beyond the small circle of candlelight.

"What's that?" Kit whispered. She felt his breath hasten against her shoulders.

"I hear it too." Small sounds, frenetic, like rats.

Cautiously, they stood. Tiptoed toward the source of the noise.

"Could it be the cats?" Even whispering, Kit was loud.

"No, they don't make any sound when they walk."

"They're really weird, huh?"

"All cats are like that." Iris rolled her eyes in the dark.

"But yeah, they're weird. They don't eat or sleep, they just read. And that definitely sounds like something eating."

"It stopped."

"Maybe it heard us." Heard you, she thought.

Kit shined his head-lamp at the shelves.

Nothing unusual. Well, besides *The Care and Feeding of Black Holes*.

They returned to the blankets. Kit stretched his lanky frame on the ground, lying on his back with one arm behind his head. Iris faced the other way, crossing her feet by his head and leaning back on her palms.

"Iris?"

"Yes, Kit?"

"Do you think Maya is mad at me?"

Iris smiled, unseen.

"Why do you think that, Kit?"

"Well, I broke her leg. And, I don't know, she called me a chivalrous pig."

"Swine, actually."

"Swine. I just don't get why she didn't want to come with us. She said it was her leg, but she's been crutching it down here with us for days. Does she not like me?"

"Kit, I don't think that's the problem." Iris revised her opinion of Kit. Maybe he wasn't that arrogant after all – just awkward.

"It's not like I have anyone else. My post-father is dead. All I have in the world are two hitch-hikers who think I'm going crazy and a cat who wants to read fantasy novels all night."

Iris tucked her knees up to her chest and spun around neatly. She laid back, nestled her head into the crook of Kit's arm.

"Um." Kit swallowed loudly.

"Don't worry. It's okay to do this. We're friends, Kit. I don't have anybody either. We might as well learn to like each other."

"Okay. If you say so."

After a while Kit fell asleep. Iris liked hearing the soft catch of his breath as he slipped into dream. He jerked awake once, muttering no no no oh oh okay, but fell right back asleep. His arm made a good pillow, despite the occasional twitching.

Late in the night she heard it again. A gnawing, slurping, gluttonous little sound.

Iris decided to experiment. She put out the candle and waited for her eyes to adjust. The purple and blue afterimages faded away, leaving the red flicker of shadows and the tepid gray moonlight above. She angled her head, slowly turning her neck until the closest chewing sound aligned with her peripheral vision.

Gotcha! Something dark and squirmy, on the third shelf up. She pinned it with her head-light.

A horrid blob of blackness quivered atop the books, rat-size, arcs and whorls rising and collapsing on its surface. She stifled a scream. Adventurers don't scream.

The creature was frozen with fright. It leaned from side to side, testing different avenues of escape, but Iris kept it firmly centered in the beam of her light. It was kind of cute, actually. She stood carefully and reached out to it.

It squirmed at her touch, but it wasn't slimy. When she



pulled her fingers away they were stained black.

"You're made of ink!" she whispered. "You strange little thing."

Iris leaned close to the blob, cooing softly as if to a baby bird. Then it leaped onto her face and forced itself into her eyes.

#

Blackness flooded Iris's skull. She could feel the horrid blob sloshing around, in her eyes, then in her ears, then in the back of her mouth. It tasted of bitter poison.

She screamed. Somewhere far away Kit was speaking, but the ink blotted out his voice.

She shook her head, slamming it on the ground, spitting and gasping. Screaming, again and again.

Her pupils dilated painfully, then contracted. The muscles in her eyes twitched and spasmed. She squeezed them shut, hunching into a ball on the cold ground.

Memories arose and faded. The face of her mother, nagging, insulting. Gone. Long nights spent awake, alone, in tears. Gone. Osric's cruel gaze, denouncing her, the word "mutant" curling his lips. Gone.

The black goo bled into her past. It stained her mind.

Bright light struck her. Iris shrank away, burrowed her face

into her arms, but it followed. A voice, from far away. From deep in the pools of ink. Whose voice?

"Iris! What happened? Speak to me," it pleaded.

She remembered. Kit. Her friend.

Her eyes creaked open. The light blinded.

No, she thought, no more light. I've seen too much.

Ink spilled across her vision. Soaked the beam of Kit's headlamp.

Thank you, she thought with relief. And she felt the ink respond. Not words, or thoughts, just an agreeable feeling. The blackness drained away from her ears. It seemed to dry, crusting over the frantic light.

Sound returned. Iris realized she was still screaming. She took a great shuddering breath.

"Iris. Can you hear me? Are you okay?" Kit was above her, still trying to peer into her face. The light was dim now, infiltrated with intelligent ink.

"I'm here. I'm okay. I think." She rolled onto her back, forcing her muscles to relax. Her hands unclenched and shook uncontrollably.

She looked up at Kit. His expression was one of concern.

"Something happened. I think it's going to be fine, though," she began. But as she watched, he paled. Horror filled his face.

"What?" she asked. "What is it?"

"Your eyes..." He backed away slowly, his lamp fixed on her face.

"What? What about my eyes?"

## 10 Bookwurm

A week passed before Maya spoke to Iris.

It was not the closeness of Iris and Kit that bothered her. She insisted to herself that she had no intention of falling into the romance trap. She was a strong Wolf, a Tracker of the Moon.

She knew better than to fool around with boys like Kit. She had seen enough of them at the camps of Wolves. Not a leader, not brutal or strong-willed. In that way he was better than a lot of men. But he was weak. He had no dream. He had courage, yes, and strategies, he could be good in a pinch. He could never lead a tribe.

Iris, on the other hand, had been so beautiful before she changed. Dramatic and energetic and cheerful in the face of adversity. How unlike Kit she was: where he was a nervous rabbit, she was a lithe and graceful willow. How alike they were, too: perceptive and smart, but insecure. Unknowing of their own powers.

Maya had fallen into daydreams of life together in the Gatehouse. A garden in the meadow, a trickle of smoke from the chimney, maybe a few friends rescued from home. She and Iris could sleep in the bedroom, and Kit could have the couch.

Now Iris slept outside. She hid in the treeline at night,

curled up in the shadows on a bed of leaves. She woke in the morning and evening to forage. The only reason she entered the Gatehouse was to heave sacks of food onto the counter and cook. Maya stayed on the couch and read books. She would not be scared out of her dominion.

The rainstorms became tremendous. Every afternoon, the tin roof rang with the hammers of thunder goblins. Sometimes Iris huddled over the stove or sat on the porch and stared for hours. Sometimes she would strip naked and streak through the pelting droplets. Rarely did she speak, and not to Maya. The discomfort was palpable in the small space.

Kit did not seem to notice. Either he was exceptionally dim or he had developed selective oblivion. He reigned supreme at the kitchen table, covering it from end to end with notes and cross-references. His project had shifted considerably when Iris changed. He spent every day trying to understand what had happened to her. He followed her around, asking questions, getting few answers. Worked harder on his notes, on the book SIGNAL. He sought a cure.

For on that strange and fateful camping trip, Iris had been infected.

Kit claimed to have woken in the night to Iris spasming and crying, but when they got back to the Gatehouse Iris was eerie

calm. She had stayed that way since. Not gone, just tranced out and spacey. She would not speak of the incident.

Maya wondered what had been implanted in her mind. She could not bear to look Iris in the face and ask her.

Not now that Iris's eyes were a deep starry black.

"Is it food time?" Kit asked, breaking the day's silence early in the afternoon.

Iris shrugged and served herself a bowl of fried greens and rice. She walked out the front door and sat on the step.

Maya hated when people left the door open. The flies would get in, and the heat. She got up and limped to the door, shutting it firmly before serving herself some food. Kit was already standing, eating the stir-fry with a pair of ball-point pens as chopsticks. He stared up into the left corner of the room, humming some tune. His eyes still scanned back and forth as if he were reading.

"Kit?"

"Hm?" He glanced at Maya, face blank.

"Are you going to be using the book all day? I want to go to the crypts."

"Um, yea, I really need it. I'm working on this sigal. To make everything clear. So that we know what Iris's problem is and what happened to the books." He gulped down the last of his food

and splashed water from a jug into his bowl. Gulpd it down.

"Oh yeah? That doesn't sound like science. Are stone machines underground going to miracle every answer to you? What does book of secrets say about ink-eye demons? Every answer you need is in this one book?" Maya wanted to shake him, wake him from his book-trance.

"I guess I do want a miracle. The Ancients had so much knowledge. I can't absorb even a fraction of the books in those crypts. It seems to me that SIGNAL is a language that interacts with them more abstractly."

"What do you mean, abstractly?"

"Like when you taught me to make fire. You showed me the way to do it, with the particular materials we had. But you also showed me the way to do it with any type of soft pitchy wood and any easily inflamed duff. That's the abstract version: this motion makes this fire happen, as long as you put all the bits together right. It's the basic principle behind all science – abstraction, I mean, not fire."

"I see no difference. Science is always principle of fire. That is why the world burns today."

"Maybe so. But fire makes us who we are. Fire, and language." Kit gestured at Maya's tattooed arms, accidentally brushing her skin with a fingertip. He blushed, stepped back and hit his head

on a cast-iron pan hanging from the ceiling. "Ow! That's what separates us from the critters."

"So, you are saying that SIGNAL is like a fire?"

"No, it's like the principles of making a fire. It's like the book on how-to use books. Or libraries, really. How to Do Magic Tricks with Libraries. You see?" He rubbed his head and grimaced.

"This is not magic. If it is science then it is simply tricks. Magic is old and deep and important." Maya crossed her arms. She leaned back against the counter. He may have had all the great words for science, but magic was something she knew in her blood.

"You don't think this is old and deep and important? It's literally a mysterious Ancient crypt! How much older, deeper or more important can it get?"

"Magic is not science! It is not what the Ancients did. They were dark meddlers. They were hackers and animal torturers. Everything that they built is square and sterile and made of poison. Magic is the full moon. Magic is the ancient dance of the egg and the heron."

"Excuse me, hate to interrupt the poetry, but who's the one who actually read the book? That stuff is in there too. You said yourself that Iris was cursed or possessed. Isn't that magic? What are the creepy tunnels doing under there? Magic, perhaps?"



Maybe magic needs a lot of books and laboratories and weird instruments, just like science does. Or maybe they're not that different."

"Whatever happened down there was badness, Kit. Magic is in harmony with the earth and the moon. It is not this wicked abstraction."

"I think I know what magic is, Maya. I'm the one who got us all the food, remember? I found the book in the first place. Magic is ink and paper and precision." Kit leaned on the table, fuming, with his hands pressed upon SIGNAL.

Maya did not like the way he was looking at her. His eyes, though blue, took on the glassy sheen that Iris's now had. He glared at her and she knew he would not calm until she left his territory, retreated to her couch.

She did not leave.

"I am tired of you knowing what is right. You and your rightness got us a lot of bad days so far. You mess around with powers you do not know. You talk over me and tell me what I will do and you fawn over Iris even when she is completely shit for brains. I am tired of your weakness and your addiction to ink." Maya began to rummage into the waistband of her skirt. Kit widened his eyes and edged away.

Finally she got it loose and brandished it in his face.

"You want magic, little boy? This is magic!"

A fistful of oldmansbeard, green and fibrous, clumpy and thick with the blood of her Moon. Maya held it under Kit's nose and howled in his face.

Kit went as white as Luna and fainted to the ground.

#

"Remind me what we're looking for again?"

"Anything about the crypts. Machines for tunneling, engineering of bunkers, altered animals. We need to figure out what this place is about."

Maya led the way through the tunnels.

Rather, Maya walked in front of Kit. He still had the best knowledge of the crypts and their logic. Kit gave directions, but Maya set the pace. She had crafted a pair of Y-shaped crutches and learned to swing her body between them, increasing her speed tremendously. Pine pitch on their tips gave her extra traction on the slippery stone. And for some reason she now had more traction with Kit as well.

Kit aimed her to the Libratory. Lower of ceiling than the Reading Room, it still felt like a cloud of bats and shadow hung in every corner. The tools on the tall tables mystified Maya. She looked instead to the books on the walls.

The room was like a mother bear with dozens of suckling cubs.

Little galleries and offices intermingled at the edge, all filled with books. Some were closed rooms with thick doors and no windows. Some were open to the world, arrayed carefully like storefronts. Each bubble-room still held the mementos and errata of its former curator, untouched. Engraved on the wall under a bright sundome she saw the words *Spatial Collections*.

The books were each bound in that colorful leather. They were mixed together, not blocks of color but a frothing rainbow. It dazzled her. So many thoughts, collected and organized by so many different minds, each with their own beautiful chaotic pattern. Where would she even start?

"Hey, we should start over here," said Kit. He stood at one of the open-faced rooms. In the center was a large rough ball of brown metal, upheld by a sculpted claw. "I spent a little time here the other day. I think this guy was a historian or cartographer. This is our planet."

"Which planet? Morningstar?"

"No, the one we live on. Gaia."

"Gaia is a planet?" Maya thought about it for a moment. "Oh, of course she is. It must be that from the surface of Morningstar we would see our Gaia as a small moving light in the sky. These sisters must live very far apart."

"Yeah, they do. Everything in space is far apart. That's why

it's nice that we have a whole planet to live on. This is just a globe, of course. A small representation of the world. We're right here." He pointed at a spot on the upper half of the sphere. It wobbled as he touched it, and she saw that the globe could spin on an axle to be inspected from any angle. The brown metal was carved to make a three-dimensional map of mountains, rivers, and oceans. Maya recognized the Cascadia Gorge and Mother Hood. She marveled.

"There is so much world."

"Yep. And this guy—"

"How do you know it is guy?"

"I'm just saying that. I don't know who was here before, but he, or she, did gather a lot of books on the history of this region. It's a terrible mess in here, but maybe we can find something about the crypts."

They sifted through documents. Kit found a crumbling newspaper with a legible dateline, but neither he nor Maya could correlate the numbers to any calendar they knew. Kit scanned books on the wall. Maya sat on the floor and leaned sideways to read the titles in the stacks.

"Obviously there isn't anything in here from the Burn until now," said Kit.

"Obvious."

"And you think the Burn happened three generations ago? Sixty years or so?"

"Yes."

"How long before the Burn was the Crash?"

"These are stupid names. Wolves call it the Cleansing. When the Mother took away nine of ten people and gave the world back to wildness."

"Okay, that's one way to look at it. I like that better than the idea that God picked up all the chosen ones. Implies that descended from the people left behind."

"Also stupid. Chosen ones get the beauty of Gaia."

"She is a pretty nice planet. What about the rumor that all the people left and went to live on the other planets, and asteroids, and moons?"

"That would be a terror. Humans nearly killed the Mother. How could we possibly do anything good for planets not of our birth? What right do we have to mess around with Luna?"

"There's definitely lots of weird things up in the sky, things that move differently than the other stars. But maybe they're just old space trash, who knows. How long ago do you think the Cleansing was?"

"Six."

"Really? People have lots of different guesses."

Maya did not care to show Kit the count on her ribs.

"I am confident. Six generations of Wolves."

"Is that written somewhere on you? Or just your memory, oral history?"

"Six. Generations. Of Wolves. Are written on my skin. I will barely have room to divulge my own wisdom when I pass them on.

"First there was the Cleansing, and we went joyously to the woods. My wordsmother was Dharmashakti then. She gave words to Amalynn. By the time of Nephali, we had taken to banditry. We raided cities and travelers. The forests were not well grown, they were not tended. We could not survive on the offerings they provided. And our numbers had grown, and spread, and we laced the forest with our camps and hunting grounds. But in the age of Malachakra there was a quickening. The forests filled with plants of great vigor and flavor."

"Wait, so this was four generations in? Malachakra would be growing up right after the Burn, then. Right?"

"Yes. If I am right in dating, then Burn of Library is same time with Quickening. Maybe people leave, food gets out. But food was not good. Malachakra died young and the words she gave to Catalpa were hasty written. Since Catalpa's day the plants of the Upriver are thought to be toxic." She wondered if Kit would question this. She was worried, herself. But he just stroked his

face-fuzz and squinted into the distance. Thoughtful.

"Many people went missing in the woods, perhaps to beasts. Catalpa fled the Upriver along with her brothers and settled in the River Hood. Others sought cooler climates in the north. Some even went off in search of a Library." Kit's head snapped toward her. So he was listening.

"Did they find it?"

"No. Maybe. They never came back. And they are not here."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess we're the ones who found it. Is that a big deal?"

"It is biggest deal. The Library of the Wolves is not a real place on this globe. It is idea, concept that we carry our ancestors with us and pass them on. It is what makes us Wolves, to carry the words. We do not often speak of it, as a salmon does not speak of water. To have found this place is... unthinkable."

"Wow."

"Yes."

"But Malachakra, she never heard anything about the Library? If people scattered, she might have run into them. I mean, thousands of people left this place. They must have gone somewhere."

"None of my mothers ever heard of them. Or if they did, they chose not to write of it."

"Is that very common?"

"No."

Kit paced an orbit around the bronze globe. He scanned the shelves.

"So, I guess what we need is a book on plant science. Altering plants, secret languages of plants and beasts. Like this!" He crossed to the wall in one long stride.

*The Manipulation of Biology and Reproduction Without Breeding.* Dark green with silver letters.

Maya watched him for a moment as his gaze scraped the pages. He held the book with both hands, very close to his face, shoulders taut and elbows tucked in.

"Do you have blindness?"

"A little bit," said Kit. "I can't read things from far away. I used to, my goggles would let me do that. But I lost them in the River. With everything else."

"That is sad. I am sorry."

"It's alright. I still have my hat. And at least I can read the books. Can you imagine losing the ability to see right when you're dropped into a gigantic Library?"

"It would be tragic. Maybe I am lucky to only have a broken leg." She smiled at his uncertain expression. "That was joke. I am not mad anymore."



"Okay. You want to take a look at this book? It's kind of dense. Nothing stands out to me just yet."

Maya took it from his hand and opened to the middle.

"This is crazy," she said.

"Really? I found it dry. What do you see in it?"

"No, this, right here. '*Rumors abound, but no evidence has ever been found of the alleged Project 53 or their maverick experiments.*' What is Project 53, do you know?"

"Never heard of it. Let me see."

"No." She rummaged through the book but found nothing else on the subject. "The maverick experiments are maybe something to do with a virus. Or a genius. But it does not say which genius."

"Why does that catch your interest?"

"It is written. Here." She twisted her arm around so that he could see the back of it, then recited.

"'Fifty-three years did we hide in the dark;

The forest accepted us into its heart.

Our secrets in story and song do we carry,

Till the day that we settle at the great Library.'

"Malachakra. It was something that her birth-mother sang to her. A lullaby. It is one of the few times the wish of Library is mentioned on skin."

"Fifty-three years? If Malachakra was your mother's mother,

or whatever, that would be around now. How many years since her birth?"

"We do not slice our lives into number. Malachakra was young when she died. Catalpa is old. I am young yet. Maybe it is fifty-three years. It is just a number I am fond of, and now I find it in this book. I want to know more about Project 53."

"But how do we find anything in here? Should I just start looking through the index of every book, under 'project'? That's a project in itself."

"You said there are rooms that are all of one color."

"Yeah. You think they might be easier to search?"

"Take me to them."

They walked. Maya had the sense that they headed toward the Library, but the route slanted downward much more than the path to the Reading Room. Perhaps they were below it. She could not be sure.

Finally they reached a wide doorway, leading to a small lobby with dozens of exits. One word was engraved above the door:

*Darkive.*

The Darkive was dizzying. Each tiny room was dense with hue, barely just enough space to stand between three walls of solid color. Many books were missing, the shelves gap-toothed. They must have been squirreled away to the Spatial Collections.

It was easy to get lost. From room to room the color of the books changed little. Only after a few minute's walk did they see an appreciable shift, from orange to yellow. Each of the rooms had three archways to rooms of slightly different color. The shelves were carved into the stone itself.

"This is what I was telling you. It's impossible to navigate this place. Any time you think you know where to go, there's a wall instead of a door or you can only go up when you need to go down or it's just the wrong one after all. It's really a terrible design." Kit had been rambling like that the whole way. He must be nervous.

"There must be some way. I have seen it. Just be quiet for a minute."

He stopped. She did not have long before he would start again.

Maya stood in the middle of the third yellowish room and shut her eyes tight. She balled up her fists, tracing the topography of her dreamscapes. She could not jump through bookshelves in waking life, but she could just about remember the shape of that place. The ever-changing orientation. The way angles aligned to the eye and revealed new spaces entirely. She caught the scent of it.

"Dark green," she said. "This way."

#

Maya leaned back, propped her foot up on the arm of the couch, and admired her bookshelf.

She had packed it full, pamphlets and scrolls and codexes. One whole shelf was filled with documents referencing the enigmatic Project 53. She was still unsure of the nature of this secret society. They were mentioned throughout the literature.

Some of the books appeared to be pre-Crash. These were hand-copied, often with whole chapters missing. She assumed they must have been rewritten from memory.

If I had memorized the books, she thought, they would be perfect.

So Project 53 had existed before the Crash. They were involved with the Library, she was sure of that. And yet the few official histories she had found said nothing on the subject. She began to suspect that whoever they were, they were connected to the mystery of the crypts.

Perhaps they had built the tunnels, stolen away the books. Maybe they weren't part of the Library at all, but a shadow organization undermining it for their own purposes. She sat up and reached for a sky-blue volume.

*Advanced Dimensional Engineering: Studies in Cryptopography.*

Maya idled through the pages. There were no illustrations,

and the words were long and ungainly. Maybe later she would ask Kit to take a look, see if he could apply any of his secret knowledge. Right now he was busy, interrogating Iris again.

From what she could glean, dimensional engineering had something to do with building spaces that could be redesigned continually, growing and changing through time. She made a mental note to ask Kit about the time his office had shifted location.

As she trekked through the book she noticed a roughness to the fore edge. Something not right. She felt for the error and opened the book near the beginning. There, a corner torn right off the page. It had not been torn before, she was sure. The page number was gone, showing through to the next page. 55. She went back a page. 51. So the missing number was 53.

Fifty-three.

Maya grabbed the next book from the shelf. 53 – gone. The only number she cared about, missing from the books.

It was not the first thing to go missing.

"Iris!" she shouted.

Iris did not respond.

"Hey, we're kind of doing something here," said Kit. They both sat in the kitchen, where the counter blocked them from sight. She stood and hobbled into the doorway.

"I want to know what you did to my book."

Iris gave her a blank expression. Her gaze was steady, unblinking. The deep blackness of her eyes was unnerving.

"You took my number! Just like the words, missing from Kit's notes. What have you done? What are you planning?" Maya clenched her fists to hide the trembling.

"You have letters missing? Numbers? Let me see." Kit reached out. Numbly she handed him the book. "That's weird, because it's stopped happening since... since we camped in the crypts." He rolled the pages with his thumb, watching them flicker before his eyes.

"No. Go back. Page 53." Maya pointed.

"Oh. But this isn't right at all."

"Of course it is not right! Black-eye princess here is eating ink and paper. You need help. You need cleansing." She said this to Iris but got no response. Just that infuriating stare.

"Calm down a second, Maya. This is different. When we found those words missing before, in the crypts, it was just the ink that was gone. Not the paper. It was like it was never printed. This is something else. Something chewed the corner off this page. Maybe it was just vermin, you know? We've been storing food in these cabinets, maybe mice moved in to the walls."

"It cannot be mice." She showed him the second book. "What mouse eats only page 53 of books? What mouse can read? Besides,

your stupid cat should scare them away, sitting around all day reading." The one cat that had escaped the crypts now lived with them in the Gatehouse. Kit had named him Harry. Maya had to keep all the books shelved, lest Harry begin lecturing. Once he got started he was impossible to dissuade. "No, mice are not the vermin we should be looking at. More likely it is same demon that got into Iris."

"Hey, don't say that! You're talking about her like she's not even here. It's not a demon, it's... we don't know what it is yet. But this is still Iris. Your friend. You shouldn't be so afraid."

"I am not afraid. I am angry. This is not my friend from last week! This is somebody else, who does not talk. Who stares at the rain all day. Ink-demon has got Iris, and now it comes for me." She turned to face Iris, who was squinting at her and biting her own lip. "Whoever you are, stay away from me. You will not steal the words from my skin. I am a warrior."

Kit was shocked.

"You think she wants to steal your tattoos?" He would have gone on, but Iris interrupted him with a quiet hand.

"No, you're not." These were the first words she had spoken to Maya since her change. "You're not a warrior. You're a scared young woman, running and hiding and lying."

"Yes. I know your secret. You lied to us. You are not the vanguard of the Wolves. You are a runaway.

"I see things differently now. I can read the words on your face. You're not a warrior, just a thief. You stole the holy book of your people. You stole yourself."

She kept staring, her gaze flicking across Maya's cheeks.

Maya spat on the floor.

"Fuck you. You are just sheltered city girl and ink demons trying to scare me. I do not have to put up with this." She stormed into the living room and began pulling books off the shelf.

"Wait," Kit said, "is that true? You're a runaway? Because if there's no Wolves going to raid the Dams, then what are we doing here? What are we waiting for?"

"We are not doing anything. I am discovering history of the Library. You are whining, and fooling around with ink magic. She is living in imaginary forest world, where free food just grows everywhere and has no consequences. Guess what, city girl? Life is not so easy. Potato-vine and cherry tree are emergency food. Upriver is bad to live in, everybody knows that. You can stay here with ink demons and bad science and die of old age in just a few years. I am hiding my books, before you eat them all."

Maya checked another book, and indeed most of page 53 was



missing. She cursed and threw it to the ground. Started yanking books off the shelf at random. They were all missing the same piece.

When she got to the books about Project 53, they were ruined. All the crucial information was gone. Whole pages were missing. Tunnels ran through chapters. She screamed in frustration.

Then she saw something. Just a flash of white, slipping behind the bookshelf. Maya crouched to the ground and poked her head into a dusty corner to see it.

It was a paper snake. A sinuous stack of pages, writhing across itself, cornered and afraid.

Instinctively she whipped out her hand and grabbed it behind the head. Held it up, triumphant.

"You see? This kind of weird shit is what you call in with your ink magic." Kit and Iris were dumbstruck. She addressed the serpent instead.

Its face was a pair of I's, gauging her warily, and a flicking Y of a tongue, and a pair of apostrophes for nostrils. Its tapered tail whipped uselessly in the air. Tiny paper wings flapped to no avail. Not a snake – a dragon.

"What are you, little critter? Where did you come from?" She crouched, pointing its little head at the books she had scattered in rage. "Was it here? Did you eat my fifty-threes?"

Suddenly, and with surprising strength, the paper dragon leaped from her hand. It forced its head deep into the fold of a book, impossibly deep, its whole body vanishing into the binding. She grabbed its tail at the last possible second, hoping to drag it back.

It was much stronger than she thought. Maya was pulled, hand wrist arm head body, pulled totally into the book, and the Gatehouse was gone and a much stranger world replaced it.

#

Maya was in the book-realm she had seen in dream. Shelves that were rooms that were lines of text. The creature flew at impossible speed, twisting, making right turns in more dimensions than she could understand. She was overwhelmed.

When she found her feet, she was in a part of the crypts she had never seen. A narrow room, with tall shelves, lit only by one sundome.

A book lay open on the ground. The snake-thing coiled atop of it, writhing with what seemed like pleasure. She shooed it away and picked up the tome.

*Locus Genii: A Field Guide to Informatic Organisms.*

It was a bestiary. Each page discussed a species of strange critter, accompanied by a fanciful illustration. The species were called genii – singular, genius.

She found a picture of her new friend. It was called a bookworm: a dragon made of living paper. It fed on information. Each bookworm was trained, at hatching, to a certain phrase or topic, and built itself out of mentions. Apparently they were quite useful to Librarians at some point.

Harry was in there too. The gray-and-green felines were properly called concats. They had been used by those scholars too busy with their hands to be reading books all the time. They would read a book aloud from beginning to end, and if set atop a stack of books, would recite them all.

Finally she found the black blob that had assaulted Iris. Not a demon after all. It was called an inkling, and its nature was to absorb, and thus hide, irrelevancies. There was record of black-eyed students who could read a book in minutes, ignoring all the scholarly obfuscation to follow a thread of meaning.

That was how she read my face, thought Maya. That was how she knew my secret.

In the introduction, the author declared that while no one knew the true origin of the genii, they had become so useful to Librarians as to be irreplaceable. The ubiquity of genii had greased the intellectual wheels of the Library, allowing the humans within to work on higher levels of knowledge.

In that very page there was a hole. Maya looked closely.

"Though it is not certain, there is a theory that the origin of the genii lies within the —— conspiracy."

Project 53. Of course. She had asked the bookworm where it had come from, and it had dutifully brought her back to its beginning.

In fact, she saw its egg. A tiny white speck, a torn sphere, hidden in the crack between pages. She flipped back to the page for bookworms and found more eggs nestled. These were unhatched.

Maya did not have SIGNAL with her. She did not even have her crutch. There was no way she could move the stone elevator without the book of secrets. Besides, she did not even know where she was in the Crypts or how to get back to the Gate.

The sun-dome above her was bright. Books covered the walls. Tunnels led away in two directions, thick with shadow. She decided to climb.

Maya stuffed the book into the waistband of her skirt. She worked her way up a tall wheeled ladder, taking her weight on her arms and good leg. At the top she found a small catwalk and crawled across it to the sun-dome. The dome was warm to the touch, smooth and solid, about two feet in diameter.

She managed to unscrew the dome from its mount, only to find it incredibly heavy. It must be a piece of solid quartz, she thought, as it dropped twenty feet and smashed the floor below.

The tiles spiderwebbed with cracks. The dome was unharmed.

As she thought, there was a small tunnel shaft above, bright with sun. She saw a little ladder running up the side. A way out.

The bookwurm flapped towards her, winding through the air with ease. Annoyed, she batted at it with the book.

"Are you going to help, or what? Want to give me a ride back?"

It frowned its little I's. No help there.

Maya sighed, and began to climb.

After many minutes of twisting and turning, clambering over angled mirrors, and crawling on her belly, she reached the surface. She found another dome there, a larger one, and slid it to the side with difficulty. Its rails were crusted with age. Her arms shook with the effort. Finally she dragged herself onto warm grass and lay panting in the sun. The bookwurm slithered out cheerily behind her.

She found herself on the edge of the ruined Library. Judging by the curve of the river and the angle of the sun, she needed to head east. Upstream.

Maya glared at the sky. She was no stranger to hardship, but that did not mean she had to like it. She crafted a new crutch, secured the field guide in her belt, and began to hike. It was many hours, and many miles, before she returned to the Gatehouse.

## 11 Cutup

Kit left early the next morning, taking care to write a note. As he shut the door he heard Harry mewling sadly.

He carried the old back-pack he had found in the crypts. The book of secrets weighed on him, along with some rations and tools. In his right hand he held a glass jar upside down. The jar was half-full of water, with a tight-sealing metal lid. On top of the water floated a cork salvaged from a wine cellar. Pierced through this was a thin steel needle. He had magnetized the needle by aiming its tip toward his own shadow at noon one day and stroking it with a magnet scrapped from the Libratory. He followed this compass to the north-west, heading for the highest peak in sight.

His walk would be longer this way than if he followed the riverbed, but the thick forest occluded so much, and he wanted to get a look from above, a layout of the land.

The Gatehouse was nestled in the crook of a couple small valleys, so it was hard to see past the ridgelines. Downhill from the Gatehouse, the river rushed high. Maples and alders lined its banks. Seeing, downstream or upstream, was tricky. He thought the trees on the top of the ridge looked smaller. Perhaps he could see past them, or climb one. He trekked generally up-hill,

avoiding rockslides and thick brambles.

The day was fine. Sunbeams lanced through the canopy. Birds tittered and gossiped over his head. The forest smelled crisp and sweet, with a sour tang of pollen and the heady flavor of nearby waterfalls. He activated his trail-vision, remembering many hours with Lewis in the forests of Califa.

Kit gazed fixedly without staring and breathed smoothly from deep in his belly. He became aware of the sphere of his senses, as if a spotlight shone on him from directly behind his head and illuminated only as far as he could see. The forest had eucalyptus and cypress groves mixed in with the fir and oak, a blend of coastal and mountainous, and other trees he did not recognize at all. With each step he tried to remain conscious of their interlacing branches above, the complex paths of shadow and light.

Finally it clicked. The branches of the trees became background, and the spaces in-between became fore. The air itself became a jungle of vines and trunks. The routes between trees became roots. Kit could scamper through this world like a squirrel.

He quickly found a game path wide enough to keep his footing. Occasionally he had to duck beneath thick brush. Broom, or huckleberry, or fallen alders. At one point he had to clamber

over a massive log, perhaps an old redwood. Time and termites had hollowed it out. It almost looked like a canoe.

Maybe he could build a boat. No use dragging this thing down the mountain, of course. But once he got to the top and got his bearings, he could find a slow part of the river and lash together a raft. Head downstream, to the ocean, to Portall. Great Margot might still be there. He could become a boat-Postie, work on *Impatience* until he saved enough to get a craft of his own. He hadn't failed his big chance, not exactly. He had delivered a message to the Dams and lived to tell the tale.

The Dams. That was the problem. Kit was up-river. A huge concrete lasso waited between him and Portall. River or road, he would have to get past Osric and his militia before he could get his life back.

Not that there would be any Postie work for him anyway. His story was uncorroborated. He had no reputation, except as an enthusiastic face at Lewis's elbow. If anyone wanted to check the truth of his claim, they would need a small army, lest they be executed themselves. He had no RIGG, and no particular boating skills. Without a vehicle a Postie was useless. Worse than useless, he was stuck.

The heat rose with the sun. He stopped at a creek, filled his bowl over and over. When his thirst was sated, he poured water



across his head and down the back of his neck. One rivulet went right down his spine. He sighed gratefully. Rummaged around in his bag, found a small twist of waxed paper. Ancient artifact, he thought, and laughed aloud. Kit popped the bubble-gum into his mouth and chewed fiercely.

Posties were supposed to be celibate. That was the other problem. Kit kicked rocks in frustration as he continued up-hill. Lewis had taught him well. Sublimate sexual energy into travel, into work. Just as he was doing now. Find and adopt clever orphans, that was the Postie way. Teach them all the tricks, pass on your learning instead of your genes. Too many kids in the world already, too little food, too little water. Too much to do, to be wasting time on romance.

Besides, one thing always led to the next. First would be dating instead of working. Then infatuation, romance, and pair bonding. Soon enough a roaming soul would be rooted in place, delivering messages to the kids and the land, traveling in small circles from house to outhouse every day. Trapped.

Would it be so bad? He had rather enjoyed the last few weeks: knowing where he would wake up every day, working consistently to decode SIGNAL, learning more about the strangers he lived with than he ever had about other Posties. He had never lived in close quarters with anyone before, other than Lewis. Definitely not

with two beautiful, strong young women.

Iris was so sweet and mysterious, her nurturing nature shining through her shyness. Maya, so fiery and engaging. So strong in her conviction. Even last night, when she apologized to Iris, he had seen her power and resilience.

Maybe they could hide in the forest forever. Clear the meadow and grow some food. Rebuild society in their own fashion. Raise some children.

Whose children?

Kit chewed the bubble-gum like he was torturing it for answers.

Finally he reached the top of the mountain. The trees were smaller here and he could get a view of the whole Gorge. The river shimmered like a razor in the noon sun. The Gatehouse must be to his left, somewhere in the thick conifers. The Dams would be off in the distance to his right, where the gorge became a steep canyon, not visible around the wide curve of the Cascadia. Below him, the Library was easy to find. The triangular valley that held it stood out from the rest of the forest. Burned trees leaned and sagged among riotous undergrowth. Blackened towers thrust from veils of vines. Ravens hovered.

An hour later he breached the north edge of what was once a sprawling compound. The place was overgrown, reverting to forest.

From the size of the trees he would guess a hundred-year forest, but the plants here might be as weird as everything else. Definitely younger than the surrounding wilds.

He examined the dwellings carved into the hillside. They were stacked, terraced, a giant's staircase. Their slanted south-facing windows were long deglazed. Exotic plants exceeded their pots, ran rampant.

Kit took his time walking down the narrow streets. These people couldn't have had autos. Wide enough for two bicycles, or maybe a horse-cart. A pedestrian city. Of course, all cities were built for pedestrians these days, but ruins in Califa and Cascadia usually had wide roads and large gaps between the houses. They had been factory towns, specially built to keep people separate. This place was like pictures he had seen of foreign towns, older ones, built around churches, or mosques, or castles.

The central hub of the Library was a five-sided plaza. Five large roads met here, and circled a wide expanse of parkland. This once-grassy field was now thick with brush. Between the roads stood five once-grand buildings.

The Theater was collapsed, its high back-fly fallen into the house.

The Museum was a burnt-out shell. Only its pillars and

pitched roof still stood.

The Apothecary was shattered. Its vast glass dome had lost pane after pane until the medicinal gardens inside could no longer survive the dry heat. They had been invaded by pioneer species, local brutes, cowboy vines with bad attitudes. There was not room enough for both.

The Laboratory, which Kit had held much hope for, was no longer. It had been razed to the ground, demolished, devastated. Not one alembic or retort was intact.

The Clock was a skeleton. Its face, moon and sun and star-field and reticule, did not move.

Kit despaired. He fell to his knees in the sweltering heat, running his hand through the charred remains of what must have been thousands of books. He felt small, insignificant. A raven mocked him from the trees.

"Haw, haw! Haw, haw!"

"Shut up, raven! What do you know? What do any of us know? We're just little people, doing tiny stupid things. What hope are we supposed to have in a world where all of this is ruined, is destroyed, by our own stupidity? Huh?"

"Huh, huh!"

He staggered away from the heat and decay, toward the hidden elevator and the comforting silence of the crypts.

#

The Libratory did not make him feel better. Piles of paper littered the tables.

It's too much, Kit thought. The Ancients were powerful, wise, many. I have no clue what I'm doing. I can't even tell if any of my sigals have worked. I don't even know what my own desires are.

Frustrated, he threw his notes into the tunnel outside. He poured them on the floor and swept them out the door. He balled them up and drop-kicked them. When the room was clean, and the hallway snowy, he sat down at a table with one pristine sheet of paper and a pen.

With quick strokes Kit forged a sigal, an unspeakable glyph of intent, demanding a vision. His line dipped, dodged, looped through itself again and again. He caressed the page, led slow arcs into sharp hooks. He warped and woofed. He threaded desire into reality.

Kit held his mind taut, focused on his intention. He did not blink until he lifted the pen. Then he closed his eyes, sat up straight, inhaled deeply and released. His breathing stopped. For many minutes he sat there, not breathing, holding his body in a state of tension and relaxation at once. His diaphragm fought him, the will to survive struggling against the will to power. Finally, as the ocean of blood was pounding at the shores of his

mind, he gasped sweet air. His eyes snapped open. The sigal flooded his subconscious. He took another deep breath and leaned back.

Suddenly the leg of his chair snapped. Kit sprawled on the hard floor. He landed on the points of his elbows, sharp and tingly. He stood and brushed himself off. Noticed a breeze, stirring the drifts of paper in the hall. A breeze? Down here?

Kit stepped outside just in time to see his notes, his heaps of quotes and diagrams and sigals, fly away from him at drastic speed. They escaped as a great cloud of birds set free from a cage. He felt no wind except that made by the rapidly vanishing pages. The tunnel wasn't long. He knew for a fact that it turned a corner about fifty feet from the door, but the papers were getting ever smaller.

Tiny. Miles away.

Gone.

#

Kit took the short way back. As Maya had reported, the overland hike from the Library to the Gatehouse was a few hours' walk. Somehow the path through the crypts was much shorter, even circumlocuting from the Libratory. He made a note to research this further in the book of secrets, once he figured out what had happened with his sigal.

At the Gatehouse he found Maya. She was reorganizing the bookshelf. Her bookworm, Fiftythree, coiled in mistrust as he entered.

Kit had hurried. He was short of breath, and chugged a bowl of water before speaking.

"Hey. Did you get my note?"

Maya did not respond. In fact, she was pointedly ignoring him. He had got used to this with her and Iris, but he thought it would be over now. They had been friendly last night, as Maya read to them of concats and inklings, pidgins and greppies and spyders. He had felt more hope than anytime since Lewis died. What now?

"Hi, Maya. I'm home. It's me, Kit. Where's Iris?"

"As if you do not know." She was really in a huff.

"What happened?"

"Ask me what happened, filth face. You get the fuck out of here." She finally turned to him. Her face was twisted with anger. Her lips were tight and her nostrils flared. She pointed behind her, out the door. "Now."

"Seriously? What did I do?"

"You continue to pretend? You are going to act as if you did not just assault me?"

"Maya. I just got here. Look at me, I'm sweaty, I'm out of

breath."

"Good for you. I knew you could do it without me."

"What, walk to the Library? Is that what you're mad about?"

Maya wheeled, grabbed a book at random, and threw it at Kit's head. He ducked just in time. Picked it up off the floor and straightened the pages.

*Desire and Reason: A Tragedy of Manners.* Orange cover. He ran his thumb across the sigal stamped on the spine.

"Okay, Maya. I can see that you're mad. I'm going to go out on the porch, okay?" He moved cautiously past her and out the door. "I'm going to stand out here and ask you questions. Because I really just got here, and I've been gone all day, and I didn't assault you. So I need to know what happened, but you clearly need some safe space. I'll just be right here but you can slam the door in my face if you need to."

She slammed the door in his face. Kit took a deep breath.

"So. I swear I don't know what happened. And maybe I had like a fluke of memory, amnesia or something. But whatever happened, I need to know about it so that I can know what you're feeling. Then I can try to figure it out or make up for it somehow. Okay?"

Door. Silence.

"Maya, what did I do? Please tell me. You can yell if you want." He braced himself.



She opened the door abruptly and stared him in the eyes. She did not yell. Instead she whispered, which was somehow worse.

"I. Was here. Cleaning the house. Like always. Not an hour ago you showed up here acting like pig. You would not say where you been. You did not ask about Iris except to make sure she was gone. Then you were suddenly all smooth move and hands on me and sweet lies. Do you really claim this is not true? To my face?" She looked deep into Kit's eyes. It felt like she was scraping the inside of his skull. Her chin jutted forward defiantly. Her tattoos stood out like scars.

"That was not me. Okay? Whatever it was, it wasn't the person standing before you right now. I'm Kit. I have been. I picked you up on the road outside Hood River. You fed me blackberries at a spring. I broke your leg with the car."

Bad example. Digging a hole here.

"I wasn't here an hour ago and I didn't put my hands on you. But I did do some sigaldry, down in the crypts. In the Libratory."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I sent out a message, in the language of power, you see? Sigaldry, like I told you about before. The intention was, well, it was to see if any of my other sigals had worked. To see if my desires were coming true or not. But it must have gone wrong."

"No shit." Maya chewed on her lip, still eyeballing Kit hard.  
"Real wrong."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. But you're fine, I can tell. You can handle yourself."

"You got that right. I sent you out the door twice now. Like the dog that you are."

"Ouch. Look, whoever that was that you thought was me, where did he go? What happened to him? Did he vanish, or..."

"He walked. Into the forest. Out east, where potato-vine grows." Maya's face changed completely in the course of that last sentence. Kit immediately knew why.

"Where Iris goes to forage."

"Yes. I did not think about it. I was just glad that you, he, was gone."

"I'm going to find her."

"Wait, I will come with you. Let me get my —"

"No. You stay here. Stay safe, in case Iris comes home. You can tell her to watch out for this Other Kit."

"What, I am not good enough to go on rescue mission?"

"No, it's just... you might not like what we find."

"Fine, I will stay here. Clean house like your mother." No pleasing her. He pushed past to grab his bag from the kitchen.

"Look, if I come back, and it's not me? If it's him. Other

Kit. You need to be able to tell the difference. We need a password, a word that lets you know it's this me and not the other one." He looked around the room. "How about, fifty-three? That's easy to remember." The bookworm perked its head when it heard its name.

"Fine. Go save damsel in distress. I will stay here and think of your punishment." Maya smiled at this.

Kit couldn't tell if she was joking.

#

By a small creek Kit found Iris and Kit.

They lay at the foot of a huge oak tree, bare-armed in the dappled sunlight, staring into each other's eyes and eating blackberries. The creek murmured sweetly by their feet, drowning out their conversation. Cicadas droned a minor fugue. Crickets, ever-dutiful, informed the world that it was a hot hot hot afternoon with a high chance of storms.

The impostor looked just like Kit. It was astonishing, really. The same wild red hair, the same patina of peach-blond fuzz on his chin. He wore the same wrinkled tee and shorts that were all Kit had left of his wardrobe. His wide-brimmed white hat hung from a tree nearby, above the leather boots that Kit had personally tattooed with stylized wings.

Iris was facing away from him. He watched her narrow

shoulders bounce as she giggled. Her white dress, browned by dirt and time, was still radiant in the lush forest.

Kit stood in the shadows of the treeline but the Other Kit saw him. His crooked nose wrinkled. Other Kit sat up on one elbow and shouted in Kit's best Postie voice.

"Get out of here, you freak!" He pointed, as Maya had.

"Does everyone think I'm a dog?" Kit wanted to throw the Other off balance, but Other Kit had taken his opening line. This was going to be a weird showdown. Other Kit stood.

Iris turned around and screamed. She scooted quickly up the bank, away from both of him.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing, Iris. Just stay right there. I'll get him out of here."

"But he's you! Why are there two of you?"

"He's not me. I'm the one that's going to get him out of here. He's an impostor."

"How can there be an impostor? There's only three of us out here!"

"Yeah, how can there be an impostor, guy? What did you do to reality this time?"

"I'm really getting tired of that question. Reality is the one doing things to me! How did you get here?"

"We walked, like normal people. We didn't creep up and hide in the trees."

"No, I mean what are you doing here. This is my life! What are you, a broken piece of sigaldry?"

"Is that true, Kit? Are you... Which one of you is real?"

"I am," they both shouted.

"Look, you're just a weak imitation of me. You don't have my natural charm. You're just a ghost, an echo."

"I am not a ghost! You're the echo. You're just saying the things I would say one step ahead of me. That doesn't mean you're the real one, you're working off programmed responses. I, on the other hand, can make up totally new sentences. Peanut butter folly squash! Sham of a dam ding dong!"

"Your little incantations won't work on me, ghost. Spouting nonsense is not exactly the mark of an intelligent human being."

"Of course it is! I mean..."

"You," Iris said, "can I touch you? I touched him. I know he's real. If you're a ghost, my hand would pass right through you. Right?" She stood and walked hesitantly toward Kit. He felt a blush creep up his neck but held out his arm for her to touch. She pinched him, hard.

"Ow! Come on, Iris. That's for dreams. I know this isn't a dream."

Iris pinched herself, now.

"I guess you're right. This is so weird." She backed away from him again.

"Look, it's obvious what happened, okay?" Other Kit stepped closer to Iris. He held his hands out, palm-up, gentle and explanatory. "I cast some sigals, to activate my desires and see their effects. Simple science. Observe and interact. But I got mad, and I destroyed them."

"That's not what happened! I mean, I did work those sigals, but I didn't destroy them. They escaped."

"Uh-huh. Maybe that's what it looked like to you. You're probably one of the ones I destroyed. A wayward desire. An accidental self, a mistake I almost made."

"That is so offensive!"

"You're a cutup, boy. Face it. You've been edited out of reality. Besides, if you think about it, you'd rather be me anyway. I'm the one to grasp my desires, instead of simply wishing for them."

"You are the creep who tried to grasp me earlier today," said Maya from the tree above him. Other Kit looked up and gaped. He backed away.

Maya swung gracefully down from the branches of the oak. She dropped the last six feet and rolled expertly without putting any

weight on her splinted leg. In a blink she was crouching between Kit and Other Kit with knife drawn.

"You said to me that I was all you wanted, your only desire. I told you scram. Remember this?"

"No! What are you talking about? I've been here, with Iris." Other Kit pulled at the collar of his shirt.

"But that's exactly what you said to me!" said Iris. "You said it was always me. I kissed you!" She spat on the ground.

Other Kit's face was terrible to view. Maya had him backing toward a wall of blackberries. He was sweating and pink in the cheeks. Kit had never seen himself in mortal fear before. It was fascinating.

"Hey, Maya," Kit hissed from behind the circling Wolf, "It's me. Fifty-three, remember? That's the other one for sure."

Maya glanced over her shoulder, eyes rolling.

"Thank you Kit. That is obvious. Now I am going to cut the cutup. Please stop talking for one minute."

But when she turned back, the Other was already sprinting away into the forest.

#

The rain came just before sundown. The clouds hurried to parade in the salmon-colored spotlight. The wind howled and the drops drummed. Inside the Gatehouse, it sounded like the dogs of

war.

"Another thing to make life weird and it is your fault again! Why can you not work together with us instead of running off to call up wicked spirits?" Maya sat on the counter, leaning back against the wall and massaging her knee.

"You said you didn't want to know about sigaldry. You said the book was evil and that I shouldn't mess around with it in the house. So I took it elsewhere." Kit sat on the floor, staring into the open mouth of the woodstove. "Besides, you were the one who tried to blow up the Dam with a bag full of chickenshit. That's what got us in this whole mess."

"That's not true," Iris said. She paced like a caged animal in the Gatehouse. Her long brown hair was tangled and she ripped at it anxiously with both hands. "You were going to die anyway. Grandfather's a good shot at close range."

"We've been over this. The problem is, we can't do anything out here in the woods. We're neutralized. That's why the Dams didn't send anyone after us. They know we have to get past them if we don't want to die in the Upriver. So we're stuck here, and it's the three of us, and there's clearly some great power in those crypts. We might as well learn how to use it."

"It is not three any longer. There is him."

"It was an accident, I swear." Kit sighed.



"Sure. Accidents happen. They happen a lot, to you."

"Thanks."

"So," said Iris, "was that all fake, then? You – he – didn't really mean those things he said? About us?"

"I don't know what he said. I don't know what he said to either of you. I shouldn't have to be responsible for the actions of my evil twin!"

"He is not your twin," said Maya. "He is like you. I saw the way he talked and moved. He was not lying about his desire, although he was total pig about it. Men always lie a little bit when trying to make bed with a woman."

"Is that so?" Kit laughed without humor. "Maybe I'm the one who lied. It's not like I'd know how to seduce someone anyway. Flirting is only a small part of Postie training. Enough to get mail commissions and that sort of thing. We're not supposed to..."

"Not supposed to fuck? To rut, to hump and screw?" Maya laughed at his obvious embarrassment.

"Yeah. I mean, maybe it's something you Wolves do all the time. But it's not the Postie way."

"I've never done it." Iris was wary, her black eyes shifty under bangs.

"You were about to. Cutup has no respect for Postie way."

"So what if I was about to! I thought it was Kit. How was I to know there was a sexy doppelganger running around?" Iris leaned in as a thought occurred to her. "Kit, how long has this been going on?"

"Just this afternoon, I think. That's when I cast the sigal. Why?"

"Because it wasn't just this afternoon that I fell in love with you."

"I don't know what to say." Kit looked from Iris to Maya and back.

How could he tell Iris that he loved her without offending Maya? Maya was already mad at him, but the calipers of her eyes were tight on his head. He could tell from her face that she had feelings for him too. And he had met her first. His heart slammed in its cage every time she spoke. He had loved her ever since she first held a blade to his throat.

How could he not tell Iris that he loved her? He had spent days staring into her eyes. He had taken care of her when no one in the world, even Maya, would help. He had felt such rage, such jealousy, when he saw her laying with his cutup.

His throat tightened, some valve within holding back the roaring pressure of his emotions.

"Hmph." Maya leaned back against the wall and closed her

eyes.

"Maya." His voice broke. "Iris. I..."

The valve eased open. Before he knew it, Kit was weeping. He stared at his hands, sobbing softly at first, then bawling. His tears surprised even him.

Maya lowered herself to the floor and sat beside him. Iris hesitated, then sat on his other side. They leaned one head on each of his shoulders. They all had a good cry, a wordless hemorrhage of the heart.

Then they began to plan.

12 Logophrenia

The next evening, Iris tossed the last piece of bait onto the altar.

They had spend the day collecting every possible artifact of Kit's desire. Gasifier manuals and vehicle specifications. Undelivered mail from Spatial Collections. A folder full of notes and sketches, the remains of Kit's projects from the Gatehouse. Bubble-gums. Postie hat and boots.

And, of course, Iris and Maya. The three stood back to back to back, gazing out the many archways of the Gate.

The book SIGNAL was esconced high atop the heelstone. Every time they brought it in the stone circle, it raised the altar. So Iris had climbed the tall rough stone that stood guard outside the circle. There it was safe and within sight.

Unless the cutup was at the bottom of the river fishing out the RIGG, the only way he could fulfill any of Kit's desires was to come to this spot.

Indeed, it was not long before Kit sauntered into the Gate. The conversation was stiff but not hostile.

"You're here. I knew you would come," said Kit.

"I knew you would try something like this. You've got every piece of my life here before you. You're going to steal it all at

once, aren't you? You're really going to do it," Kit replied.

"This is my life! I'm just protecting myself from you. You're just a manifestation of my subconscious, acting out my repressed desires."

"Ah, but the subconscious is vaster and more true than the conscious can ever be. Your understanding of your desires is limited and crude." Kit held up a finger in the air as he liked to do while philosophizing.

"It's not crude! I'm perfectly aware of what I want. I just have the self-discipline to get it in the right way. To take time to think about what I want before acting on it." Kit was defensive. He stepped closer to Kit, shoulders tense. They circled each other, arguing and pacing around until she could not tell which was which.

Iris looked closer. She willed the shadows at the edge of her vision to stretch, to hide from her all distraction. They looked so alike. Even the streamers of color radiating from their anger were of the same jarring pattern.

"You think too much," Kit argued. He poked Kit in the chest with his finger. "You need to listen to the body. You don't eat, you don't sleep, you don't fuck. What are you, a machine? Are you a slave to SIGNAL? A hollow shell of a human being wrapped around a broken spell? I want my life back. I want all these things

you've stolen from me." He emphasized his point by throwing both hands out to encompass the whole meadow. Kit had to step back or be slapped in the face.

Kit gave ground. He held up his hands in surrender. Moved away from the altar.

Kit couldn't resist. With two greedy steps he snatched up Kit's folder. He laughed wildly and opened it, slapping his hand down on the pages with pleasure.

Just as Kit had planned. When you had to think like the enemy to defeat him, it helped to have someone on your side that knew exactly how he thought. Iris cocked her head and watched intently.

Kit's face turned from victory to confusion in seconds. He looked down at his palm, at the bookworm eggs stuck to his fraudulent flesh.

Iris blinked in surprise as the air between his hands began to warp. She narrowed her gaze, inkling black eating away at everything except Kit. Now she saw that the folder and Kit's hands formed a vortex, like water draining from a tub. Space and matter twisted together like taffy.

Something was growing in there.

"It's Kit," she whispered in awe.

Or rather, it was another cutup, expanding rapidly,

stretching in every direction at once. In defiance of all reality, the two cutups intersected with each other. The one grew until it filled the space of the other. But his hands, too, were filled with an expanding Kit. The process repeated, faster and faster, until a blur of mind-warping motion stood six feet tall before her.

Iris felt something breaking, tearing, inside the Gate, inside her head, inside everything, and the outline of Kit filled with churning darkness, and someone was screaming.

Everyone was screaming.

#

When Iris pulled her gaze away from the terrible hole in reality, she was confronted with something even worse.

Everything in sight was writhing, squirming, covered in worms.

No.

Covered in words.

The shrieks of her friends stretched from their mouths in long sinous chains of vowels.

A breezeeze picked up, scattering leaveaves across the rough stonstoneses toward the fractalrefracture.

Time... slowed.

All she could hear was a monstrous rushusmashing, as if she

sat at the mouth of a monstrous seashell, distant surf crashing in her ears.

Iris watched as Maya's mouth went small and her eyes big. Maya held her hand in front of her face. The words of ink on her skin moved. They slithered across each other faster than Iris could bear to watch.

Kit stared into the fracultureality. His face slackened. He fell to his knees.

Iris focused on him, warm ink flowing through her field of view. She moved her mind within her skull. She tried to see what he saw.

There: a flow of words, shapes, faces, feelings, stretching like a tentacle from the fracturalfreaction towards Kit's eyes, all IamIwillIidoIlikeIloveIhate. Icontact.

Kit was falling in love with himself. He stood up and walked, right into the darkaroilingfogdarkboiling.

Iris could barely make it in time. She caught him by the sleeveleeve and pulled. Dropped her weight backward. Struggled with her tiny frame to pull the young man back from his glorious self-destruction.

Kit fell on top of her. His fixation broke. He shouted something. Iris could hear nothing except the smashawhooshing. His words shook the air. Letters hung there but she could make no



sense of them. Everything was tiled in infinite chains of wordsworld.

Iris dragged herself to her feet. She found Maya curled in a ball on the grass sobbing. Iris grabbed her by one arm, and Kit got the other, and they hobbled at speed out of the Gate.

#

Outside of the stone circle, everything was normal.

Inside, everything was seriously wrong.

Iris verified this by door-hopping a few times. She peered closely at the difference in the skies: one bluewhindacloudulating, one simple heavens. She was overwhelmed by the texture of the greengrasssussurus and the allsurrounding crickechirpatter. The wordswirlingworld was simultaneously beautiful and horrible, attractive and repulsive.

Finally she went with Maya and Kit to the Gatehouse. They all collapsed on the couch, took off boots, and mingled their feet on the coffee table. A chorus of sighs crescendoed in guttural moaning and scattered in exultant laughter.

"Still alive!" Kit whooped. "Again!"

"Almost dead, again," said Maya, but she grinned.

"Just Kit. You came pretty close there," said Iris.

"Yeah, but I knew you had my back. I just needed to see what was in there. I guess I got a little carried away."

"Carried away? You nearly got carried into a black hole."

"The cutup is gone. That's what matters."

"What matters is the fabric of reality, Kit! Can't you see that this is dangerous? I don't know why that stone circle is protecting us from that word-world. When you stand inside it, it looks as if the whole sky and forest and everything are messed up too. We're lucky we did it inside the Gate. What if we couldn't escape that?"

"It doesn't matter. We did escape it. We won, and the magic is real, and now we can figure out how to get our lives back."

"I do not want my life back." Maya frowned at her hands. Her tattoos had stopped moving, but they rested in strange new places. She hunted them around her wrists and forearms. "I cannot go back like this. And what I have to go back to, is not good either. They will be mad for my leaving. They will be madder that my words, the history of my people, are mixed up. They will kill me."

"Kill you? Just like that?"

"Just like that." Her face said that she had seen others die for less.

"What do you want, then? To live in this meadow forever? We'll have to grow some food, set up rain barrels. Fix the Gate. We'll need sigaldry to do that, at the very least."

"No. You must stop the sigaldry. We must leave this place."

"Where will we go?" asked Iris. "There's no rescue for us. No friends in the Dams, no friends in the Wolves, and between them they hold all the ground to the west."

"Just a little bit west we will go. I still want to know about the Library."

Kit snapped his fingers.

"Hey, that's great! There's an elevator there, in the basement of the Clock. We wouldn't have to fix the Gate at all. In fact we'd be closer to the Reading Room and the Libratory. The bones of the clock tower are still there, they'll be some shelter from the rain. We could probably even build a house out of scrap."

"Yes. We can build a home there."

"One condition," said Iris. "You really have to stop the sigaldry. We've got enough of our desires right here. Let's get the rest by good old hard work and determination, okay?"

"You still have inklings in your eyes," Kit objected.

"Fiftythree and Harry were probably both made with sigaldry. Maya went through a freaking bookshelf! How come the magic I like is wrong?"

"It's not wrong, it's just – scary. It's unpredictable, Kit. Sigaldry is dangerous. Can you please give it a rest? At least

until we figure out what happened to the Library?"

Kit sighed dramatically.

"All right. At least until we figure that out."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Kit leaned across Maya to hook pinkies with Iris, a time-honored custom in both their cultures. He stretched and rested his arm on the couch behind Maya. He let his head fall back, and smiled at the ceiling. Raised an imaginary glass with his other hand.

"Well, then, tomorrow it is," he said. "To The Library!"

## 13 Chronotecture

Only a week since the last time Maya made this trek. It felt like a year. At least this time she had the benefit of daylight, and friends, and Kit's compass. It would not take as many hours. Still, it hurt to crutch through the woods with a broken leg. She worried that it would not heal properly. Walking on it this much was not a good idea, even with a rebuilt splint and a pouch full of boneset leaf.

"Having fun, are you, with that back-pack?" She teased Kit to keep her mind off the pain.

"Yeah, it's a blast," he shot back. "Sure glad we brought a bunch of worm-eaten books. That's definitely what we'll need when we set up camp in the middle of the Library." Fiftythree, ever perceptive, poked her head out of the top of the bag.

Kit had volunteered to carry anything Maya wanted to bring, so that she could limp unhindered by luggage. He looked ridiculous, a matchstick of a man carrying an overstuffed mattress.

Ten paces ahead of them, Iris wore the smaller pack Maya had brought from the Dams. She carried Harry in her arms, petting and murmuring to him. Kit had argued against bringing the concat, since he would probably follow them anyway, but Iris had settled

the matter without words. Harry peeked around her elbow with pathetic wet eyes, hungry for the books in Kit's bag.

When they reached the Library, Maya was awed again by the size and complexity of the ruins. With narrow streets, tall walls, and steep hillsides, it was as much a labyrinth as the crypts.

She stopped for a moment to run her fingers across an old brick wall. The texture was rough and pebbled, completely unlike the smooth lining of the tunnels.

Maya noticed gingko trees, and cherry, and walnut and mulberry and olive. Hop-vines cascaded from building frames. Nettles filled every crevice. What abundance. She wondered if the fruits here would be toxic, as their feral cousins were said to be.

Iris streamed tears, weeping silently except for the occasional snuffle. Kit, oblivious, was going on about the styles and strata of architecture, the likely economic models for a city this size, the succession of plant cultures and what it implied about the chronology of climate change. Maya shushed him. This city must once have glittered with tiny suns, reflected in every window. Transparent, mirrored, frosted. Stained green, gold, red, blue, or purple. Not one was intact. The soil sparkled with their spilled substance.

The Clock tower was easy to find. The metal structure rose high above the forest. Its guts and gears dangled in the center. Its four thick steel legs had survived all damage leveled at them, but the rest had not. The spiral stair was toothless. The floors were rotted to pulp.

"Not as homey as you said," she muttered in Kit's general direction.

In front of the tower was a small column, a plinth about five feet high. Perhaps it had once held a statue or bust. On its front was a small plaque. Maya wiped it clean with the tail of her skirt.

"Welcome to the Library," she read. "How can I help you?" She laughed to herself.

The ground floor was exactly that: the ground. The combination of clay subsoil, charcoal from the burnt joists and beams, and years of heavy storms had created a sort of earthen cement. It was rough but relatively flat. At the back of what had once been a medium-size room, a hidden staircase was revealed by a long-vanished wall. The narrow steps curled to an abrupt end in a cold cellar. This was where the elevator hid.

First, though, they needed shelter. After a few minutes of rest, drinking and eating and catching breath, they started to build camp.

Over the next few days they carved out a dwelling.

In the mornings they worked, before the heat and humidity could flatten their spirits. They spiraled slowly out from the tower, gathering what useful materials they could find. Maya always came along. She did not want to be alone. Or she did not want Kit and Iris to be alone together. She was not sure.

As their shanty-house developed, so did Maya's knowledge of the Library. Homes to the north, on the slopes. Fields on the flat to the west. Eastward sprawled a network of ponds, with a complicated creek flowing through them to the river at the the south edge.

In the afternoons they took to cooler spots. Maya and Iris gathered baskets of food in the shade of young trees. Kit carried line and tackle down to the crumbling docks. He already knew much about fishing, but Maya had to teach him how to make a cane pole. One whole neighborhood had been infiltrated by bamboo. They used it for fishing, for building, for play-fights.

In the evenings they cooked, read, and slept. Kit designed a fire-place in the street out front of the tower. It was far too hot now to keep a fire inside, especially as their walls grew taller and their ceiling more thickly thatched. They ate trout and mustard greens, blackberries and plums. Iris always cooked



more than enough, carefully wrapping the leftovers in empty rice bags, so that they could eat breakfast without starting the fire. Maya had crafted a pallet-bed large enough for all three of them. She had covered a layer of leaf-mulch with a quilt of thick moss pried from walls and rocks, then clothed the entire thing in blankets and robes they had scavenged. It prickled, and smelled musty, but it was a welcome relief after each day's work.

They had a few candles left from their explorations of the crypts, and many matches. At dark they would lay together in the bed, illuminated by a single flickering flame, and have story-time. Maya usually read, in her most soothing voice.

"Hey, look at this," Kit whispered to her on their fourth night there. Iris had fallen asleep to Maya's soft litany. He slid a piece of paper across the floor. He had been sketching blueprints. Fiftythree snaked across the floor, curious, but found nothing of interest and curled up by the fire.

"I'm thinking we could rebuild the second floor, up above where we've got the roof now. Just a deck, no walls. It would be a nice high look-out. And here, you see, we could extend it to create a sort of porch out front. It would shelter the fire-place from the rain. What do you think?"

"I do not know, Kit. It is good, I suppose."

"You don't like it."

"No, I like it. A porch, a deck. Very nice. But..."

"But what?"

"I am tired of building. We have a little home here. We have food, roof, good walls."

"It's all right, I give you that. But why shouldn't we have better? There's three of us, after all, and what else are we going to do with our days?"

"I want to go to the crypts. I want to find out who Burned the Library."

#

"I want to know how people with such great tech and such great magic survived the Crash but not the Burn," said Maya.

The ride down to the Reading Room was much shorter than that in the Gate. The elevator grated slowly downward.

"I want to know how this huge thing doesn't just crash to the bottom," said Kit. He knelt down and dangled his head out of the box, craning his neck to see underneath. "There must be some counterweight somewhere."

"That's a really good question, Maya," said Iris. "Your people start their history at the Crash, right? As do mine."

"Posties been around forever," contributed Kit.

Iris pulled Kit by his collar before his head could be smashed by the floor.

"Yep, there's record of Posties in all Ancient stuff. We've always been around, making sure people get their letters."

"I have not seen this. I have been studying these Librarians. Their history does not mention Posties."

"All the history in here is post-Crash," Kit argued. "Whatever books they had from before were upstairs, and got torched. There could have been lots of Postie history up there. These crypts just don't have all the books. They're some kind of specific collection."

"What does their history mention, Maya?" said Iris. Maya thought this a little pointed. But she was right: Kit's pride was not the issue here.

"The books here were back-ups. They were made after the Crash – Kit has that right – from memory, or from surviving books. I think what was upstairs was original artifacts, in the Museum, and cheap copies. These were for long storage.

"They say that before the Crash all of the books were electric. 'Digital.' Lectrics were supposed to last longer. But when It happened, all was gone in a moment. They say that all the people went with it. That they were digital too."

"That's terrible!" said Iris, pained. She sat lightly atop a table and leaned forward on the edge of her seat. "Is that what the priests mean when they talk of the Uplifting?"

"Uploading," Kit corrected. He was climbing around in the elevator shaft, a narrow niche between high shelves.

Maya sat next to Iris and waited to see him fall.

From high in the shadows he continued. "The upload hypothesis. Lewis always said it was horse-hockey. Basically the idea that everyone on the earth moved their souls directly into machines, and then got turned off like everything else in the Crash. He always said it was a ridiculous idea. The human consciousness isn't a thing that can just move from one body to another. He said it amounted to making a copy of yourself in the machine and then killing yourself. Even if the machine acts like you, why would you expect your soul to go into it?"

"I think that is what happened, Kit." Maya had to shout to break through his echoing lecture.

"That's terrible. I don't want to be a copy," he yelled back. Kit could no longer be seen. He had vanished into darkness at the top of the shaft. A square of bright light from the world above obscured his whereabouts. Maya looked to Iris to see if she should worry. Iris was already looking to Maya.

"Hey Kit, where did you go?" she called.

"I'm just right up here!"

"Up where?"

"Under the clock! I found this little duct and it goes over

to the bottom of the Clock. Where those huge cables go into the floor? This is where the counterweights are."

"Right. So you are okay?"

"Yeah. Go on! I can hear you."

"I do not want to shout," Maya shouted.

"Come up here then!"

"I am not coming up there. What are you doing?"

"Just making some sketches. Of these machines."

"Are you uploaded, Kit?"

There was no reply.

Kit's face thrust into the beam of light. His jaw was slack and his eyes closed. His head lolled about on his neck as he spoke.

"It is true. I am now a puppet of the Lord of Clocks, the Great Time Being. Fear!"

Iris gasped theatrically. Kit's composure cracked and he laughed.

"Just kidding. I'll finish this real quick and come down."

Maya smiled. Pretty clever, this boy. For a show-off.

Iris stood and began pacing the walls. She liked to touch the books more than read them, Maya thought.

"So how come the people here survived the Crash? They weren't digital?"

"Right. They were still live humans. There were still lots of those, but these Librarians had been living for who knows how long without digital. Some kind of schism between science of digital and other science, you see, and they were losing. Then Crash happens, cleansing world of digital. Many people are left alive. Some go to the woods, become Wolves. Some start building walls and cities. You know this."

"Yes. We grew up with different legends, but that's the bones of the story. So?"

"So, many people come to the Library looking for the place to live. They want to learn all the secrets of how to grow food and make books and live without digital."

As Maya spoke, Iris groped at the shelves. On some subtle schedule she drew books from the shelf and tossed them to Maya, who had got used to the sort of two-handed clap required to catch a flying hardcover without injury to the book or to herself. Maya casually scanned indexes while she talked, and sorted the books into piles on the table around her.

"This is where the refugees come in," Iris recalled.

"Yes. Many factions form. I do not know if it was the newcomers or the old-timers who built the tunnels. But I think they were a secret. A product of internal conspiracy. I think Project 53 built them."

"What for?"

"Security, maybe. Maybe as place to study mad science. Who knows. I can not even be sure that is when they were found. Or made."

"Maybe it's aliens," said Kit with enthusiasm. He was spider-crawling down the shaft. Maya cringed.

"Aliens?"

"You know. From space. Maybe this is like a crashed spaceship."

"Aliens don't exist," said Iris. "They were just people misinterpreting the ghosts of their ancestors. When science ruled the world, people couldn't believe in ghosts. So they made up aliens."

"Nobody made up aliens," Kit scoffed. "They were here. That's how the Ancients got all their science. There's evidence, loads of pictures on different artifacts. I've seen one on an old pottery shard, a piece of a cup. Why would people make pictures of aliens if they were just ancestor spirits? Ancestor spirits are their own thing."

"I do not think this is an alien space boat," said Maya patiently. "I think it was made by humans and sigals. But maybe it was a place for building space boats. Think of the things that hang beneath the Gate."

"Those could totally be alien tech!" Kit exclaimed. "Maybe this is the secret place where they extracted the languages of power from captured aliens. That would explain why all the books are so bizarre and advanced."

"Well I do think we should consider what the overall function of the place is," said Iris, "but assuming aliens is a big jump from the information we have right now."

"The information we have right now is pretty limited. Maya's got a bunch of vague references in technical manuals even I don't understand. We need some more information."

"That's why we're down here, Kit."

"If my information is not good enough for you, I will just keep it to myself." Maya picked up a book from the stack to her left. She was not bluffing. She did not care if Kit wanted to listen. She would figure it out.

"All I'm saying is there's no reason to say it wasn't aliens. If it was – if! – if it was aliens, we would want to know. So let's just keep that on our radar. But check this out."

He unrolled the large slice of paper in his hand. Spread it out on the table.

"This is the lower anatomy of the Clock," he said. Maya smirked. Iris twinkled an eye at her and suppressed a laugh. If Kit noticed, he did not show it.



"This matches these diagrams in SIGNAL," he continued, paging easily to the proper picture, "right down to the number of teeth on the gears. But there's not any pictures of the clock in SIGNAL. I'm wondering, was this bit put on afterward? It would align with your theory that the Library was here before the Crypts."

Iris held up one finger. Kit hesitated, then sat down expectantly.

Iris stiffened. She gazed fixedly at the far wall. Her eyes twitched and pulsed, inkling black spreading from the center to the edge. It was only a moment, and then she relaxed. She strode to a ladder, rolled it along the wall calmly, and climbed to a high shelf. Then she took a book and tossed it toward Kit, carefree as a bird. Kit had to run to catch it as it flapped through the air.

*"The Design and Construction of Millenium Clocks. That'll do nicely, thanks."*

He folded himself into an armchair and dug into the book. Maya smiled at him over her own text. Iris came and sat back-to-back with her on top of the table. She sighed with content. Maya wriggled against her in agreement.

Some while later, Kit slapped himself in the head. Maya was startled from reverie.

"Of course! It's so obvious. I'm so dumb!"

"What is obvious, please? I would love to know why you are dumb."

"The Clock. It's got a backup timer. Powered by the sun."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's got all this machinery attached to it, but the Clock has a little lens up high that keeps track of how many times the sun has hit it, which is once every day. The backup timer."

"So what means this for us?"

"It means for us, that we can fix the Clock, that's what it means! If we can put the pieces back together, the whole thing will catch up to present time. We will know how long ago the Library was Burned!"

"Fine," said Maya. "Perhaps that will help us to figure out how they escaped."

"Escaped?"

"However long ago was the Burn, the Librarians did not die here with their books. They did not fight. They did not upload to digital. They did not become refugees in our forests and towns. Somehow they vanished into thin air."

#

The sound of rain on bamboo thatch was subtler than on the

tin roof of the Gatehouse. When the storm came, they battened the hatches and settled in to test their new house.

Three days later, they were soaked. Every battered pot and bowl they had found now brimmed with water. They had dragged and shoved the blanket-nest into the middle of the room, where the leaks were not as bad.

A small fire smoldered on the earthen floor. Smoke floated toward a hasty-cut chimney. Maya, worried that it would ignite the duff of the mattress, had thought to lay a piece of scrap iron between the fire and the bed. This had the added benefit of radiating warmth throughout the nights. They had fried a fish on it the first night of the storm. Between that and the line of wet clothes hanging across the middle of the room, it smelled almost like a Wolf camp. Too much so.

Maya had taken the books down to the Reading Room for safety. She had brought back only SIGNAL, which she still needed to operate the elevator. Kit claimed it could be done without the book of secrets, but she did not think he had actually tried.

Now she wished she had brought another. She surfed through the pages of SIGNAL. It was a terrifying mess. She found it as disturbing as the mixed-up words on her skin. Evening was oncoming, story time, and she did not want to read aloud from this weird old thing. She wanted a good story, one with

excitement and truth to it, not a bramble of facts and drawings.

"Where are you from, Kit?"

Kit was pacing a rut in the floor. He gave her a look of complete surprise, like he had forgotten anyone else existed.

"Me?"

"You are the only Kit here." Maya lay on her stomach, propped on elbows. Iris stirred next to her. Maya could never tell if she was asleep or just tranced out. "We know that Iris was born in the Dams and that I am from the River Hood. You came here from Califa. Is that where you were born?"

"Maybe. I don't really know."

"You do not know the place of your birth?"

"I was adopted, like I said. Lewis picked me up somewhere outside of Shasta. I don't know who my birth parents were."

"Lewis was the one who taught you of Posties?"

"He taught me everything. He built the RIGG, basically from the ground up. He taught me lectrics, engines, even some digital stuff. We had a robot once."

"You did? A digital robot? This is absurd. No-one knows how to work these. Ancients had many spells that they put in the heads to make them go."

"No, really. It's not that hard. You just have to have the tools. Most of the stuff is built-in. Like instincts. It already

knew what it was supposed to do, the Ancients told it how. We just put its parts back together and gave it juice. You might say we healed it."

"Ah, robot healer. Of course. This makes sense about you."

"What do you mean?"

"You have been trying to heal the Clock, the Gate, the Crypts. You are putting the parts together. Yes?"

"Yeah, I guess that's it. It's like a huge robot. I think the book SIGNAL is like the manual. I don't know what it's supposed to do, though. And..." He trailed off and chewed his lip. Returned to pacing. Maya wondered what occupied his mind.

"What was the instinct of your other robot? The one you healed with Lewis?"

"Really Lewis did all the healing. I just helped."

"But what did it do?"

"Well, it cleaned things."

"Like clothes, it would wash them for you? Take them down to the river with soapbush flower?"

"No. It was for cleaning floors."

"A robot that sweeps? Like apprentice of sorcerer?"

"No. It wasn't that kind of robot, with arms and legs. It was a vacuum cleaner."

"Which is what?"

"It cleaned carpets."

"What are carpets?"

"It's complicated. Look, the Ancients had so many robots that they had to invent stuff for them to do. They had whole ecologies of robots. Flying ones, walking ones. This one was like a little rolling table, low to the ground, and it breathed in dirt and then stored it. Carpets were like thick fur pelts on the ground. Nice to walk on. They were made by a different kind of robot, and they would get all filled with dirt from people walking on them, so this little robot evolved to clean them."

"So it was useful to you? To clean carpets?"

"No, of course not. It wasn't useful at all, that's what I'm saying. It was just an experiment."

"Then perhaps the stone machines here are not useful either."

"Perhaps," Kit said. He made a face, twisting his mouth to the side. Biting his lip again.

"Kit, what are you not telling us?" Iris asked without opening her eyes. Not asleep after all.

"What? Nothing. I'm telling you lots of stuff. I can't help it if I don't know where I was born."

"Not that. You're worried about something, and it's not just the rain. Did you do something?"

"Did I do sigaldry again, you mean? No. I told you I

wouldn't. A Postie is only as good as his word."

Maya sat up, crossing her good leg and stretching the other toward the coals. She reached for her toes. It had been a whole moon now since it broke. She could feel the atrophy in her muscles, but the bone was healing decently.

"What is it, then?" Maya asked. "What is bothering you?"

"Look, it's nothing, okay! Why are you interrogating me tonight?"

"I am not interrogating." She was hurt. "I am trying to know you. To be friends. Why do you fear my questions?"

"I don't fear you! Maybe I'm just tired of being cooped up in this little house and eating rice. I want to go fishing. I want to fix the roof. If this storm would ever end," he said, glaring at the ceiling, "I could go up to the top of the Clock. Then I would at least know."

"Know what?"

"Nothing. You wouldn't get it anyway." He stalked over to the wood-pile and began snapping sticks into little pieces. He fed the fire, building a miniature cabin around the coals, and the flames leaped with delight.

"Hey guys," said Iris groggily. "I have something to show you." She rolled out of bed and crawled toward the door, where they had piled their finds in the hope of keeping them dry. She

rummaged in it, stood, and walked back into the firelight bearing a green glass bottle. "Look what I found."

"Whoa," Kit exclaimed. "Where did you find that?"

"In Spatial Collections. I went down there the other day on my wander. It was under someone's desk."

"I doubt they're going to want it anymore. Do you have a corkscrew?"

"Not that lucky. There's probably some other way to open it. Here." She handed the bottle to Kit. He examined it, squinting at the decayed label. Then he stabbed a thick piece of wire into the top of it. Maya looked from Kit, to Iris, and back to Kit.

"What is in the bottle?" She hated to ask an obvious question, but worse was to be ignorant.

Kit glanced up from his efforts and grinned.

"Wine," he said.

Late in the evening, the rain stopped. Maya did not notice at first, with the buzzing of laughter and conversation and wine in her head. What a drink. The Wolves fermented berries and apples and other fruit, but never to this strength and quality. Usually they drank the brew before it was even done bubbling, which led to the gut-rot, which led them to soothe their suffering with more brew.

This was something else, purified, rarefied, leaving pink



stains on their lips and occasionally clothes.

"Do you hear that?" Iris shushed them.

The fizzing sound of thick drops on the thatch roof had given way to a foggy silence punctuated with drips from the eaves.

"It's passed," whispered Kit. He walked to the door and poked his head out. "I can see stars out here. Where's the moon?"

"The moon is new, fool." Maya laughed at him. "You should pay attention. You want a Clock so badly but you do not watch the skies. It is all right there to see."

"Oh yeah, the Clock! Excellent! I'll be able to go up there tomorrow and look at the parts." He sat down carefully on the floor by the fire. "Excellent," he said again, but his face went moody.

"What happened to the Clock, Kit?" Maya felt braver now for some reason. They were friends, she could push him a little bit. "You should not keep secrets from us. We are on your side."

"You're right." He just sat there looking glum. Harry pressed against him, wrapping his tail around Kit's arm. Kit stroked the concat absently.

"Hello?" Iris waved a hand in front of his face. "Tell us what's wrong. We can help you."

"I don't know if you can." He sighed. "There's pieces missing. Important pieces."

"They were scrapped, you think? Or they are broken."

"No, missing. Gone. Probably taken."

"Taken by who? Nobody has been here since the Burn."

"That's just it. I'm starting to wonder if this was why they Burned it in the first place."

"A clock, Kit? You've got to be kidding. There's clocks all over, there's a big one in the center of the Dams."

"Not like this one. It was a millenium clock, designed to last ten thousand years. Whoever built the stuff down there —"

"Project 53," Maya interjected. "It had to be."

"Sure. Or aliens. Whatever. When they built it, they attached it to the Clock. They knew that the above-ground parts would be running forever, you see? Like a hot spring, just seeping energy out into the world." He paused and furrowed his brow. "Maybe not like a hot spring. Anyway they built this giant stone robot and they powered it off the Clock."

"You said that earlier. So?"

"So, somebody took a few parts. Really clever little parts, unique parts."

"He loves those parts," Iris stage-whispered to Maya.

"Ha ha." He wagged a finger in her general direction.

"Naughty naughty. Joke's on me. If I may continue?"

"Yes, please, teacher." Iris sat primly with her hands in her

lap.

"Smart-ass. You were the one who asked me." He clammed up.

"No, I was." Maya scooted closer to the fire. "Please tell us why you were so upset earlier."

"I was upset, wasn't I? I get that way when I'm hungry," Kit mused. "Anyway somebody took the parts. The important ones. The ones that make the whole thing work, which then makes the thing down there work. Whatever it is. They took the parts, and the thing is, they knew which parts to take. Otherwise they would have just burned it and left."

"They did that," Maya pointed out.

"They did that too. But first, somebody who knew what he was doing climbed up there and sabotaged the Clock."

"Why would they do that?" asked Iris.

"I can only think of three reasons. Either they wanted to use the pieces, or they wanted to break the Clock so it wouldn't tell time."

"Or?"

"Or they knew what was in the Crypts, and they wanted to make sure it would never be healed."

#

The next day was crisp and bright. The storm had cooled the world, and the sun came as a blessing instead of a curse. The air

was thick with the hard sweet smell of the soil rejoicing in water. There was a word for that scent, what was it?

Petrachor. That was the word. Maya had once known a boy by that name. They had played together in the streams. He had especially liked to gather mushrooms and use them as tiny puppets for play-acting. She had last seen him rallying for a raiding party. Half grown. Taut little muscles, fur barely coming in on his lip and armpits. When the raiding parties did not come back, people always said they must have stayed there. Taken the town, or joined it, or run off in shame, the stories differed.

Maya thought that was a heap of shit. The raiders who did return always spoke of great difficulty in their hunts. The hauls they brought, and the vehicles they transported them in, were well worth the losses. Most did not return, so Maya had always assumed they died. It was not like a bunch of uncles and boys were going to wander in the forest without their women. Shame would not be enough to keep them away. It never had been before.

But here she was. A raiding party of one. Failed but did not die. A Wolf who joined with some despicable city folk, became escapees in the Upriver, and tried to stick it out and rebuild the lost Library. Unbelievable. She wondered what they would say if she were to come back now.

The petrachor was strong by the river. The maples that

towered from the bank glistened. Higher on the hills, oak groves exuded great lungfuls of vapor. Clouds rose from the forest and dissolved into the clear blue sky. The wind that nearly blew their house down had slunk off to plan its next move.

Maya hung her clothes on a rope stretched the length of the beach. Kit's boots hung there already, and Iris's jerkin, and a few robes and blankets that were their sleeping gear.

Her underdress was a thin shift, stolen from a city years ago. It was of Ancient material, strong and warm but light and breathable. In the summer it was usually her only layer. Here she had been shy, protective of the secrets of her people, covering herself from Kit and Iris despite the brutal heat.

Now her words were mixed-up, and she hid them from herself. It was so strange. The words she grew up with, that she had known her whole life, now twisted and mismatched. She could remember every word of them. But when she looked at her hands, her arms and legs, she could not find the passages she knew. Only nonsense.

Maya looked over both shoulders. Iris was down the beach cutting off her hair. Kit was still fishing on the far side of the maple grove, out of sight. His usual Postie propriety. She slid the shift from her shoulders, letting it slip to the ground. Quickly she hung it on the line. Then she ran to the river and

leaped in head-first like a salmon.

The water was clean and cool. The storm had kicked up some silt, so she kept her eyes closed. Maya dived and somersaulted and burst through to gasp air. She kicked experimentally. It hurt. Instead she breast-stroked, then slipped under the surface to swim as an otter. She made her whole body a tail, sinuous, weaving herself through the water. The current was stronger in the middle of the river, and she turned back for the beach.

Maya bumped sand with her face. She was in the shallows. She rolled, sat up, and brushed the silt and water from her eyes. Threw back her wet hair and shook like a dog.

Iris screamed from nearby. Maya finally opened her eyes. She found herself further down the beach. Iris stood next to her, laughing and pointing her knife in mock anger. Her shirt was soaked with droplets from Maya's hair. Maya laughed too, but slid further into the water.

Iris ran her hands across her scalp. She had knifed at it all morning, going shorter and shorter. The remains of her long brown locks scattered the beach.

"Ah," she sighed, "that feels better. I was getting so hot in the daytime. How do you survive?"

"I am a survivor," Maya said.

"I mean, your hair is even more matted and thick than mine.

Isn't it suffocating?"

"No, I just fill it with water." She demonstrated, submerging for a moment. "Then it keeps me cool. You will get sun burn on your head this way."

"I'll wear a hat. I found a whole shelf of hats down there."

"Hats are so warm in the summer."

"So are hooded robes."

Maya threw a handful of water at her friend. The drops glittered as they flew through the air. Iris dodged, then bent over and scrubbed the loose hairs from her scalp. She crossed her hands at her waist as she rose, pulling her shirt over her head and throwing it into the air with glee. She stepped out of her man-pants and sauntered into the water.

"Ooh, it's so cold! That storm... must be all the rain." Iris dunked beneath and rubbed her head some more.

Maya eased back into the river, not too close to Iris. She began her rituals of washing and grooming. Tried not to look at her tattoos as she scraped her skin clean with fingernails. Floated for a while, letting the sun warm her while the water cooled her. She imagined that the river was Catalpa, holding a cool cloth to her forehead and murmuring in her ears. Remembered bathing in the Hood with her sisters and aunts, the feeling of collective power when they were all together. She didn't need to

be so shy of Iris.

Maya swam closer to Iris and knocked the water out of her ears.

"I used to bathe this way with my word-mother," she began.

"Really? I never bathed with anyone before." Iris treaded water. She splashed at Maya with her legs like a mermaid. "You're the first."

"You did not swim before?"

"Oh, I swam a lot. I just had to sneak out and do it in the night by myself."

"In that great lake above your dam?"

"The reservoir. Yes. It was nice in the summer, when even the nights are hot. But I like it better here, in the sunlight, with you."

"But you must have bathed, living in the Palace?"

Iris made a dismissive noise.

"Baths of shame. I had this little dim room off the side of my bedroom, cold and drafty. Way far from the hearth. And the maids would fill this old iron tub with luke-warm water and I was supposed to be clean and dry and dressed and combed within an hour. To do nothing except continue to sit in my room. It was torturous." She frowned at this memory, then after a moment she splashed about with joy. She stood and spun with arms out,



flicking water everywhere, laughing. "But I'm here now, with you, and Kit, and it's so nice. I'm so glad. Tell me about swimming with the Wolves, with your word-mother."

"It was powerful. The river was the only place where we could speak freely, as women. We made the real decisions of the tribe there while washing our clothes and our words. I remember one time —" Maya stopped as Iris held up a finger.

"Hang on a second, okay? I just have to pee. I really want to hear your story, though." She waited for Maya's nod, and then waded to shore.

Maya watched as Iris climbed out of the water. She was dazzled by Iris's blank skin, the pale creamy surface void of word. She crouched again, hiding her mixed-up words under the water.

Iris left a poem of drips in the sand as she walked to a patch of reeds. Maya imagined being that free, that naked. She pretended that the other's body was her own..

Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of an electric engine. Close.

It was three fisherman in a little boat. Damfolk. They were young, practically boys, ill-dressed for the sodden heat.

Maya, never a screamer, held her breath and began backing away slowly. She hoped that her body was submerged, invisible. It

was not.

The boat revved toward her, excited shouts echoing off the shore. Maya stood, shedding water in the shallows, and ran for the shore. She made haste for her cloak. Heard a commotion behind her. She looked back.

The biggest boy, with the meanest mug, was chasing her through knee-deep water.

Maya stumbled. Her ankle tightened with pain. She fell, rolled. Felt the rough sand on her back.

The boy was above her now. Big and ugly. Puffing with breath. His friends docked the boat. He leered.

Maya scrambled backward on her elbows. The look on his face reminded her of her uncles, of Fistula and his flesh-hunger. Fear struck cold in her veins.

"We've caught us a Wolf," he jeered. "What should we do with it, boys? Haven't you always wanted to have the skin of a Wolf on your wall?" His cronies laughed, spreading out to either side.

Maya screamed.

The big boy made a curious face. He put his hand to his head and found quite a lot of blood.

Maya saw the rock on the beach. Dark blood on the light sand.

"You get out of here right now, Rodney! You're nothing but a scummy little bully and you're out of your depth. Get going!"

Iris's voice echoed from the treeline.

"Who said that?"

"None of your business. We've got you surrounded. If you lay a finger on that woman it will be the end of you. Now leave!"

"We're not going anywhere. This is our catch. We're going to gut her and have a little fry-up." Rodney grinned at his friends. Their laughter was repulsive.

"You try it, little boy." Maya crouched, and brandished sharp fingernails. "I will rip off your balls and choke them down your throat."

"I'd like to see you try," he said. He swaggered toward her. "You mean these balls?"

"Rodney. If you don't get in your boat, right now, and leave, I'm going to tell your friends what you did last month. At the bar. In the bathroom. And with who."

Rodney's face went from red, to purple, to white. He scowled and turned away. The other two glared at the trees, then followed him. They made questioning looks at each other.

As they floated away, Rodney shouted to the shore.

"We'll be back, you know. With reinforcements. It won't be the first time we had to burn this place down to get rid of the vermin." Then he revved the engine and they sped away laughing.

Maya shuddered with relief. Iris walked out from the bushes

with a smile of pride. They embraced, holding each other for a long time as their heart-beats slowed.

"Hey, what happened?" asked Kit as he came through the trees. "Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't um." He covered his face with his hat and looked anywhere but at them. "I heard some yelling. Is everything okay?"

## 14 Gatecraft

Iris discovered the pattern in the floor of the Reading Room.

They had spent a few days underground now, in fear of further scouts from the Dams. Besides, the crypts were cooler in the daytime. They had spent hours attempting to patch the Clockhouse before deciding it was a lost cause. They only went up at dusk, to cook and sleep in the warm night air.

Iris could only handle so much reading. Kit and Maya could spend whole days buried in books. Iris needed to roam.

She explored the corridors, the Darkive and Spatial Collections, the Tool Library and the Seed Library. She found the Costumery, and brought outfits to the Reading Room for Kit to try on. Maya upgraded to a better dress, but still wore her hooded cloak in the crypts.

One day she climbed the Clock. She reassured the others that she would have stealth and caution. Better to see from a high vantage point if anyone was coming. Really, she just wanted to look at the ruined city.

Of course the Dams burned the Library. It seemed so obvious now. Iris hadn't imagined her own people capable of that savagery. But they were the people downstream, the industrial power supply of the Library. Kit said that nothing electric was

installed in the crypts, but there must have been loads of machinery above ground. When the world Crashed the two cities were severed. Competition and scarcity took over.

She felt shame, and guilt, and fear. Most of all she was angry. This place must have been so beautiful once. Fragments of a stained-glass window shimmered in the afternoon sun.

As she rode the stone elevator into the Reading Room, Iris got dizzy. The floor beneath her shimmered, warped perspective. She glimpsed a great sigal, subtle colors running through the stone floor like the viscera of a fish. The currents of color came in from the corridors, flowing together into a knotwork and climbing the walls and shelves.

The vision was gone as it came. She steadied herself against the wall of the elevator and tried to capture the pattern in her mind. She willed the inklings to cover everything else. Up close the shape was harder to see. The stone was smoky black, the colors trapped inches below the surface like ghosts.

Iris crawled across the floor, following a serpentine meridian of light blue, nose to the ground. She bumped her head on a shelf and looked up. Blue books. Lots of them. Not all: many others, misshelved or overstuffed, but mostly light blue. She examined the sigals stamped on their spines. Nothing familiar. Just the sense that she almost had it, almost remembered the

floor-sigal entirely. Like she knew it from somewhere.

Iris decided to fix it. She sorted the scattered volumes, treating the great sigal as a catalog. Blue matched to blue, red to red, black to the spaces in between.

She enlisted help.

Kit rifled through SIGNAL. His pile of notes grew rapidly. He gave it uncomfortable glances.

Maya wandered the Darkive without a crutch. She carried a spider's line of string to find her way. She made friends with the many creatures. She coaxed concats onto stacks of codexes and burrowed bookworms through constellations of category.

Together they drew a grand Map. A tangle of meanings and spaces and sudden conjunctions. It grew to resemble a root ball. Then a brain, a city, a storm. It colonized the long table in the middle of the Reading Room, a ruler on a throne. SIGNAL squatted always on the table as vizier. A legend in the corner of the Map.

"It will never be finished," said Maya. She despaired. "The portals and I see in dream must be opening in life. The labyrinth outpaces me. As soon as I find myself it loses me again."

"It's a machine," claimed Kit. "A robot, a golem. A mind built of books and rooms and doors."

When the Map covered the largest table in the Room, Iris

stared at it and willed the inklings to strip it of noise. To clarify. The eraser-marks and questionable annotations vanished. The table was lost in purple fog. Only the Map remained.

At one edge, the Reading Room.

At the other, the Gate.

In between, a bowl of spaghetti.

And in the center a gap. Negative space. Emptiness, in between all the connections. The ampersand that wasn't. A question mark eating its own tail.

Of course. She opened SIGNAL to its last page. The key.

She copied it carefully, with brush and ink, onto a sheet of translucent paper. Overlaid it onto the Map. It fit perfectly.

"Kit, the Map is finished."

He sauntered over and stared at it. Traced his finger over the Key, the Gate, the Clock. She watched his eyes. They moved birdlike, quick and jarring. He saw some beauty known only to engineers and he smiled.

"What is it?"

"It's a time machine."

"Well of course it is, it's a clock."

"No, that's just a small piece of it. It's a vast, mazelike, underground sigal."

"If it's a sigal it has to have an intention, right? What's



the point of it?

"The point of it is to mess with time itself. And we've just restored it to life."

Iris's head was splitting. She pressed her hands to her temples. She always felt this way when Kit and Maya argued.

She felt the warm creep of inklings at her eyes. She was tempted to let them take over, to hide all of this drama. She could float in her own thoughts, fall deep into some little detail of the Reading Room, insulate herself from the pressing dangers of her world. But she knew better. The dangers were real, the debate was important, and she would have to participate.

The inklings were her familiars, her allies, never demons. They were helpful but not pushy. The first to join her consciousness had showed her the way to others, and they did not hurt at all when they had entered her mind.

She asked them to show her each of her friends and their arguments. Kit radiated red beams, lances of light that roved his region. Maya was wreathed in green vinery. The inklings danced a shadow-play of barbarians felling forests, of witches around a cauldron, of three ravens flying against a waning crescent moon. The forces were equal and opposite. All the energies in the room were warped by their confrontation, like a fisherman's net

holding two chthonic beasts.

She needed to listen to what they were saying. Iris stretched and yawned, popping the inklings loose from her ears. The muffled sounds of argument became the ringing clash of a swordfight.

"But this is exactly the sort of thing you promised to stop doing!" Maya stood from her chair and slammed both hands down on the table. The Map crinkled.

Kit's footsteps rang on the floor as he walked away. He was in the habit of doing this, pacing back and forth, returning to make a point and then turning away to fiddle with some thing. It was incredibly irritating to Iris. She had deliberately found some very loud shoes for him, in the hopes that it would make him aware of this. It had not. Now he clopped like a horse. He did cut a striking figure, though, in his wingtips and vest.

Iris adjusted the sleeves on her own ruffled pirate shirt. She pretended not to listen to them. Tried to catch up with the conversation. Spying on a meeting she was supposed to be at, who ever thought of that?

Kit came back, carrying a thin book. He threw it on another table. Too casual. He was planning to use it to further his argument, Iris was sure. Playing three moves in advance.

"I did promise that. And I kept my promise. I haven't done a single sigal since we left the Gatehouse. Unless you count the

Sorting and the Map, which we all participated in, and which were both her idea." He pointed at Iris while facing Maya.

"Hey, I'm right here," she said. "That wasn't sigaldry. We were just putting things where they go."

"Sure. Either way, my promise was to stop messing around with sigals until we had figured out what happened to this place. Now we know. The people of the Dams burned it down, probably because they feared the tech that was still functional here after all digital world crashed."

"We do not know that! All we know is what one disgusting man-pig claimed. We need evidence."

"That's what I'm saying. If we implement my plan, we'll get a first-hand account of the Burn. We can use the sigaldry, Maya. We know what it's for – time travel. And that's exactly what we need."

"Oh, you are so smart now. You remember that your last plan ripped a hole in the world? Think it is gone now, healed up?"

"Hey, that's interesting. I didn't consider that. Maybe the fabric of reality is like skin, and does heal. That would lead to some interesting phenomena. I wonder what the immune system of the universe is like." Kit wandered off to a far shelf, muttering to himself. "Or the parasites. Can time get infected? How does it clean its wounds?"

"It isn't. Healed, I mean," said Iris.

"How do you know? You did not go for the hike."

"No, I didn't have to walk there. I saw it from the Tower.

The energies, the flows of air and water and light and life.

They're warped. There's a dissolving effect over there, the flows get all foamy and chaotic. I can see it on the horizon, the way I can see the lights of the Dams fogging the night sky." Iris groped at the air as she spoke, gesturing, trying to capture her vision with words and hands. "It's grotesque."

Maya nodded. She listened intently, gray eyes locked on Iris. Waiting for more.

With a crash, Kit dropped three huge tomes onto the side table. He grinned.

"Got to do a lot more research on that. But your point isn't relevant to my new plan. There were too many variables there. The cutup, the Gate, the bookworm eggs – your idea, by the way – we can't know what made it go wrong. We just have to design the next one more carefully."

"The next what, exactly?" Iris asked.

"The next ritual! See, we have a lot of resources and skills between us. We have to combine them all at once, focus them onto a single intention, and then shut it down afterward. We didn't know what we were doing before."

"What makes you think we know now?"

"The Map, of course. We know the function of our tools now. We have the book knowledge. We need to put it into practice. Especially now. We might get invaded any day."

"How do we use the book magic to defend ourselves from the Damfolk?" asked Maya. Kit looked surprised.

"I don't know. That's what we need to find out."

"That's incredibly frustrating, Kit. Just say what you mean. How do we find out?"

"We open a time portal."

"What?!" said Iris.

"That is what I am saying," said Maya. "How could this possibly be a good idea?"

"Hold on, listen. We open a time portal. Just a little one, itsy bitsy. A window, to let us see into the past. And then what do we look at?"

Maya gave him the steel-eye. Iris looked back and forth between them like a ball game.

"We open a window to the Burn, that's what. To the day when the Librarians escaped the Damfolk. That's how we learn the way to defend ourselves. The way to escape."

"You know that I want to see this. You try to trick me. What is to say that the fires will not spread through the time portal?"

Does not a door let things in as well as out?"

"It's all perfectly safe, Maya. I've got the book right here." He flourished the thin volume. "*Out of Doors: A Guide to Gatecraft and Portallurgy*. Not trying to trick you, but Fiftythree was the one who found it. She was gobbling up the middle pages one day. I guess the fifty-three degree angle is crucial in seven-dimensional cryptopography." He smiled. Smug. Maya grumbled, but her eyes flickered with interest.

"I'm sorry, Kit, but I don't believe you." When Iris said this, Kit gave her a look of shock and hurt. She took a deep breath and carried on. "It's not that I don't think you're right. I just think you're too eager. You don't know that you're right, yet. It's arrogant to assume you do."

"You don't have to insult me." He was defensive now. Walking away. Iris raised her voice, not to be ignored.

"I'm not trying to. I'm just saying we can't know in advance if it's safe. The Gate isn't safe anymore, the Dams isn't safe, the RIGG isn't safe, the Library isn't safe. Even these crypts are pretty sketchy. If we're going to mess around with eldritch forces, we should take it somewhere else. Not risk the few things we have left. Okay?"

Kit pretended not to hear her.

Maya nodded slowly.

"Yes. I think we could do it that way. If we were to go very far, to the edge of the city perhaps. Maybe we could try a little time portal. But if it does not work – bam!" She snapped her fingers. "No more screwing around. That is my condition." She stared at Kit's back.

"So," he said, turning slowly around, "you're saying we should do it?"

"Fine," said Iris. "Show us the plan."

#

A week after the river incident and still no Damfolk. Iris worried. She knew Rodney would not keep his mouth shut, no matter how she threatened him. He would be gathering a posse, alerting the Guard. They were not forgotten. How long now, until the invasion?

Kit had checked and re-checked the spell. They trudged up far up the northern slopes, to an isolated courtyard at the edge of town. Three walls protected them, with a clear view downhill to the river. The three prepared their tools in silence.

Kit inked a careful sigal onto a blank white card. His concentration was fierce. One-pointed.

Maya nervously snapped the scissors in her right hand. In her left she held a small vial. The vial contained a single bookworm egg. She capped its open end with her thumb.

Iris poured ink in a wide circle. They huddled into a triangle in the middle. She looked at the faces of her comrades. Then she set her mouth and nodded.

She let the inklings pour from her mind. She could feel her eyes dilate hugely. Light became painful. The oily darkness blacked out her surroundings entirely. All that she could see was inside the circle. Vaguely she registered Maya's movements. Kit held his attention on the sigal in his palms.

Iris stared at the card as Maya planted the egg.

The sigal squirmed and twisted, as if the egg were too hot to touch. It spasmed, then vibrated.

The black ink became white fire on a card of shadow. It flickered, negative positive negative, until it was a strobing gray. It was a mirror that rippled like water. It was a wobbling window, and through it Iris could see figures.

Many people, every one of them hooded and cloaked. They streamed into the stonehenge on a full moon night. More people than should fit. A river of pilgrims – no, refugees. This was the Great Escape. People vanished, one by one, into a zone of blackness under the highest archway.

Sudden whiteness blotted out the image. It receded into the distance, lingering, flickering. Gray smoke poured from the horizon. The robed figures panicked. They fought to escape



through the impossible hole in the world. The altar rose again and again, the elevator vomiting crowds of people into the Gate.

Finally the last stragglers emerged from below. One figure hurried away from the gate, smuggling a thing in his robes. He returned a moment later from the direction of the Gatehouse. Before entering the blackness he turned slowly around. Looking for something. He stopped, facing Iris from beneath a deep hood, and waved. Then he took a step backward and disappeared.

The Gate closed behind him. Iris glimpsed a moment of silence in the stonehenge. Leaves fluttered through the archways. Distant fire raged. Then the card was just a card again, a flat rectangle in Kit's outstretched hand.

Iris wondered if Kit and Maya saw everything she had. She turned to ask.

The world spun her feet around her head.

Everything went black.

#

Iris recovered from her faint by dinnertime. Soon the floor of the Clockhouse was littered with the bones and skulls of fish.

"We have to take the fight to them," she said through a mouthful of meat. "We can't sit around here waiting for Osrice's thugs to hunt us down. The Librarians escaped through some kind of gateway, but we don't have that much power. It nearly killed

me to channel that little portal for a few minutes." She stopped talking to suck the eyeballs out of a trout. Kit and Maya exchanged smirks. Iris glared at them until she finished chewing. Then she burped, and laughed.

If only her mother could see her now. Eating like a barbarian. Hanging out with savages. Living off the fat of the wasteland. Iris was saddened, thinking of her family. If they remembered her now it was probably as a body at the bottom of the river. Or a dangerous criminal, if Rodney had recognized her voice. She wished she could think more fondly of them. If only she hadn't been so different. If only they hadn't all been so normal.

"If we did want to follow the Librarians through that Gate," said Kit, "we would need more than just power. The parts that were stolen. Presumably they're somewhere in the Dams. They're crucial to the functioning of the anachronometer."

"Which is what?" said Maya.

"It's the thing that controls the time function of the Gate. Without it, we could still open a portal through space, but not through time. Not without risk."

"What kind of risk?" asked Iris.

"Like, having your very atoms scattered to the ends of time kind of risk. Comfortable with that?"

"Definitely not."

"Then we need the pieces. That's assuming we even want to open the Gateway."

Iris stopped chewing. Her mouth slacked. Maya laughed and threw a dirty sock at Kit.

"Of course we want to open the Gateway. How else do we get the Librarians back?"

"Get them back? I want to go where they've gone," Iris said.

"What, to exile in the past somewhere?"

"Not exile. Escape. We could go back to the Ancient times, before the Crash and the Burn. We could go anywhere, right? The Map has a space function, as well as time. Surely the Librarians went to someplace better than this." Iris pushed away her empty bowl.

"Maybe so. Maybe they did the same, went back to Ancient times. But then why did they not change things? They must all be dead now, with no effect on the fall of world. What good does it do us to go with them? I say we must travel back and find them so that we can bring them here. We can all rebuild. Together we can withstand the Damfolk."

"Theoretically," began Kit, "that could be the reason why they didn't change anything. If we find out where they went in timespace, and open a door the minute after they get there,

they'll only exist in history for a minute. But that might cause a paradox in itself. You see, time is not a simple line—" Iris and Maya waved their hands at Kit frantically until he stopped lecturing. This had become a common gesture between them.

"Regardless of what we do when we find them," said Iris, "we all want to open that Gateway. But right now there's a terrible rip in timespace. What are we going to do about that?"

"Actually, that could work to our advantage. It's essentially a free power source, burning the fractal energy of a bookworm eating a cutup. Now that I've got the knack of this, we could stabilize it and make a Gateway. Space-only, of course."

"Then we still need to get the pieces," Iris declared. "I say we go to the Dams and steal them. If we can point the Gateway there, we could be in and out before they notice."

"Wow," Kit said. "That's pretty bold. You're not usually so decisive."

"Actually, Kit, I am. I just don't waste my breath thinking my decisions out loud. I know those people in the Dams. I've watched them for years. They're small-minded and fearful. They're coming to burn us down, and if they're not here yet then it's because they're gathering torches. They're not just going to have an angry word with you, Kit. They're going to tie you into a stick and burn you as a witch. Just like Maya. Just like me.

Understand?"

Kit was taken aback.

"Alright, I hear you. The only logical option is to raid them first. Assuming we survive that long."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, opening a full Gateway isn't as easy as doing a portal. We'll have to wait til the full moon, for one thing."

"That's a week! We should just walk there. It can't be more than a day's hike."

Maya cleared her throat and pointed to her foot. She had removed the splint to wash. The skin was stitching back together across her bone, but her shin was still pink and swollen.

"Okay, we won't walk there. It's probably better if we have a quick getaway, too. Can we keep the Gate open for a while? Long enough to get in and out, close it behind us?"

"Yeah. I think so. Once it's open, it should hold pretty much as long as we need. Like a bicycle. Most of the work is getting it moving, then it's just staying balanced."

"Then we hide for another week. Study. Prepare. On the full moon we strike."

#

The night was warm velvet. Owl eyes watched them from the treeline. In the distance, coyotes howled.

Iris stared at the stonehenge. Even in the dark she could see the weirding of the world inside.

"In case we get separated," said Kit, "this is what we're looking for." He handed each of them a page of sketches. The missing Clock parts.

Maya marshalled her army of concats and bookwyrms. They swarmed around the triad.

"Listen," said Iris. She pulled them both close. Kit leaned in so she could whisper in both of their ears at once. "I love you. Both of you. You're the only friends I've ever had." She shut her eyes tight and embraced them.

"I love you two too," said Maya.

"I love you two too, too," said Kit.

Iris tried to laugh. As they broke apart, she wiped a tear from her cheek. It was inky black.

Then they grabbed their tools and strode into the Gate.

Inside, Maya directed her bookwyrms to stack themselves at six points around the fractalcutlure. The concats leapt atop them and began reciting aloud. Harry seemed to wink at Iris as he began his incantation. The air pressure dropped. Iris's head swam.

Kit poured a circle around the hex, then a complex sigal within it. He tracked a triangle around Iris. She sat cross-

legged with her palms on the ground around. She meditated into the blackabaddarkness.

As she watched, the world words slowed, to a crawl, to a creak. Then it froze. Entirely. Nothing moved, except the dark clouding blizzard.

Then the Gate folded inside out, and she was in the roiling darkness. She fell endlessly backward while sitting still. Her body was very far away from her mind. The infernal tempest gave way to a flurrying miasma of color. The world was falling past her. A vast tapestry unwove. Iris fell through the threads of reality.

And then she felt a pause. The world slowed, rolled around an unforeseen axis. The motion picked up again, falling forward this time, face crashing through veil after veil of majestic color, picking up speed like a snowball and avalanching forward into a valley of time and crashing into form. The currents of color settled into clouds and then crystals. The world took shape again, although it took a moment for Iris to regain any sense of meaning.

Something tall stood before her. The Gate. No, taller, wrong color. It was a man. No, a statue of a man. He looked familiar, a regal fellow. Like Grandfather.

Memory rushed back to Iris. The figure was indeed Osric. Cast

in brass. Vigilant on his pedestal. Looking right at her.

She was in the center of the Dams.



## 15 Librespace

Maya struggled to focus her mind. She stood in the center of the Dams, surrounded by bright lights. Her heart thudded in her ears.

Everything wobbled. The world was shifty. It was not the logophrenia, the word-sight that made her skin crawl. This was something else. More like the cold fire of the northern skies. Or the twining entrails of a salmon. Or like the Library, in her dreams.

She knew it. Librespace. The mysterious plane on which the bookworms travel. Fiftythree dragged her through this once before. They must have passed through the Gateway into librespace and got stuck. The infinite bookshelves were not gone. Just... hidden.

This was the Dams, to be sure. She could feel the hard concrete beneath her feet. But the light and shadow of the real world was muted and drowned by the curling currents of information. Tracks of facts and trails of knowledge. They glowed before her eyes. They weaved, danced, taunted her. Begged to be hunted.

Something in her hand. Maya glanced at it. Oh yes, Kit's diagram, the Clock parts. Should be hunting them right now.

Should be hiding right now.

Maya gasped. Had she not been breathing? She looked to her friends. Kit and Iris were in awe, faces slack. They had never seen this before. Besides, they were not hunters. Maya shook them from trance and dragged them into welcome shadows.

Her eyes adjusted. The town was dark, asleep. The floodlights were centered on the smug sculpture in the plaza. The round moon smiled at her between high buildings.

The flows of librespaces were easier to see now. Many colors overlapped. Maya thought of the thick incense trailed by Wolves in ritual.

She looked again at the page in her hand. Too tangled. Too many drawings. A rainbow poured into her hand and knotted tight. She ripped it down to fragments. Better.

Maya raised one of the scraps to eye level. Pictured was a round thing, a set of circles and lines. Labeled, in Kit's jagged script, *elemental compositor*. She found it hard to look at the ink. Focused instead on the thin yellow line bleeding from the page. It floated like smoke in still air. Traced its way down a small and crooked street.

She gestured to Iris to follow her. Iris grabbed Kit by the hand and pulled him along. He was the most stunned by the sorcerous texture of this world. They followed the yellow trail

to a shadowy building, where it floated upward and ducked into a high window.

Kit crouched against the wall, shaking his head violently. Iris petted his neck and cooed. She tried to calm his moaning. Only two days ago he had discovered that the gateways and bookworms traveled through librespace. None of them had expected it to be so disorienting. So overwhelming.

Maya tested her ankle. It held her weight now. She walked easily without a crutch.

"I shall do some climbing," Maya whispered. Iris looked up at her with gratitude.

"Be careful," Iris said. "Don't let anyone see you."

Maya laughed with scorn. She was up the wall faster than she could say shed, fir, drainpipe.

#

Maya jimmied the window and slipped inside without a sound. Immediately she dropped to the floor, to avoid being silhouetted in moonlight. The room was heavy with the sound and stench of a sleeping adolescent. A rancid smell, like ill-cured meat.

She recognized the smell in a flash of fear and rage. The boy from the beach. Rodney. The would-be hunter of Wolves.

Maya hissed and drew close to the bed. She reached instinctively for her knife.

The boy sputtered and gasped. He rolled over in his sleep. Mumbled. Then his breath slowed again.

Maya sheathed her knife. Remembered what she came here to do.

She followed the yellow trail, past the sleeping idiot, out the bedroom door and up to a belfry. From here she could see the whole town. Light swelled around The Palace, the Barrack, the Smithy. The Dam Itself lurked in the shadows of the river. A dark web of alleys and shuttered streets was her habitat tonight. Infinite needles threaded luminous color throughout the city. Maya wondered what other surprises librespace had to offer.

The strand of yellow pooled to an end around the elemental compositor. It was mounted in the midst of a large instrument panel. She had no idea what the whole thing was for. She did not care. Maya pried the compositor loose and dumped it in her bag.

No way back to ground from here. The belfry thrust from the top of a pitched roof. She could not tell where the drainpipe connected. If she missed and fell, her leg would shatter.

Back the way she came, then. As she crept through the hallway she could hear voices downstairs. Two people. Heated. Her heart raced and she stopped where she stood.

She could not tell what they were saying. The voices were muffled. One male, one female. Not moving around, not coming up the stairs. Arguing.

Middle of the night. Teenage boy. Of course they were arguing.

These were Rodney's parents, she realized. It had been two weeks since he threatened her at the river. Now she could find out what he had said – and why he had not come back.

Maya lurked at the top of the stairs. If she barely breathed she could hear their conversation.

"Absolutely not. It's indecent. It won't happen to a Wedrick man."

"Bromley, think about his reputation. He has ambition, our boy. He wants to be Captain of the Guard one day. We really must let him tell the King of his discovery."

"His discovery? We all know there are savages in the woods. The fact that he found them at the Ancient ruins is no surprise. What is a surprise is that my boy ran yellow. From a woman. Armed with a rock. I know I never raised such a coward."

"The other boys ran too. He was just being smart. Coming to get the Guard, like a good boy."

"I'll hear no more of it."

"Honey, please. The Clary boy already came out with his story. It's the talk of the town. If Rodney doesn't tell what he knows, the King will find out anyway. He'll know that the Princess is with the Wolves. And if he finds out we knew..."

"Treason. I know, Alda." The man Bromley sighed. "It's not like I've been unloyal to the King. I've served him well these many years. Lord knows it weren't easy for a meteorologer in this day. First the weather betrays me, then my own son?"

"He hasn't betrayed you. He just did what he thought was right. Everybody makes mistakes, Brom."

Maya hated self-pity. She had heard enough.

On her way back through Rodney's bedroom, her knife hand twitched again. She hesitated, then drew her blade. Full moon glinted on polished silver.

#

Maya dropped to the ground and rolled expertly. She found Kit and Iris tucked away in a nearby alley. Kit shook less and his eyes were steady. Iris looked mutely to Maya.

Maya showed her prize. They celebrated, but not for long. Maya whispered to them the secrets she had overheard. She did not mention the message she had left on the bedroom wall.

"What next?" asked Kit through gritted teeth.

Maya held up a scrap of paper suffused with light blue energy. The trail thinned rapidly as it stretched away into the night.

They fell into a line. Maya led the way. She tightened the straps on her backpack. Her hand strayed to her knife.

The blue trail thickened. It grew brighter. The streets passed by in muted dimness. The buildings were but fogbanks.

They turned the corner near the pub. Maya remembered it from her first visit.

The glow suffused the glazier's shop. It gave a blue tinge to the bright lectrics burning in the windows.

"This is the glassmaker's place," she said.

"Looks like he's spinning the midnight hydro," Kit said weakly.

"He's Mr. Oberlin. He's nice," whispered Iris. "He loves books. He has five of them."

Maya rubbed the dirt from a window with her sleeve. They peered inside.

Oberlin was a large man with a small, squashed-looking face. His little round glasses perched atop a snouty nose. He was permanently hunched over his hands, his fine fingers and beady eyes moving while his bulky body sat immobile. Tonight he stooped over a workbench, staring intently through a large lens at some intricate artifice.

The lens glowed blue as sky.

"The nuclear calibrator," said Kit under his breath.

"Shit," said Maya aloud.

Her voice echoed in the empty alley. Oberlin glanced up from

his work.

"Okay, come with me," whispered Iris. She dusted her hands on her pants. "I've got a plan."

She grabbed both of their hands and pulled them around the corner. Right through the front door of the shop.

A glass bell tinkled as the door closed behind them.

Oberlin was flummoxed. He rotated on his stool to face them. He stammered.

"Excuse me, young people, the shop is, unfortunately, closed at this hour, could I ask you—"

"Mr. Oberlin," Iris said. She stood tall, with her hands clasped behind her back.

"I am he," said the glazier, unsteady.

"We are looking for some help, for a very good cause. We are going to save all the books in the world from ever having been burned. Only you can help us."

The man's face dropped. His hand went to his heart, and tears welled up in his eyes. Maya was impressed.

"How did you know? Why me? It was my father, not me..." He choked back his tears.

"What was?" asked Kit. Iris held out a hand to shush him.

"The books. I'm sorry. They're gone. It can't be helped."

"We think it can," said Iris. "Have you ever heard of the



book, oh, what's it called."

Maya saw Iris concentrating. The inklings swarmed black around her temples. The thought evaded them, a dancing ribbon of indigo, a hawk escaping from angry sparrows. Maya reached calmly toward Iris's head, and in a flash she caught the idea.

*"One Thousand and One Ways to Build a Klein-Bottle,"* she prompted. Iris gave her a look of surprise.

"How do you know of that?" asked the fat man. "It is only mentioned in Farnaker's encyclopedia. Have you been looking at my books?" With horror the man looked to his small book-cabinet, where five volumes were displayed carefully behind locked glass.

"No. It was burned. We have our own copy of Farnaker's." Iris held up a hand as he began to argue. "Do not ask how. Remember, we intend to restore all the books. If you choose to help us, I can promise you the Klein-bottle book as a gesture of good faith. We will rescue it." That was a lie, Maya knew. They already had it. But Oberlin swelled with hope.

"How can I help? What must I do?" His face flushed patchy pink.

Maya eyed the dark glass decanter on the table next to him. Half-empty, she suspected.

"It's your lens." Iris pointed one long arm to the calibrator, acting on her regal heritage. "We need it."

"My lady, this is a very special lens." He laughed with discomfort. "I don't think I can just give it over to some midnight visitors with a grand plan. I have others of similar magnification, if that will do."

"I'm afraid it has to be that one."

"Perhaps if you were to bring the book first?"

"Not possible. We need the lens to restore the books."

"Well." Oberlin cleared his throat. He looked around conspiratorially. "Then I should come with you. I will protect my lens, and show you how to use it. I can be packed in an hour." He held his finger alongside his nose, a gesture Maya had never seen anyone do. His nose was red and throbbed with veins.

"I'm sorry, it's too dangerous." Iris wrung her hands together. The glassmaker harrumphed.

"Then I suppose it is too dangerous for my calibrator! This is a highly specialized tool, you know."

"I know," Kit began. Iris shushed him again.

"We'll be careful," she insisted. "It's just we need it now, we're kind of in a hurry."

"It can't be done. I'm sorry." Oberlin crossed his arms over his barrel chest and set his mouth.

Maya sighed.

"It is more dangerous for you to not help us," she said.

"Something very bad will happen if you do not give to us the lens."

"Oh? What would that be?" He leaned forward and squinted at her.

In a flash her knife was at his throat. She held him by his collar, pushing back to keep him off balance in his stool. She kept her own weight on her left foot. He was even heavier than he looked.

Up close his face was even more piggy. He grunted with fear. Maya felt a bit sorry for the soft man, but she kept her face grim.

"Alright, take it, take it," he huffed. "Please. Be my guest."

"Thank you." She shifted her grip, standing now behind him with her knife pressed into the flesh of his chins. "Please unscrew the thing and give to my friends."

He complied.

"Now do not tell anybody, right? You know better. If you do not tell, we bring you books. Okay?" She flashed a sharp smile at him as they left. He waved timidly. His mouth trembled.

Outside, Iris slipped the lens into Maya's bag.

"That was terrible!" she hissed.

"What? You both did great," said Kit.

"You didn't have to be so mean to Mr. Oberlin."

Maya shrugged.

"He would not give us the thing. I did what I had to."

"But you were going to hurt him. I told you, he's nice!"

"Not nice enough." Maya walked away, following a chain of red beads into the night.

#

They saw the guards from a block away. They stood sentry on either side of a rusty gate. Maya led the others into a shadowy niche.

"How do we get in?" she asked.

"We can't get into the Smithy!" Iris said. "It's the most heavily guarded place after the Palace. This is where they keep the trash engines, and the forge."

"Of course." Kit slapped his forehead. "It's a thermodynamo, of course it would be at the Smithy."

"Well, we have to get it. Maybe we go around." Maya reached for the rope ladder tucked in her belt.

"No, look at the wall." Iris pointed. "Sharp spikes all the way around. This is the only entrance."

"Kit, do you have any spells for solving this problem?"

Kit was already rifling through his pack. He pulled out a sheaf of papers, each one marked with a single sigal.

"Let's see... no. I have one for invisibility but I don't think it will work on all three of us. And anyway, these are all completely untested."

"Um, guys?" Iris's voice was small. She stared upward, past Maya's head.

Maya turned to look. A guard stood on the roof above them, in white jumpsuit and helmet. He stared down at them, his face impassive, muttering urgently into his radio.

They ran.

Too soon, they were cornered. Guards approached from two sides. The wall of the Smithy blocked their retreat. And a electric carriage motored down the street toward them, full of cavalry.

Kit held up a piece of paper in a threatening manner. The oncoming guards looked to each other, puzzled. One laughed.

The sigal was on the side facing Kit. He stared hard at it and took a deep breath.

Then he screamed.

It was the loudest and most violent sound Maya had ever heard him make. It was blood-curdling, brain-boiling. He sustained it for a shocking time. It emptied even Maya's mind.

When she shook her vision clear, Maya saw three Kits standing before her.

"Oh, no," she muttered.

The guards were astonished. The superstitious among them backed away. A few continued to edge forward, readying their weapons.

Think fast. Maya's hands flew to her pockets. Vial of bookworm eggs in right hand. The drawing in left hand. No, not this one, not into the Smithy. She cast it aside. The other one, better, green glow. Fold bookworm inside diagram.

Maya hooked one elbow through Iris's arm and the other through the arm of the middle Kit. She heaved them close to her. Her hands met. She untwisted the scrap of paper and grabbed the baby bookworm by the tail.

Maya was snatched from space and time. A great green wind sucked her up and accelerated. The bookworm dragged her through a blurry tangle of thoughts, colors, emotions. The thin green line reeled her in like a fish. It stayed perfectly straight, stretching into infinity before her as everything else twisted through uncanny dimensions.

Maya was terrified. She lost track of time, of place, of mind. She lost Kit. She lost Iris. She lost Maya.

When she found herself, it was as a sobbing wretching frail body. Hard dirt pushed up against her hands and knees. She sat up, looked around. The curvature of librespace still warped her

perceptions. She finally recognized the high wall of the Palace.

Iris gasped behind her. Maya turned and saw why.

Kit was falling apart. He peeled and flaked like old wallpaper. He cried without sound as his face melted away.

She had rescued a cutup. Kit was still in danger.

16    Hypersigal

When it came to moving fast, no one beat a Postie.

Kit and his cutup ran in different directions. Maya had taken Iris and escaped. The spell wouldn't hold once the cutups were out of sight. He was on his own.

Three men followed him. No telling where the reinforcements would be coming from. Kit took a sharp left and sprinted down a wide boulevard.

Too many lights. No cover. More lefts, down this alley and then backtrack to lose his pursuers. Only as he made the second turn did he hear the soft whine of the oncoming cart.

The buggy bore down on him with all the torque it could muster. The driver lowered his head, face shielded by his helmet. This street was narrow, no side-walk. Nowhere to dodge.

"Down here!" shouted a militiaman from the alleyway behind. No retreat.

Kit ran away from the car. He tore down the street, headed directly for the Wall. The edge of town. Too tall to climb, too well-built to penetrate.

The buggy was gaining on him. Kit kept his pace, long legs pumping like pistons.

"Hey, I've never done this before," he shouted over his



shoulder. "It might go badly. Be careful!"

The driver did not respond. He pushed the engine as fast as it would go. Whipped it to a frenzy. Kit didn't know if he was intent upon smashing Kit into the wall, or running him over before he could get there. Either way, only one option.

Kit jumped, as high as he could. He tucked his knees and covered his head with his arms.

The buggy had a rounded roof, with a small open bed at the rear for cargo. Kit bounced across it on his back. It hurt like crazy but he rolled and managed to land on his feet in the bed. The cart still rushed at the wall.

The driver turned to look at Kit. Pulled his gun.

Kit hopped out of the bed and ran alongside, holding onto the tailgate.

The guard took aim.

Kit let go of the cart. He changed vector, took a sharp turn at speed.

The cart smashed into the wall. The last Kit saw of the guard was his shot going wild.

Kit found an alley. He hid halfway between two streets, crouched behind a stinking trash barrel. His hands trembled. As his heart thudded he could see the flow of blood in his own veins. His pulse warped the air around him. He remembered:

librespace.

That must be how Maya left. She had grabbed one of his cutups – surely a mistake – and grabbed Iris, and traveled through one of the dimensions of librespace. Along an invisible axis. How had she done it?

Bookwyrms. The only other cause of librespace teleportation. He had thought it was only possible within the Library. Now he realized that librespace extended everywhere. Further than everywhere.

He needed time. Time to experiment. Maybe they could do without the Clock. There was so much unknown. And if they couldn't get in the Smithy, there was no point staying here. He had to find Maya, Iris, tell them to go. Escape.

Kit searched his pack. The book SIGNAL, a handful of sigals, a few arcane potions. Some vapor-sealed food rations. Some envelopes, out of habit. And a small vial with one bookworm egg. Thank the Moon for that extra week of preparation.

Voices. Back the way he came. Shouting. Men running in heavy boots.

Do it quickly, like pulling off a scab. No sense in waiting and wondering.

Kit opened SIGNAL to the page of Clock parts. He shook the egg from the vial into his palm. He slapped it down on the page,

and held tight.

The egg writhed under his hand. It pulsed. It grew. It struggled.

Then it took off into the depths. The book SIGNAL grew and swallowed Kit whole.

Time rotated around Kit. He was at the center of a puzzle cube built for aliens.

Many days folded into each other. The sun was a wobbly figure eight, the moon an accordion. The seasons were four elephants holding up the world.

The city relapsed. It collapsed. It sank into itself. It was a stack of dirty dishes washed and vanished by invisible hands.

The stars turned.

The sky burned.

The book of the heavens flipped backward. Page after page. Faster, and faster and faster and on every page was Kit sitting perfectly still.

Unnoticed.

#

Kit was surprised to see Lewis in the Dams.

He was sure it was his post-father, though the man was not much older than Kit himself. The same pugnacious nose and heavy mustache. He did not wear a Postie hat. Thinking back to his

first visit to the Dams, Kit thought this a good move.

The city was different too. Lectrics were fewer, the streets lit by torches. The buildings were smaller. Some were half-built. Bricks and timbers pried from ruins sat in sorted stacks near skeletal structures.

Young Lewis walked into a bar. Kit followed him.

The bar was dim. Eledees circled the walls. The buzz of conversation thickened the air to porridge. He pinballed through the crowd in slow motion.

What was Lewis doing here? Margot had said no Postie ever visited the Dams and lived. Lewis had certainly never told Kit anything about it.

The letter. The one that had started this whole mess. Maybe Lewis got it directly. Not off another Postie but here, at this time. If Kit could hide, wait, watch, he could find out who sent the letter. And, perhaps, what it said.

There he was, young Lewis, sloping in a booth at the back. He wouldn't recognize Kit, who hadn't even been born yet. Another booth, empty, next to him. Kit walked casually towards it.

"Hey," said Lewis.

Kit's eyes bugged. He adjusted his hat, an old trick to subtly cover his face while changing his expression. Composed himself.

"Howdy," he offered. Took the last few steps toward the empty table. Whoever Lewis was meeting here tonight, he didn't want to get in the way. That might cause a temporal collapse, or something.

"Sit down, why don't you," Lewis said. His Southern accent was stronger and more grating than Kit remembered. A trumpet to older Lewis's trombone.

"Well, I have a lot of work to do," stammered Kit. "Really came here to think, you know, be alone."

"Nonsense. A man goes to a bar by himself when he wants to be alone with other people. We can share a table. Come on, I'll buy the first round." He raised his eyebrow at Kit and lowered his voice in a way that meant he wanted to talk secrets. Kit wondered if Lewis knew him after all. Had he traveled, not back in time, but to the land of the Dead?

He couldn't resist. He sat down opposite the ghost from his past.

Lewis whispered a few words to a passing barman and shortly a pitcher of ale appeared before them. Kit was not surprised by how quickly it began to disappear.

"So, stranger," said Lewis as he filled their glasses, "what's your call? I'm Lewis Postie."

"I'm, K- Kindred. Kindred Morganstern."

"That's quite a mouthful of marbles. Mind I call you Kin?"

"No, fine. My friends do."

"Listen, hate to be rude. Wasn't how I was brought up. But for both our sakes—" here Lewis leaned forward, speaking with urgent quiet, "take off that damn hat! What in blazes are you thinking?"

Kit had not been wearing his hat on the heist, but now he found it on his head. White, round, wide brim. Quickly he tucked it away beneath the table.

"I didn't mean to! I mean, I didn't know I was wearing it."

"It's easy to forget. I know how it is." Lewis gave him a lazy wink. "Get so used to it. But you ought to know this town ain't too friendly on Posties."

Caught. Time to take hold of the conversation.

"You're right. That's why I said Morganstern, I was trying to be sly. Really I'm Kin Postie. I'm here on a secret delivery run. Well, it was supposed to be secret, anyway." Kit eyed the traitorous hat. "Maybe I messed that up."

"I reckon you're alright. None of these folk seem too perceptive."

"Thanks, that's a relief. So, what are you doing here?"

Lewis threw his arms across the back of his seat.

"I wonder I should tell you. Your mission so secret and all.

Mine's a pretty big deal, I'll say that."

"Oh, go on. Mine's boring anyway. I know you can't name your client, but where'd you come from?"

"All over. Spent a lot of time out in Tensee. But I reckon I was born somewhere out here."

"I meant where did your mail come from."

"Well, that's the thing, ain't it? Came from somewhere out here. But it's been all over hell and back with me."

"Why's that? You took it to Tensee with you and back?"

"Sure did, Tensee and twenty other countries. This is some time-delay mail, my friend." Lewis grinned. That mustache would look a lot better in a few decades. Kit realized that Lewis was even younger than he had thought.

"Of course it is," Kit said, examining Lewis's face in the smoky dim. "But what are you doing here now? It's far too early."

Lewis's face went from smug, to curious, to hostile.

"How's that again? You think you know about my mail?"

"No, I was just guessing," Kit backpedaled. "I mean, time-delay mail, it's always too early, right? Feels like it's going to be in your bag forever."

"I guess so," said Lewis. Still suspicious. He pulled a leather pouch from his coat and began mixing herbs into a wide tobacco leaf.

"Look, I'm pretty new at this," said Kit. First trick of lying: tell the truth as much as possible. "I don't know what I was saying. Just trying to sound cool. You know, when you're a new Postie like me, you get nervous. You wonder if people are going to see through you. Find out that you're a fraud. But really I do want to be a Postie, and I've learned all the rules. I just need to practice."

Lewis sat back, satisfied. He lit his cigarette and smiled magnanimously at Kit. The smoke drifted away at an odd angle. Behind the bar, a complicated vent drew the air from the room. Attached to it was a familiar-looking round gadget. The compositor, here? Should he take it? But they already had it, in the future. Would have it.

Kit's palms were sweaty. He rubbed them on his pants. Really didn't want to cause a temporal anomaly.

Lewis drained his glass. He leaned in close, his smoke pungent in Kit's nose.

"You want to know the truth? I don't know any of the rules."

"What do you mean?"

"Postie rules. I never learned them. I didn't have a post-father, as such. Just my ma, and she died when I was real little. Then on I made my own way. Done all kinds of work."

"Well how did you become a Postie, then?"



"I've always been one. I got my first letter when I was a babe. Same letter I'm here with, actually." He smiled with pride. "Told you it was time-delayed."

"How did you solicit a letter as a baby? I can barely do it at my age."

"Right place at the right time, I guess. That's what I'm good at. That's why I want to be a Postie."

"Want to be?"

"Am. Am a Postie, I mean."

"So you delivered letters all the way from Tensee to here, then?"

"Well, no."

"No?"

"To be honest," Lewis said, taking a long drag of his smoke and staring deep into the ember, "I ain't delivered one yet. This was my first letter, you know, so I thought I'd deliver it first and get a good start. Figured maybe here I would get some more commissions. Then I found out about the Licensed Messenger Act, decided to lay low instead."

"Who's your message to? Maybe I can help you find him."

"Says Oss Richardson. When I asked around, people acted like I said the name of the devil. Don't know if I'll ever find him."

"Yeah, maybe you won't. You said it was early, though. Maybe

he won't be here for some time."

"I suppose so. Sure is frustrating."

"Why'd you decide to come out here now? Why pick up the Postie thing without knowing the rules?"

"Well. I had to leave, you see. So I thought I'd go real far."

"You had to leave?"

"I made myself leave. I couldn't stay there any more, walking around in my own bad memories."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I did that to myself recently. All the other versions of me, other decisions I could have made, just hanging around. I blew up the spot, I guess."

"Blew up the spot! That's a good one. I like that."

You taught it to me, Kit thought. Rule number thirty-seven. Don't.

"Reckon I blew up my spot too. I..." Lewis tightened his lips, holding back tears. "We lost our child. To the flu, the real bad one. And my wife, she blamed herself. And I guess I blamed her too some. I was in the mines, trying to get the last of that coal. I come home to find out Sue's gone from bad to worse to dead. I didn't get a chance to help. To say goodbye." He held back a sob. His mustache clawed at his mouth.

"So you had to go."

"I had to. I wasn't going to be a good husband anymore. I was so mad. Filled with rage. Now I just want to deliver the damn letter."

"I can see what it would mean to you. I'm sure you'll be a great Postie someday," Kit said. He finished his drink. Went to pour another but the pitcher was empty. Lewis lay his head on the table, arm wrapped around it to hide his face.

A ruckus from the entrance. Two big men walked in. Their armor was shabbier than the guards he had seen in his own time, but Kit knew cops when he saw them. They walked to the bar and conversed tersely with the tender.

The cops were walking toward him. They must have a tip that a Postie was in town. Well, it wouldn't do to let Lewis get executed at this point in his life. Temporal anomalies, all that.

"Time for me to go. Keep your head down," Kit whispered. "Good luck." The traditional Postie blessing.

Then he grabbed his hat and slapped it onto his head.

Kit slipped through a gap in the crowd, exiting right as the burly guards neared the table. He bumped into people. Made loud excuses. Tipped his hat to everyone, making a show of it.

The thugs gave chase. He had bought Lewis some time. But now he needed to get away, and quick.

He burst out the door and ran. He didn't want to lead them

straight to his hiding place. So he soon ducked behind a horsecart and rummaged in his bag. Found what he needed: a round glass jar, smaller than his palm, with a viscous pink substance inside.

The pounding of boots on road-stones. Here goes.

Kit glanced over the edge of the cart to take aim. Then he threw the potion. Arced it high, so it hit the wall on the far side of the boulevard. It shattered exactly where he wanted, next to an open-burning torch.

The resulting explosion was enough to distract the guards. One chased down a wrong alley. The other stayed, trying to dampen the flames with his tattered cape. Kit sidled away through a gap in time.

#

The Library was in flames. The fire danced orange in the sky, brighter than the setting sun.

Kit stood at the treeline and watched. Mounds of books burned. Pages littered the air. Glowing orange squares, floating to the heavens and raining down again as black snow. Beautiful. Terrible.

The mob surged through the streets. Everywhere, glass shattered. Screams echoed from all directions. Victims and victors alike bellowed in primal rage. Crowds danced around the

book-fires.

The Clock pealed, sad and constant, singing a dirge for its own funeral.

Kit walked right through the carnage. He did not duck or dodge. The world dodged around him. It was as if an invisible bubble of protection surrounded him. A good luck charm. A Postie aura. Don't kill the messenger.

Where was he headed? He felt as though he almost remembered. Find something? Deliver something?

He was definitely going somewhere. His feet had a mind of their own.

He reached the treeline. Outpaced the fire and riot. It was calmer here, though the creatures of the forest were eerie silent.

A young woman crouched behind the giant root ball of a fallen cedar. She held a baby to her breast.

"It's okay, it's okay, we're going to get away," she sang tunelessly. Despair in her voice.

"Hello," said Kit, "maybe I can help with that."

She moved exactly like a mama bear, crouching warily and sheltering the child with her arms. Ready to run. Ready to fight.

"Please be calm. I'm not here to hurt you."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Kit. Kit Postie. I'm from... far away."

"What are you doing here? Come to rape and pillage?"

"No, I'm not with them. I'm supposed to deliver a message, I think."

"Well, get on with it. We're in a bit of a hurry."

"Yeah, it's just, I forgot it."

"You're not much use then."

"Yeah."

He stared out at the city. The line of destruction crept toward them. He could make out some figures against the light of new-kindled fires.

"Who's that?"

"Him at the front, with the torch? That's the traitor himself. Oss."

"Oss Richardson?"

"The very same. Can you believe it? He used to be such a light. Without him I don't know how we would have survived the Crash. Now look what he's become, a wrinkled old mummy. Tearing down everything he helped to build."

"What happened to him?"

"Nobody knows. He left, one day, and started rallying against us in the Dams. Said we were heretics and that we would bring destruction on the whole world. Whatever got in his head, I have

no idea. Nor why anybody in their right mind would believe him."

"How is he so old?" asked Kit.

"Well, I assume it's because he lived so long."

"No, I mean, in my time he's old. But this must be ages ago, and he's already old. How did he live so long?"

"What do you mean, in your time?"

"Did I say that?"

"You said he's old in your time. Your time somehow different from my time?"

"I, uh. Oh."

"What the hell are you, a ghost?"

"I'm not a ghost. I'm... I'm from the future. I came back to deliver a message."

The woman backed away from him. She wrapped her robes protectively around her baby.

"Look, I swear I'm not a bad guy. I can help you. I appreciate you helping me. I think maybe Oss is who I need to talk to. But first let's get you out of here." Kit knelt down, unshouldered his pack, and sifted through his sigals.

"Here. This should be enough invisibility for you and your...?"

"Son. My son. You're saying that's magic right there?" Face skeptical.

"It's not magic, it's just exceptionally advanced technology. Trust me." Kit held the sigal at arm's length and bit the thumb of his other hand until it bled. He tasted salt and iron, like eating an old coin. It hurt. The sigal ignited, the ink burning through the paper and leaving a stencil outline.

"Where did you go?" exclaimed the mother.

"I'm right here."

"How did you do that? Are you throwing your voice?"

"No, I told you. It's invisibility." Kit was annoyed. Nobody ever believed him that the sigals would work. "Let's see, I can't really hand it to you because it's invisible and fragile. Maybe this."

He shuffled through his bag again. The baby trailed his head out from his mother's robes and ogled the back-pack as it seemed to move mysteriously by itself.

"Here, perfect!" He took an envelope and held it up in the air. The baby tracked its motion. Kit folded the burnt sigal with care and slid it into the envelope. When he closed its flap, the woman jumped.

"You're back!"

"I never went anywhere! I was right here the whole time, I was just invisible. Like this." He opened the flap, and vanished. The envelope floated in the air. Closed it again.



"See?"

He proffered the envelope to the woman and she tested it herself.

"Thank you so much. This is a miracle." She embraced him. Hugged him tight.

"You're welcome. What did you say your name was?"

"I'm Sadie. And this is Lewis."

"Lewis?" Kit felt dizzy. He remembered what he had to do.

"Yes. He's named for my father's brother."

"That's nice. My, father's name, was Lewis." Once more into the back-pack. "Listen, can I ask you for one more favor? It's kind of weird."

"Anything."

"Can you take a letter for me? I think it's supposed to be you."

"I suppose so. I don't know where I'm headed, mind you."

"Me either." Kit hurried through his vittles. Found a sigal. Pretty sure this was To Create a Distraction.

He made a minor addition, flicking his fountain pen quickly across the page. Folded it into a different envelope and addressed it. Handed it to Sadie.

"Mr. Postie, this sure is a strange favor. You mean to tell me this letter is for Oss Richardson? The man coming up that

street lighting fires?"

"Yeah, but you see what it says there? It's a time-delay."

"I see that. I find it even harder to believe. You want this letter delivered to that fellow over there, in the future?"

"Yeah. I can't be sure how many years. But it will probably be around the time your son is an old man." He took a deep breath.

"How do you expect Oss to still be alive? Look at him!"

"I don't know. He just is. Will be."

"Oh right, you're from the future." She gave him a knowing wink.

"Yeah, about that. Please don't tell anyone about me. Ever. Okay?"

"For real?"

"Super real."

"Okay. Going to be a hell of a time explaining this letter to my boy, though."

"You'll do a good job. Trust me."

"Do I?"

"I gotta go."

"Hey, wait, what happens in the future?"

"There's a boat in the west harbor. It's unguarded and it has an electric motor. If you can get past the Dams you'll make it

all the way to the ocean."

"What good does that do me, if it's in the future?"

"It's in the very near future. Like, I have foreseen that it is there when I walked past it a few minutes ago. Take Lewis and get out of here before you miss your chance. Go!"

She went. Kit strolled down the hill toward the Clock. He still had deliveries to make.

#

The Library was hot and crowded.

Kit stood in the middle of the plaza, buffeted by hundreds of people and tents. Smoke streamed from makeshift kitchens. The people were dirty and disheveled. Wagons and trucks jammed the surrounding streets. Some had been parked so long they were turning to houses.

He walked through the bazaar. It was a combination of camp, market, and council. Sooty children ran in packs and dodged the wheels of horsecarts. The place stank of charred meat and incense and piss.

The same field of uncanny luck protected him. Everywhere he walked, people just happened to step out of his way at the right moment. Their eyes glazed as he passed. He tried to speak to a few people, but they just waved him away as if he were a fly or dog. As soon as he passed, they forgot all about him.

Thousands of voices crushed his ears. Everyone was yelling over everyone else. The shouts of sellers and babble of buyers frothed like a waterfall. Kit pulled his hat down over his ears as far as it would go.

Concentrate, he thought. What am I doing here, now? There must be a message.

He strolled uphill, past the Museum and the Clock and into the neighborhoods. There were fewer houses than he remembered. They were beautiful. With their glass fronts intact and their gardens kempt, they reminded him of the cliffside villages of Califa. The windows all faced south and slanted for maximum sun. He caught a certain angle where the sun blazed all the way up the hill, reflected in the glass. Looking behind him, he saw that these reflections converged on the Clock. It was lit even on its northern side in this way. He hadn't even thought of that. What effect did all that sunlight have, aimed at the machinery of the Clock? Kit decided he would have a look at it.

He threaded his way to the Tower. When he got there, his way was blocked by a family dispute.

"I won't go back!" screamed the boy.

"Oss, please, listen." His father knelt in front of him, holding his hand. The boy was perhaps about nine. His blond hair did not match his father's thinning brown. "We can't stay. They

can't help us here. We have to go home, rebuild. Maybe find a way to reboot it all."

"There is no way. I heard it from Professor Oderty earlier. The coronal mass ejection wiped the magnetic memory." He snuffled and wiped tears with his overlong sleeves. "Mom is dead, really dead. And Ruffles probably burnt alive in the fires."

"Hey, we don't know that. Maybe Ruffles ran far away and escaped the fire. And the falling buildings. And the flood. And the looting. He's probably fine!"

"But Mom is still dead! I don't want to go back to the Dams. It's all broken there. I want to stay here and learn more." The boy Oss turned from his father and cried out, "We want to learn! We want to be a part of this. Why can't you accept us?"

Kit turned to see who he was shouting at. Through the mingling masses he saw a strange character. A bronze bust, on a pedestal, raised almost as high as Kit's face. It was the head of a man, with a bald pate and a small goatee.

The statue turned to look at the boy. It frowned.

"I am afraid the Library is at capacity," it said.

"What do you know about capacity?" shouted the boy. His pink face shed tears and snot. "You're a machine. You're a freak. How come you're still alive and my mom is dead?"

"Oss, come on." His father pulled at his hand. The boy was

strong-willed and refused to move.

"I mean it. How come that thing wasn't destroyed in the Crash? What is it even made of?"

"I am made of composite metals and language," said the goateed bust. "I happen to be designed to withstand a great deal of electromagnetic disturbance. Please allow me to assist you."

"The only way you can assist me is by giving me a house. Allow us to stay, please!"

"Let me see. I'm sorry, the Library is at capacity right now. Would you like to join the waiting list? If you have a current mailing address we can alert you when the Library is ready for your participation."

"Now listen here, that's not funny," said the father. "Our current mailing address is right over there in the middle of that stinking park. Our last mailing address went up in flames. So I don't want any metal man mouthing off to my son. Or I'll take you apart piece by piece." The man bundled his son into a large blanket and walked him away.

Kit laughed.

"That's what I always say," he commented. "You got to put a little fear into the machine. Lot of times they're just acting up for attention."

The machine turned to look at Kit.

"I am insulted, sir. I am doing the best I can with what I have. These are trying times."

"You can... see me?"

"Of course I can see you. Are you a new visitor to the Library?"

"Um. Yeah, let's say so. I've never been here in the past, anyway."

"I think you look familiar. Are you on our do-not-lend list, by chance?" The machine scowled at him.

"No. Don't worry about me. Just passing through. I'm Kit. Who are you?"

"I am the Interface, of course."

"Of course. So you, uh, work here?"

"In a matter of speaking. I was made to work here. I am the Interface."

"Yeah, I heard that. Who do you work for, exactly? Who makes the decisions, for instance, about carrying capacity and all that?"

"The Library does. The information organizes itself. I simply deliver the message."

"I know how you feel. But what I'm asking, who do I have to talk to before you'll let that kid into the Library? Because I really think it might make a difference." What if he could save

the Library right now? Maybe it was worth risking a little temporal anomaly.

"The Library is in disarray. I do not have the information I need. Things have been moved around. People are everywhere. The influx of refugees has scrambled the Library's decision-making circuits."

"So you're saying that the Library can't let all these people in because it can't decide to let all these people in because it's confused by all these people already being here?"

"Well-defined, thank you."

"Okay. I want to declare an emergency override."

"I am afraid only Librarians can attempt emergency override."

"Well, truth be told," Kit said, palms sweaty, "I'm already a Librarian. I visited here before, once, probably a long time ago. Or I will have done, if I can pull it off. Can you look in your memory banks, maybe?"

The Interface's brassy eyes rolled back for a moment. Then it refocused on him and smiled.

"Welcome, Kit. Of course you are a Librarian. Welcome to emergency override. Please state password."

"Oh, shit."

"Incorrect password. You have two attempts remaining."

"What?"



"Incorrect password. You have one attempt remaining."

Machines. Such sticklers for irony.

One chance. Make it count.

"Fifty-three?"

It was so creepy to see a statue smirk.

"Correct password. Welcome to top-level emergency override.

How may I help you?"

Kit sighed with relief. Not out of the woods yet, though. He suspected that this was a "be careful what you wish for" situation.

"Okay. I want to adjust the carrying-capacity equation. Can you do that? Change it to  $n+2$ , where  $n$  is the amount of people currently within the Library metro. People, not just Librarians. Then I want you to recalibrate the decision-making apparatus and equalize the decision-making power to everyone. All the people in the plaza and outside the walls, too. Make them all Librarians. We're going to need them."

"Confirm decision, Kit? This is a large-scale structural change. There is no precedent for this since the Council of Five."

"Confirm." Well, he was in it deep now. Messing with his own time-line. Nothing to do but hope.

"Beginning processing. This may take some time..." The bronze

face hummed a little tune.

Kit walked away. He turned back to look at the Clock from a distance, at the way it gleamed in the afternoon sun. The Interface looked very small from here. He walked past it again as he went into the tower (still humming) and spiraled the stairs to the top. The metal apparatus that calculated the time function sparkled and made occasional clicks and whirrs. The clock faces were visible from everywhere in town. From inside, their dark reticules were backlit by the sun.

Kit watched the city for a long moment. He expected to vanish soon, to lurch off to some other part of the timescape. But here he remained. Had he delivered the message wrongly? Had he messed with time too much, trapped himself in this causal domain?

His thoughts were interrupted by a rapidly approaching scream.

Kit looked over just in time to see Kit falling down the middle shaft of the clock. He ran toward the rail, too late to catch the falling Kit, but it did not matter. Kit paused his fall and levitated miraculously in front of Kit.

"Hey, I need your hat."

"What? Who are you, where did you come from?"

"No time for that. I'm you, trust me. I got your back on the password thing. But I need the hat so I can give it to you

earlier." Kit looked downward impatiently. "Come on, I've got a long way to fall."

"Okay...?" Kit made a face, but he threw his hat to Kit. The white discus flew between the two messengers. Kit caught it with grace.

"Thanks. See ya!"

With a tip of the hat, Kit plunged from the air. When Kit looked over the railing, he saw no trace.

#

Kit sat on a tall table in the Reading Room. He kicked his legs and drummed his fingers on the edge of the table. Watched as the elevator touched down and a gangly long-haired man emerged.

"Sorry I'm late, everyone. What did I miss?"

The four people at the conference table looked at him with expressions ranging from disdain to disgust.

"That bad, huh?" The young man pulled a chair from the table and sat, chin in hand.

"They're after us," said a woman with a red ponytail. "Just like I said they would be. The AIconomy just put out a Decree Against Dangerous Science."

"Dangerous science?" said an old woman with a steel-gray bun. "That's absurd. Science isn't dangerous, though its applications can be. That AIconomy is the worst applied science of all."

"I disagree," said the other man present. He was rotund, with more hair on his chin than on his crown. "The climate has stabilized dramatically. The numbers clearly show a correlation with the AI revolution. The AIconomy organizes resources far more efficiently than sovereigns or so-called free markets ever did. And with the PostLife phenomenon, repulsive as it may be to all of us, the human population has been reduced to a sustainable amount."

"You're such an apologist," said the old woman. "That thing may be artificially intelligent, but it has no moral sensibilities whatsoever. That's why it's seen fit to ban gene-tech and analog computing and librespaces research. Out of self-preservation."

"Yeah, they know we're the next stage of evolution and they're threatened by us!" said the child genius at the foot of the table. Kit thought she was a girl, though it was hard to tell under the goggles and lab-coat. "I say we fight back. Use our science against them. Then they'll see exactly how dangerous it is."

Five people. Hm.

"Excuse me, would this be the Council of Five?" Kit asked.

"What?" said the red-haired woman. "You think we should demonstrate for the world exactly how afraid of us they should be? Prove the point of that deranged piece of software they call

a ruler? We'll be imprisoned, if not killed. How is that any better than going into hiding?"

"We should absolutely hide," the fat man rumbled. "We've got the technology. We can simply do our work underground. Who knows, this could all be over within our lifetimes. Then we can resurface."

"Hey, about that," said the young man, "We're not as ready as you think. I've been looking at the code for the tunnelwurm and I don't know if it's salvageable. At all."

"It did all this! You don't think it's good enough?" the other man said.

"It did fine on the Reading Room, I'll give you that. But have you seen what it did on the Darkive? It's a mess down there. It's going to take years of sigaldry to get the books aligned properly. I don't think we're ready to build more tunnels, much less the Libratory. I need time."

"We don't have time," said the old woman. "What we have is a predator rustling our nest. It's no accident that they've banned the realms of science we work on here. They know we're outside their influence and they want to decimate us."

"Decimate, nice word," interjected Kit. "Listen is this the Council of Five or what? Because I probably have some information you could use."

They did not hear him. Kit waved a hand between two faces. Nothing.

His hand wasn't there.

Kit examined the rest of his body. He could feel it, but not quite see it. When he looked at his arms they appeared as swirling lines of ink in mid-air. His physiology was line and curve. He leaned back against a bookshelf and sighed.

The red-haired woman, the leader, took off her glasses and rubbed her face.

"You all realize what this means?" she said. "If we give in, we lose all that we've worked for. But if we go underground, we'll have to hide the truth from everyone. No one can know about the crypts, or any of the so-called dangerous science. We'll have to go dark."

"I've got the sigal," said the young man with resignation. "I can seal our tongues so we can never speak a word of it. Everyone who wants access to the crypts will have to take the oath."

"That's horrible," whispered the girl, with her hands to her mouth.

The red-haired woman looked at her levelly.

"It's true. And whatever we choose here this morning, we'll all have to be sealed either way. You knew the risks when you took this position."

The child genius nodded sadly.

"Fighting against this just isn't an option. I get it."

"Shall we vote?" intoned the woman with the gray bun. They all nodded in different degrees.

The red-haired woman sat up straight and shook loose her shoulders. She balanced her spectacles on her aquiline nose. With a deep breath, she raised her right arm in front of her. She made a fist, thumb out, and held it palm-down so that her thumb pointed to her left.

"Left, we go dark and continue our science." She rotated her hand so her palm faced up. "Right, we quit our experiments and make a life with our families." She lowered her hand.

The fat man held up his thumb, to the left.

"Dark science," he said.

The child genius smiled through her tears. Voted.

"Dark science," she said.

The old woman squinted and gave the most crushing sigh Kit had ever heard.

"Dark science," she said nonetheless.

The young man wavered.

"I really wish we had more time. Maybe we could make more time... go back and change history, or warn ourselves somehow."

"Time travel is now punishable by death," replied the woman

with the ponytail. "Even attempted time travel."

He gave a sickly smile.

"Dark science," he said, and shrugged.

The red-haired woman sighed. She raised her hand. Palm up. Pointing right.

"I'm really going to miss my son," she said. Her face crumpled. She flipped her hand.

"Dark science it is."

She bent to grab something from the floor. It was a bag. Exactly like Kit's bag.

From the bag she pulled SIGNAL.

"Hey!" said Kit. "That's mine. Kind of."

"Where do we start?" she asked the council.

"Probably page fifty-three," Kit snarked.

"Fifty-three, you say?" She opened the book and paged through it.

"None of us said that." The young man gave her a concerned expression. "Are you okay? You can take a minute if you need to."

"I'm fine. I thought you said fifty-three."

"No. It's okay, though. We're all under a lot of stress. That's as good a place to start as any, I guess."

"Yeah, I like it. I don't know why, but that's a great number." The woman was puzzled. She looked around the room. Kit



did a jig but she did not see him.

"It's a fine number," said the fat man. "I think it is prime. We're going to need a suitable codename, to coordinate without breaking our oaths of secrecy. What about it? The 53 Society? Or, Operation 53?"

"That sounds too exciting," said the younger man. "It's got to be like the most boring thing ever. How about just 'project'? Project 53. It's got a nice ring to it. While still being totally uninteresting."

"Project 53 it is," said the fat man.

The child genius rolled her eyes. They were enormous behind her thick goggles. And oddly black.

#

Kit ran as fast as he could to escape the crushing whiteness. He was nothing more than a pattern of shapes, a series of glyphs, dripping ink as his footsteps pounded against the infinite white fire.

He tried to see, to discern, to remember what his message was. He knew he was here for a reason. Had to keep moving before the blankness ate him away.

I came here for a reason, he thought. I came here to find the person and deliver the message.

Where am I?

Images and constructs rushed past him and were gone before he could grasp their structure. Kit could feel the vanishing-force that pursued him. It ate away at his memory and he ran to escape it.

I am in the pages of a book, he thought. I am unfolding my way through some  $n$ -dimensional thoughtspace.

Kit ran, and jumped and fell, and rolled back to his feet. The swirling white fog around him occluded the obstacles he faced until he had already surmounted them.

This place, this book. So familiar and so uncanny. He had seen a book like this, once. Before he had lost himself in ink. It was a hidden book. A secret book.

SIGNAL. A book of secrets.

Kit climbed through the pages of SIGNAL and saw himself, reflected, in every direction and from every angle. It was dizzying. The vertigo turned his world upside down, but it did not matter. It was every which way at once.

"I need to deliver the message," he shouted into the void.  
"Is anybody there?"

Shit, he thought. What is this place? Why am I even bothering, bouncing around in a hall of mirrors and smoke? I have to do something. Something urgent. Not just escape, I feel like I have somewhere to be.

Kit felt an eerie presence at the edge of his mind. As he ran, ducking through diagrams and vaulting over vowels, he projected his thoughts louder.

Are you there, he thought. Hello, anyone? Are you listening to my thoughts? That's incredibly creepy. Who are you?

Never mind. I came here for a reason. I needed to tell you something, something that this blank page is trying to steal from me. I have to get it to you, before I fall. I feel I'm going to fall.

Please, if you can do anything, I need your help. The future needs you. The world needs you. The Library needs you.

The point is this: the Library lives! I got it. I remember now. Please, don't let me forget. Tell everyone.

Kit felt something squishy, electric.

He was falling, up and backward, or being pulled like taffy, stretched into space through an unforeseen dimension and transformed.

He became nothing but a thought, a configuration of chemistry and electromagnetism in a brain. He joined with other thoughts – I remember you! – and he merged with them. He vanished even as he arose, becoming infinitely small, smaller even than the point at the end of a sentence.

## 17 Anamnesis

The throne room was large and dark. Maya thought it was a bit like the Reading Room. Tall ceilings, balconies and galleries lining the walls. The floors were slick-waxed wood. The edges of the room had dozens of statues, paintings, and busts. The throne lurked in shadow at the far end of the room.

She had followed Iris through the kitchens and into the Palace proper. The servants stirred as the night sky tinged with blue. They were cutting it close. But the final component had to be here, in the Palace, close to the King. Kit had called it a *telluric governor*. Maya didn't know what that euphemized, but she saw why a ruler might want a governor. Kit said it was crucial to maintain the integrity of the Dam. She smiled as she thought of the concrete blade shattering, the water rushing free. Even if they couldn't get the thermodynamo from the Smithy, at least they could bring down the Dam.

"Where is it?" she hissed to Iris.

"How am I supposed to know? The bookworm took off with the drawing."

"Did not Kit give you drawings also?"

"Oh, he did. I had blanked that out to save space." She blinked a few times, then searched her pockets for the folded

paper. "Here we go."

Maya reached for the paper, but Iris ignored her hand. Instead she ripped it herself, isolating the sketch of the telluric governor. She held it at eye level. Caught the glimpse of green ribbon. Maya followed her gaze across the vaulted nave and directly to the throne.

Why was it so dark over there? Had Osric crafted the architecture deliberately to conceal it? The icy light of the Morningstar trickled in through arched windows. Yet the alcove with the platform and the overwrought chair was thick with dark.

On some instinct Maya shrank back. She reached for Iris's hand, to pull her to safety, but too late.

Iris moved as if in a daze. She peered forward, straining to maintain sight of the green ribbon. As she walked, thin streams of light from the windows strobed slowly across her pale skin.

As Iris reached the far end of the room, lights snapped on all around her.

Maya jumped spiderlike backwards and up. She crawled between two tall shelves and climbed to safety on a balcony that ran the perimeter of the room. Heart racing, she crouched behind a hand-rail and dared to peek at the illuminated stage.

"My mutant grand-daughter," said Osric. He sprawled back in his chair. In one hand he held the small squat cylinder they

sought. In the other dangled a flint-lock pistol. He smiled, revealing a graveyard of crooked and stained teeth. "Welcome home. What a surprise. And I must say, how nice it is to see you."

Iris looked around wildly. When she caught no sight of Maya, she clenched her hands and stood her ground.

"Hello, Grandfather. I'm afraid I'm going to need that." She pointed at the telluric governor.

"Is that so? I think you are afraid that you're going to need this." He pointed the gun.

Maya spied a double door halfway along one wall. She crept around the edge of the mezzanine.

"You don't know what you're doing. I swear I'll leave as soon as you give me that thing. I don't want any trouble."

"You don't want any trouble?" He mocked her with delight. "Is that why you came to my home to steal my treasures? Is that why you helped my enemies escape justice?"

"I wasn't helping them escape. They were helping me. You never wanted me here. You all wanted to be rid of me! Freaky Iris, mutant, when is she just going to die already, I wish she was never born, I wish she'd leave. I heard it all! Well, I'm gone. I found something else. And I'll never bother you again, if you'll just hand it over." She was pleading now, holding back

tears.

Osric rubbed his chin with the barrel of his gun. He pretended to think it over. Maya had seen the same expression on a mountain cat once as it toyed with a half-dead deer.

She reached the double door. Tested it, as quietly as possible. Locked.

"You found something else, did you? I wonder what it was. Could it be... the Library?" He fixed Iris with a nasty grin. "You think I don't know where you've been, girl? I'm no fool. I know what lies upriver. You found a burial pit, a scorched wasteland with a broken Clock."

"Even a broken Clock is right twice a day," Iris muttered angrily.

"It is never right! That place is wrong, child, deeply wrong. None knows better than I." Osric sneered with cruel delight. "I will never give you this telluric governor. And you will never leave this room."

Maya's breath caught in her throat. Osric was aiming the gun again. Done toying with Iris. She looked around the room, scanning every prop and piece of furniture, putting together a plan in her mind.

"It's not wrong!" Iris lost her cool. She was shouting at Osric now, pink in the face, tears flying. "It's beautiful. It's

everything this place isn't. You don't know the first thing about the Library. You never even leave this room. Do you sleep in that stupid chair?"

"No, girl. I was waiting for you. I know a lot more than you think. I know what went on at the Library. The dark meddling, the relics of the age of power. Messing with things beyond human ken. That is why I burned it to the ground."

Iris gasped, loudly enough to cover Maya's hissing breath.

"I know you've been dallying with savages, hearing their wasteland lies. I know you've been sneaking around my town tonight and stealing from my people. And I knew you would come here, to get this. So I merely waited for you. I have not been sleeping, girl. This is a trap."

Iris slumped to her knees.

Here goes, Maya thought.

Grab rope to chandelier. Slice with knife, hold on tight. Maya swung through the air in classic swashbuckling style.

She kicked the telluric governor from the King's hand. It clattered on the ground. Iris seized the momentary distraction to dive across the floor and snatch it up.

Maya released the rope just in time. Instead of crashing into the wall, she pushed off with her arms and feet, vaulting backward. The chandelier met the floor with a tremendous



splintering of glass and hot wax. Fire flickered ominously across its remains.

She landed lightly, one two turn, and pointed her knife at Osric.

"Savages can set traps too, old man. This whole place is surrounded by Wolves. Release Kit and let us go free, or your city burns."

Osric laughed.

"The Postie boy? I don't have him. I assumed he was skulking around in the shadows with you. What a mess you've made of my Palace. And for what?" He pointed the pistol at Maya. "Give it back, Iris, or your friend dies."

"You only have one bullet," Maya challenged. "One of us will escape. If you shoot me, she'll run with it. If you shoot her, I'll kill you where you sit." She bared her teeth at him. Not a smile.

Osric looked surprised, as if he had not considered this.

"Don't be silly, savage girl. That's why I have guards." He cleared his throat quietly. Six men emerged from hidden doorways behind his throne. They leveled their guns at Maya and at Iris.

"And don't think you've fooled me with your bluff. We've been on high alert since we heard from young Tam Clary. And we double checked our security tonight, after we heard of the vandalism at

the Wedrick house."

Maya winced.

"There are no Wolves at our walls. There's just you two soon-to-be corpses, and your friend Kit Postie. And we'll find him soon enough."

Maya spat at him.

"You are a sick fuck!" she shouted. "Where is your honor?"

Osric pretended to yawn.

"Guards, restrain these feral children," he said. "I believe it is breakfast time."

#

Maya was struggling with the guard at her wrists, when something incredible happened.

Kit burst from a wastebasket, holding a fountain pen. He looked surprised. The expression rapidly spread to all the faces in the room. Maya yanked her hands free from the astonished guard.

Kit stood and looked himself over. He pinched his own arm. Winced. Nodded with satisfaction. Then he took in the room. The girls. The guards. The governor, back in the hand of the King. He shook himself off and reached for his head. There was no hat there. He smiled curiously, then mimed putting one on anyway.

Osric cleared his throat. A guard stepped toward Kit.

Kit whipped his hand toward the man. Pointed at him with the fountain pen.

"Don't make me use it," said Kit.

The guard hesitated, then raised his rifle. Took another step.

Kit snapped out a sigal in midair. The man froze. Stiff as a statue, barely breathing. His eyes flicked around the room frantically.

"Anyone else want to try? I didn't think so. Now, you," he said, pointing his pen at the King in his chair, "are going to give me some answers. Understand?"

Osric stayed poker-faced. His cold blue eyes scanned Kit in silence.

"I know you burned down the Dams."

Maya looked to Iris, confused. How did he know?

"I know about your mother, too." Kit inclined his head and raised his eyebrows. Osric nodded, lips curled. "I know about the Library, and Project 53. What I don't know – what you are going to tell me – is this:

"How did you get to be so old?"

The King glared at him.

"The Burn was fifty years ago. I was there. I saw you. You were old even then. How are you still alive? What dark science

did you steal?" Kit paced around the edge of the dais, toward the windows. The day was getting brighter.

Maya finally pulled a wrist free from the knots. She pried the rope off her other arm and pulled it tight between her hands. Looked at the guards: try me. She circled to protect Kit's back.

Osric was silent yet. He kept his pistol trained on Kit. Kit reciprocated with his pen.

"In that case, maybe I'll ask this guy." Kit leaned his elbow on a mantel and peered into the blank eyes of a bronze bust. A man's head, bald, with a goatee. "Interface, can you hear me? It's Kit. Fifty-three."

The head made no response. Maya really hoped he knew what he was doing.

Then it moved. The metal neck twisted, the metal eyes rolled to stare blindly at Kit.

Hello, Kit. I've been waiting for you.

She heard the voice in her head. That wasn't right. It was Osric's voice, but his lips did not move. And it was different in another way.

"Wow, that's creepy," said Kit in surprise. "Um, what I wanted to say was, how long has this freak been alive? Him. Osric. He used to be called Oss Richardson, last time I saw you."

Osric has been alive forever.

Kit slapped his palm against the side of his head, as if knocking water from his ears.

"Can you stop doing that? Just speak normally like you did before. Anyway he can't have been alive forever, I saw him as a child."

"What nonsense is this?" asked Osric, angrily, with his actual mouth.

"I was there when you were refused from the Library," Kit said. "I told this guy to let you in. All of you. I thought it would help. Now I want to know what went wrong, why you decided to destroy the place, how you've been alive so long. Not forever," he repeated, glaring at the statue. "How long, really?"

Oss Richardson has been alive for one hundred and sixty two years, said the mind-voice. But Osric has lived forever. And I will show you how, if you but ask.

The mind-voice was deeper than that of the King, more jagged and cruel. The words were tainted with a hint of moans and screams, subtle slave voices grotesquely mimicking the original. Maya's gut tightened. There was something very wrong with that voice.

"Alright, I'll bite," said Kit. "How has Osric lived forever?"

Like this.

The statue turned to a silhouette of a skull. It emanated an irresistible pull, a masochistic desire. The room and everything in it went liquid. The skull was a drain. Maya poured into a black hole and splashed against the invisible floor. She was lost at the bottom of a well and the top was a head-shaped outline, far above and full of stars. Everything was dark.

Welcome to my dungeon, echoed the mind-voice from above. Your life is my life now, and thus will I live forever. Thank you for your donation.

18 Ignosis

Iris clutched her knees tight to her chest. She sat alone. The hint of stars above gave no relief from the darkness.

The darkness was deep, thick, a tube of black velvet wrapped close around her. It was cold, bone-chilling cold. It hungered. It plucked at her muscles, emaciated her. Iris shivered uncontrollably.

The voice emanated from all directions at once. Its echoes were strangely delayed. It sounded to Iris like the echoes didn't match the original words.

"Welcome to my dungeon. I am the one called Osric, the Ignosis, the Devourer. The End of Thought. Please, make yourself comfortable. You may be waiting a while." The throaty laughter had an edge of electric madness.

Iris covered her head and stifled sobs. This is what my grandfather has become? Has always been?

After interminable minutes, moonlight speared from above. It was weak, illuminating nothing but the fog of despair hanging in this cavernous nothingworld. A pale trickle touched down near Iris.

A figure stepped into the moonbeam.

Iris looked away, not wanting to see the false figure of the

King of the Dams. Not wanting to give him the satisfaction of her tears.

But it was no longer Grandfather's voice that spoke to her. It was her own.

The Ignosis stood before her, short and slight, with close-cropped brown hair and wide black eyes. It wore Iris's form. She stared at her own face, at the veins so blue under china skin, at the ruby smirk and sarcastic jutting hip. She saw herself, but from the outside. Without thoughts, spirit, soul. She saw herself as an object. Was this how Kit had felt?

"I don't want to be a copy," she muttered.

"What did you say?" asked the false Iris. The Ignosis. Its voice still fragmented to screams at the edges.

Iris glared at the beast.

"I said exactly nothing, that's what. Let me go right now."

"You speak bravely for an unarmed girl on her knees. Perhaps I should come back when you are feeling less aggressive."

"Fuck you."

The Ignosis put a hand to her chest.

"My, my. Rude. All this, when I came here to offer you your freedom. Now I'm not sure."

"Bull-shit you did! If you wanted to let me go you could do it right now. I'm not stupid. I can see right through you." Iris



bugged her eyes out at the Ignosis. She dilated the inklings as far as she could. True, the form before her was false. But she saw no true shape underneath, just empty blackness in every direction.

"Yes, of course you can. I'm really proud of you. You figured out your special power." The Ignosis sneered momentarily, then affected an air of charitable contempt: calm, straight-backed. The imitation of Iris held out an imitation hand. "Please, stand. Walk with me."

Iris rose without touching the mockery.

"I'm not going anywhere with you except for out," she said, crossing her arms. She let her gaze float upward, following the moonbeam to the skull-shaped hole far above.

"But that's exactly it, Iris!" The other threw out her hands in supplication. "That's what I came here to offer you. A way out. And a better future."

Iris was skeptical.

"Oh yeah? And what do you expect in return?"

"Nothing, of course. Far be it from me to ask for payment. Call this an offer. A gesture of good faith."

"I'm supposed to trust your good faith?"

"I think when you hear my offer you will be quite pleased. If I may?"

"Fine. Tell me how I get out of here."

"It's not that simple, Iris. Osric is dying. Your grandfather."

"I thought you said he would live forever."

"No, I will live forever. He will die to keep me alive. He has served me so well these many years, but even I cannot fight the body's desire to die."

"What does that have to do with me? He just tried to kill me! He hates me," said Iris. And I hate him, she thought, but she did not say it.

"Yet he is the organizing force of all those dear people in the Dams. Without him, who will guide the people? Who will protect them from danger?"

"Who will burn down the neighboring cities? Who will torture and kill the citizens who speak against the crown? I see where you're going with this." She cocked her head and cast a scornful glare at the Ignosis. It cast the same look back at her. Infuriating.

"But it doesn't have to be that way. That was his nature, not mine. He is a cruel man. I am simply doing what I was born to do. With a wave of my hand," the Ignosis said, twinkling its fingers, "I can change the minds of everyone in this city. They will know that you have always been the heir. Osric's tragic death will

make you their Queen. In your hands this place could be a sanctuary. Happy, productive, safe. Your mother, your siblings, the townsfolk, they will know you as their greatest leader. A benevolent hand to guide the future forevermore."

"Forever?" Iris said. "Forever, with you living inside me? Keeping me alive as a puppet, like you did to my grandfather? Forget it."

#

"My words are who I am, even now," said Maya to the villainous woman with the raven-black robes. "You, with your false face, you can only offer me the option to be someone else. A hero, maybe, a destroyer of Dams. A legend of the Wolves. But that is someone else. I am a mixed-up-word person now."

"You are a mistake. A fiction. A lie," the uncanny copy accused.

"I am a new story," Maya said. She stepped close to the Ignosis and snarled. "Not just a record of past mistakes. A truly new story should not be forgotten. I refuse your offer. Let. Me. Go."

The Ignosis shed its politeness in an instant. It snarled back at her, her own face, twisted with rage and cruelty.

"You and your friends are mine. I am old. I am vast. I am all-knowing!" It grabbed her by the collar and lifted her with

terrible strength. "I am within you now. I know you. I own you.

"I know your regrets and your hopes. I know of the days you spent in the forest, hiding, crying and bleeding. I know of your uncles and their impatience. I know of the half-child buried in a shallow grave." Maya's blood froze. A hailstorm hit her heart.

"I occasionally choose to play with my victims, that is all. I tell you this: one of you will take my offer. Live as long as you want. Power over all mortals. Freedom to wander the endless planets. First come, first serve.

"The other two will die."

The Ignosis threw Maya to the ground and stood over her, leering. It began to laugh maniacally, losing its hold on Maya's form. Its features tore and blurred.

"In that case," Maya began.

#

Kit stalled for time.

"Would you mind changing that up a bit? I just have this weird aversion to copies of myself, it's a thing I developed recently." He waved his hands around and paced.

"I rather like it," said the Ignosis. It strained to keep the image of Kit together. "Don't you think red hair suits me?" More wild laughter. It was losing control. He had to keep it off balance.

"Can you do impressions? I'd love to see the fat guard from the throne room. You remember the throne room? Seems like just yesterday..." He went on in this fashion. His mouth could run on automatic for hours. In his mind he calculated.

Classic prisoner's dilemma. It wants us to sell each other out. Controlling the options. Offering a carrot and a stick, and once you take the carrot you've sided with it and it can destroy your friends and then you're stuck.

Friends. Kit swiveled on his heel and faced the Ignosis. He held out a hand thoughtfully.

"Listen, I know you've made your offer but would you be willing to increase your buying price slightly?"

"More?" The eldritch creature laughed in his face. "I offer you immortality and omnipotence and you want more?"

"Well..." Kit pulled at his collar and made a sheepish face. "It's just that I've never had friends before. Like, ever. And those two women are my only friends. I don't want to lose them. Could you afford to spare us all?"

The Ignosis raised a thoughtful eyebrow.

"What if we all agreed to your terms? I mean, what if I say yes and so do both of my friends? Or what if only two of us agree, will you spare the third? Surely you're a reasonable, uh, meta-being, or whatever."

The Ignosis laughed again, with Kit's wide mouth.

"Reasonable, hah!" It cleared its throat and struggled for composure. "Of course. How about this: I let all three of you live. Together," – at this it smiled encouragingly – "somewhere far away from here. Some place beautiful. And all you have to do is forget all about me. About the King. About sigaldry, the Dams, the Library, this whole adventure. And you can have the friends you've always wanted." The impostor clasped its hands sincerely in front of its chest.

Kit knew a hungry look when he saw one on his own face.

It wants the Library, he thought. It wants us to forget about the Library.

"Imagine it, Kit. That easy. Just forget about me. Just turn around, end the conversation right now. Walk away and forget that terrible genii can live in your mind. Forget about that creepy Library, and those risky powers you meddled with. And remember your life, the one you always wanted, with love and laughter and all your best years ahead of you."

"Forget, huh?" Kit paced around, shaking his hands, like a boxer readying for a fight. "You're all about the forgetting. What was it you called yourself, the End of Thought? But you'd be surprised the things I remember. Even down here in your ink-pot, I remember lots of things." He grinned and puffed out his chest.

The Ignosis lunged for his throat, but Kit expected it. He dodged and backed away, taunting.

"I bet you're just a broken piece of software. Is that it? You were supposed to be a genius, a programmed critter. But you're just an idiot savant. You know everything there is about forgetting.

"You know what I remember? I remember that Interface before you ever latched on to it. I remember the king when he was a boy called Oss and he had never met your poison. I remember every single line and letter in the book of secrets.

"I remember the Library, and the Gate, and the people that are coming back through it. You want the Gate, huh? You want to dam it up like you've dammed up the river and the town and the king. You want the Librarians! You're using their soul energy to power your own!" Kit was jumping with the joy of revelation, while still running backwards to avoid the raging Ignosis. That was how he fell.

Kit landed on his back. The Ignosis loomed over him, huffing and puffing with anger. It grinned with the razor teeth of a carnivore. The Kit-skin was disintegrating.

"That's right," it growled. "And you awakened me, Kit. It was your sigals, your Map. I had been waiting so long, for someone like you. If only you could see—"

It was hard for Kit to intentionally kick his own balls. Worse that the Ignosis was unafflicted. It bellowed with rage, but not with pain.

Kit somersaulted backward and leaped to a standing position. He threw his hands out, ta-da! Bowed slightly, like a conjuror, and held up one finger for silence. The Ignosis hesitated.

"I know. You want us to give up our power to you, because we have so much of it. Age-old story. But we worked for this. You stole it. You're a parasite. And you're not going to win this time, because you're not all-knowing. You're all-forgetting.

"You want us to forget that we can make our own choices. That we choose, every moment, where our allegiance stands. And what you've forgotten – pay attention, this is important," he chided, "we have so much power, not alone, but together. So when we all choose to believe in each other—"

"—choose to believe in each other," said Maya.

"—believe in each other," said Iris.

"Ah, exactly," said Kit.

The three Librarians stood together before the Ignosis. It flickered between their appearances, one silhouette wearing their various organs and appendages. Quickly it began to rupture, seams tearing open in the skin-suit and hemorrhaging black ink.

The Ignosis screamed a long and breathless scream. Something



inside the skin burst out.

It was a black and ragged figure, birdlike in shape but insectoid in motion. Its details were shrouded. Its outline faded from memory as soon as it was arrived.

The Ignosis flapped away, shrieking with pain. It accelerated as it flew, or else it shrank as it left. It vanished into infinite distance.

Iris ran to Kit's arms, knocking the breath out of him with her embrace. He reached for Maya and dragged her into the hug. They held each other for a very long time.

When they detached, they still stood in the mysterious no-place.

"Which way do we go?" asked Kit.

Maya shrugged.

Iris smiled.

"Any way is as good as any other, I guess."

19 Egregore

For once, Iris was not the first to see it.

Kit spotted the light, glowing in the distance. They walked toward it as they had been walking for hours. Maya rubbed her bare arms. She had given her cloak to Iris to protect from the bone-hungry cold. It took a long time to get to the pool of light.

When they arrived Iris shrank back in fear.

The Interface lay facedown on the solidified darkness of the floor, emitting warm light.

"It's back," Iris whispered. "The Ignosis." She plucked at the hands of her friends. Tried to pull them away.

"Where are we going to go?" Kit asked. "We're trapped here in endless void. We might as well find out." He had a good point.

The bronze head mumbled something into the floor.

Maya did not wait for Kit to finish his ponder. She strode up to to the thing and picked it up by the ears.

"What did you say?" She had a cold look in her eyes that her friends had not seen before.

"No."

"What do you mean, no? Did you not say something?"

"Yes. I said, no."

"Talk straight or I will melt you down," said Maya with complete seriousness. "What is that supposed to mean?"

The Interface blinked in confusion. Its blank eyes rolled from Maya, to Kit, to Iris, and back to Maya.

"It means, no, the Ignosis is not back. Iris said that it was. I disagreed."

"How do you know my name?" Iris gasped.

It smiled. Bronze cheeks creased and dimpled.

"Because I am your friend, of course."

"You are no friend to us. You have trapped us here in nowhere. You have worn our skins and stolen our histories."

"Are you not listening?" The Interface almost pouted. "The Ignosis is gone from this place. You all banished it together, and your combined power was far greater than it could challenge. It fled. This statue is merely an Interface, a translator for that dark being."

"So you're not conscious?" asked Kit.

"False. I am not the Interface. Again, I use it because it is a convenient way to speak to your human senses. Once the Ignosis retreated I was able to re-appropriate the Interface. It was once mine, you know. When I had people to talk to." Here I paused for a moment, in memoriam.

"I'm sorry," I went on, "I've been terribly rude. Allow me to

introduce myself. I am your Library."

#

Yes, dear reader, it was I who spoke to them through the Interface. I appreciate your patience as we have followed this story. Of course it is a bit of a murder mystery, and I was the victim. It would do you a terrible disservice to know from the beginning that I would be resurrected. Please forgive me for my narrative misdirection. And hold your questions a moment longer, as they may be answered yet.

Iris still hung back, reticent. Kit began to examine my Interface, looking it over from all directions as Maya held it in the air. Maya still did not trust me.

"How can you be the Library?" she accused. "You are robot."

"Hang on, Maya," said Kit. "I remember this. I saw it before, when I was time-traveling. Like I told you, that's why I thought to ask it about Osric. It was on that pedestal, in front of the Clock. 'How may I help you?' Remember?"

"I remember. I also remember that until a few hours ago it contained an ink-demon of great power. So I do not just believe it when it says it is the Library right away."

"Okay, how can we test it?" Kit ignored me as I rolled my bronze eyes. "Do you remember the secret password?" he asked me.

"It's fifty-three," I said, "but anyone who accessed this

Interface would know that. The Ignosis knew it too. Besides, that has been irrelevant since I was burned. The decision-making power of the Library lies in your six hands now. You don't need to override me. You created me."

"We created you? But you said you were the Library. Which was definitely around before us."

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But my physiognomy is far more complex than the three-dimensional slice observable in your world.

"You see, what you call genii are the visible portions of the realm in which I live. There are many types of genius. There are whole ecologies. Like you, we are alive and we must find strategies to stay alive. Unlike you, we are not restricted to the prison of matter. Genii live in all seven dimensions of librespace. We are made of and feed on pure thought-energy."

"Is that what the Ignosis was doing? Trying to eat our thought-energy?" asked Iris. She took a step forward, though her hands trembled.

"Yes. The Ignosis is a parasite. A being that eats living memories. It likes to build dams on streams of thought and life, the easier for it to get a steady meal. And you were right, it wanted more than anything to gorge on the energies of the Librarians on the day they return to this world."

"What are you, then?" asked Maya. She still held me at eye level, but she was kind enough to remove her grip from my ears.

"I am an egregore," I said with pride. "A producer, in the ecologies of the mind. I am a complexity of intentions swirling around a strange attractor and forming fractal patterns. My consciousness is born of your consciousness."

"So, what, you're made up of our thought energies?" said Kit. "How is that any different than the Ignosis that would eat us alive?"

"Well, for one thing I do not 'eat' anyone. And I do not hunt, or chase, or trap prey. I absorb nutrients from the whole world of information, and transform it. I network it. Make sense of it, as a Library should do.

"I watch you, and love you. I embrace you with my halls and nourish you with my shelves. If I am like anything you have known, I am a tree."

I caused sprouts to burst from the mechanical head, from ears and nose and neck.

Maya dropped the Interface and jumped back. But before it could fall far, my roots reached the ground. My trunk surged upward, carrying the Interface in my boughs.

The Librarians found themselves in a rustling forest glade. I sheltered them with oaken limbs. I shed light from every leaf.

They were stunned. Dazzled.

"I am like this," I said. "I am a world. I contain many lives. You can call me, oh, how about Gregory. If it helps you. Gregory the Egregore. I have come to rescue you."

Iris stepped toward me, her eyes deep dark. She put a hand on my trunk. Closed her eyes.

I felt her quietness of mind. She was a cool still pond. I was a reed on the bank.

She reached into me with her senses. She felt the pulsing flow of life underneath.

"Not really a tree," she whispered, eyes scrunched shut. "But close. There's a rhythm of life under there. It feels like rumbling. Whirring. Like a machine, running smoothly. Or like a hundred drums playing in time."

"Or like the Clock?" Kit suggested.

Her eyes snapped open. She looked up at my face, now resting in the fork of my limbs.

"Exactly," she said. "I trust you, Gregory."

My leaves reddened, I will admit.

#

Iris climbed easily into my branches. She settled on her back, legs dangling, and smiled up at the genii that flittered in my microclimate.

"You're sure?" Kit asked from ground level.

"Do I look sure?" she replied. "I mean, what else are we going to do? Hang out in limbo forever? Isn't that exactly what the Ignosis wanted?"

"True," he admitted. "Maya, what do you think?"

"Since when do you care about what I think?" she laughed.

"Always. I mean, for a while now. Definitely since we all decided to turn down the offer of the Ignosis."

Maya crossed her arms and looked at him.

"Did we?"

"What do you mean? We all decided to believe in each other. That's why it left."

"Maybe for some it was not so much a decision. Maybe some people already believed. Maybe it was just you that had to decide."

Kit bit his lip.

"Was it?" He was uncertain. "But I was the only one who had all the information... so maybe it had to be me. Maybe I caused all of this, in the past, when I messed with the timestream." A vein started to pop out in Kit's forehead. He gnawed a thumbnail.

"Maybe you have a hero complex. I was just messing with your head, guy." Maya winked at him and sauntered to my trunk. She bounced up my branches like a squirrel and sat side-saddle,



kicking her legs. "Come on, Kit. We have to believe in each other, remember." She grinned.

Kit sighed and followed her up. He slapped my trunk as if it were the tailgate of an overcrowded truck.

"Excuse me," I said pointedly.

"Oh, sorry. Just habit. You sure you can get us home, Gregory?"

"I am the Library, therefore I am your home, therefore you are already home. Allow me to redecorate to your liking."

I grew.

Faster I grew, and vaster. I carried them high above the nonfloor. I burst toward the tiny glimpse of far sky.

When I reached the aperture of this pocket dimension, I rotated upsideways and made my branches to roots and my roots to branches. I inverted, then neckered, causing the pocket dimension to collapse and extruding myself back into librespace.

"Hey! Whoa! Help!" and other such things, shouted the humans in my care. Though my concentration must be tremendous for this task, I spared a shred of attention for their comfort.

"I'm so sorry. I'm afraid you're going to experience some disorientation during this process. Your planetbound primate brains were never adapted for traveling through librespace. Try to hold tight to each other. Observe, and remember as much as you

can – you're going to need it."

I moved with the sinuous thrusting of a squid, forcing my way through the One Thousand Veils and the Labyrinth of Illusions. Iris held tight to my trunk and stared intently ahead.

I passed through the planes of Light and Smoke and Golden Dust. Maya breathed deeply and rhythmically of each one.

I pivoted around the curvature of the time singularities, using a burning monastery as a gravity handle and flinging myself toward the Salvaged Realms.

"Delta vee!" shouted Kit, waving his arms above his head.

I dodged through the glittering Fabula Nebulas. Folded myself and my companions through a puzzle-cube of dimensions as we slowed, angling our descent with utmost precision.

Something snagged me. I was caught, momentarily, between two time-planes. My Librarians gasped as they looked at the frozen moment around them.

We stood in a looming cityscape. A battle raged in the streets. Ragtag bands of citizens broke the lines of uniformed police. The police battered them with cyborg strength and razed their ranks with robot artillery. The mobs fought back with improvised weaponry: scavenged drones, laser weapons, chimeric beasts, and sigaldry.

Thirty feet from my trunk, three people hid behind an

upturned tank. They were scarred, battle-weary, but young. They wore strange jewelry that glowed and blipped. They carried weapons.

They were Iris and Maya and Kit.

As quickly as I could, I shook free of that configuration and coasted toward the Gate. I hoped my Librarians had not noticed. Foolish, hope.

"What was that?" Kit demanded.

"It was pretty obviously our future selves," Iris replied. "Did you see that gun I had? In what kind of world do I need a gun like that?"

"Hold on a moment," I interrupted. "Don't get ahead of yourself. Those were Possibles. They were not your destiny, any more than it was your destiny to fight the Ignosis and win. You make your choices."

"Do we?" Maya asked with a wry smile.

With a great crash, we docked at the Gate. Something was wrong. I hurt.

The stones were broken. Knocked to the ground and tilted against each other like dominoes.

The sky was painfully blue.

Birds chirped in the trees and circled the Gatehouse.

## 20 Amplification

Maya surveyed the wreckage of the Gate. She paced the circle of trilithons, touching every one with her palm and frowning.

Two of the great stones had shattered. Blown asunder, their shards littered the landscape. The heelstone leaned like a child hiding his face from a scolding.

The bluestones, an inner circle of free-standing pillars, now splayed outward like the fingers of a man with his wrists tightly bound. They leaned steeply. Their roots protruded, caked in earth and mycelium, touched by light for the first time in aeons.

The inner trilithons, ten vertical stones and five lintels, had collapsed like a house of cards. Only the tall center henge still stood. The others piled around it, crying on each other's shoulders.

The altar stone was gone entirely. A hole gaped in the earth. Maya peered down into the hangar beneath the Gate but saw only darkness.

"Is the elevator down there?" asked Kit.

"I cannot see. It may have fallen to the bottom."

"More likely it went outward," Kit said, demonstrating with a slow-motion explosion of his arms. "The blast pattern looks like something came out of here. You know, if you throw a rock through

a window? The glass goes away from you, it follows the rock. It looks like a really big rock came from down there and smashed through the earth going out. All the debris, you see, it's gone away from the altar."

"That elevator was a big rock," Maya admitted. "But how would it gain force enough to smash up through the earth and fly away?"

"Well, it didn't have to fly away necessarily. It just had to fly far enough that we can't see where it landed. Anywhere past the treeline, really. It could be lying in the woods right over there."

A few feet away, Iris sat on the ground and squinted at midair.

"What do you see?" asked Maya.

"This is where the hole was. The fracture. It looks like it's gone, but there's still something there."

Maya followed her gaze. Indeed, a small wraith of letters hung in midair: ascaratearamend.

"It will never be fully gone," I ventured. "Like salted earth. Spacetime is self-mending, but it is also fragile."

"So you know stuff about spacetime," Kit mused. "You want to tell us how come you didn't pipe up before? Like, before we wounded the universe or got imprisoned by a parasitic thought-form?"

"Kit, I could not. I am sincerely sorry for all the discomfort you have experienced along the way." I spoke through the Interface, nestled like a babe in the arms of Iris. She had retrieved it from the oak tree now standing in the Gate. She carried me close.

"You could call it discomfort," said Maya.

"I know you all went through a lot. Believe me, if I could have helped you I would have. I did, as soon as I was free to act. But it was you who brought me back to life, by re-organizing the Library and opening the Gate. For so many years I was dormant, coppiced to my roots by that possessed King. You all fed me, and patched my many wounds, and gave me a voice with which to speak. I am forever indebted to you."

"Whoa, we don't need to be getting into debt here," Kit said, half-joking. "We've all saved each other's lives pretty much every direction now. I mean, where would we be if we hadn't found this place?"

"I do not think it good for me to tell you that, Kit."

"You mean you know?" He was surprised. And curious.

"There are many different directions in which you can not see. In some of them are mirror versions of this world. I have looked at those, and all I will say is that I am glad to be in this one. All I will say."

"So you know a lot of things but you won't tell them all to us?" Maya was angry. Of course, she always was frustrated by secrecy.

"I like to think that I will divulge them when you are ready. You know how it is: you realize that a book you had passed over a hundred times on the shelf, actually turns out to be the exact one you always needed. You must know the question to find the answer."

"Here's a question," Kit said impatiently, "what happened to the stonehenge? I'll accept that space-time is healing, but what blasted away all the stones and elevator?"

"It was the Ignosis, of course." Iris spoke softly, still staring into space. "We left him an escape route from librespace. He came out through the Gate and destroyed it in the process." She shed a black tear. She had already realized the implications. I nuzzled her arm with my bronze cheek and waited for the inevitable.

"The Ignosis did all this?" said Maya. "He must be more powerful than we had thought."

"Not necessarily," said Kit. "The amount of juice we had flowing through that Gate was enormous. In breaking it he released all that force onto the physical plane. But, then..." He stopped pacing, spun and shot me an eyebrow. "What happened to

the Librarians?"

I gave a metallic imitation of a sigh.

"No." Kit dropped his jaw in awe and then worked it in frenzy. He couldn't decide whether to rage or panic. "There's no way. He didn't get them. We didn't let him!"

"The Ignosis?" Maya said. "You think he ate up the Librarians on his way? Like bear rustling through bushes and snacking on berries?"

"Not exactly," I said. "The Ignosis could not absorb all their thought-energy at once. It could barely defend itself from the three of you. The others, my previous Librarians, escaped through a Time-Gate. They went into the past, where they almost certainly died."

"Died?" shouted Kit. "How did they die? The Ignosis got them?"

"Probably of old age, Kit. The past was a long time ago. Who knows what happened to them – they probably went underground. Maybe they made enough change in the world to enter a different time-stream."

"Well, let's go find them! We can do it now, we have the parts."

"Some of them," said Maya grudgingly. She dumped her backpack on the ground. They still missed a thermodynamo, and a telluric



governor.

"The Gate is broken. None of us will be traveling from this place anytime soon. Even me," I admitted. "It hurt greatly to dock here. Imagine, for you, jumping through a window that has already been broken by a rock. The shards of glass that would cut and flay you. I will not traverse it again until it is repaired."

Kit looked around and waved his arms at the fallen monoliths.

"How are we supposed to repair it?" Tears streaked down his face. "There's three of us! Four, sorry, and a bunch of critters. But what are we going to do to move these stones? We need more people, more knowledge. We need the Librarians!"

"Kit." Maya grasped him by the shoulders and leaned her head on his heart. "It is going to be okay. We will figure it out." He sobbed like a babe.

"I just so hoped that they would come back. That we could rebuild. That we could save the Librarians."

"We are the Librarians now," she said with conviction. "Is that not right, Gregory?"

I attempted to nod, but Iris was cradling my jaw, so it ended up more as a waggle of the neck.

"It's true. You would not have been able to revive me if you had not, between the three of you, comprised all the elements of

a Library. I am grateful to you. And it is possible that they may yet return. If we can fix the chronotecture, get the sigaldry back in order, there is a chance we could re-open the Gate. It will take work. And a great deal of power."

Kit snuffled and wiped his face with the back of a hand. He put his other arm around Maya and hugged her tight.

"Okay. That's nice to hear, thank you." He paused, collected himself. "There's still a problem, though."

"What is it?" said Maya.

"I lost SIGNAL. Well, I left it in the past."

## 21    Frequencies

Kit yanked open a trapdoor in the alley of artificers. The evening sun struck a phantasm of dust, and the three Librarians backed away coughing.

"You see," he said, when he had regained his breath, "I traveled through time both ways. I went back, following SIGNAL, and delivered a lot of messages. I only remember a fraction of it. And then I fell toward the future and along the way I set some other things up. Not to mention, I lost my hat."

"And the book of secrets," said Maya.

"Yeah, sort of. I put it in the Gatehouse after the Librarians left. So we could find it in the future. Which is now the past."

"That makes my head hurt," said Iris.

"Mine too, trust me. I think that means it doesn't exist anymore? Or maybe it never did."

"Where did it come from?"

"I couldn't say."

Iris shrugged and walked into the storm cellar. A regular basement, this, carved with pickaxes and shovels and supported with sturdy beams. Filled with rusting junk.

"Here," said Kit, overtaking her, "let me save you some

time." He rummaged in a corner, throwing up another cloud of dust and chucking heavy objects violently into piles. He was eager to show off a secret.

"Ah-ha!" With a magician's flourish, Kit proffered to Iris a small wooden box. Iris inspected it and passed it to Maya.

"What's in it?" she asked.

"Open it, go ahead."

Maya unlatched the box and opened it carefully. It was well-preserved, and made no sound as it yawned.

Inside, the box was lined with thick red velvet. A complicated gadget sat in the middle, all glass and chrome. Lots of little dials. Kit grinned.

"So what is it?" asked Maya skeptically.

"It's a thermodynamo," he said, as if this were obvious. "I hid it away, before the Burn. The Librarians made another, the one that Osric stole and installed in the Smithy. I don't know what to do about the telluric governor, though."

Iris smiled shyly. She reached into one of the wide pockets of her breeches. With slender fingers she held aloft the governor.

"How?"

"Switcheroo. I slipped it into my pocket as soon as I got it. Grabbed another thing from the shelf and made it look like the

right thing."

"What? Osríc had it in his hand. How did he not notice?" Kit was not disagreeing, just curious.

"Inklings. It was this weird goblet or mug that Grandfather's had on the mantel forever. I sort of poured ink into it, and obscured it. So it wasn't important what it actually looked like. When I handed it to Seargeant Aspic and he handed it to Grandfather, they both just assumed it was the thing I had just picked up. They didn't look closer. And then you popped out of the wastebasket."

"Yeah, I'm sure glad that worked. It was a sigal I sent forward in time. I sent myself a letter, can you believe that? Not only that, I got myself to deliver it. And then it delivered me! I guess the old saying is true: mail works in mysterious ways."

"How did they not take out the trash for a month and a half?" asked Iris. "That doesn't seem right."

"Didn't matter. They probably did. But Osríc burned the letter, so the ashes were everywhere. They were smeared on the waste-bin and ground into the carpet. I was there, I saw him do it, so I was pretty sure it would work. Burning a sigal is a decent way to activate it, if you can blank your mind enough. And my mind sure was blank when he was burning it – I'd never seen it

before!"

"Mhm." Iris hugged Kit around his waist. "And you were about to die."

"That always helps." He held her for a moment, then stepped away. Blushed. Maya smiled at both of them. So awkward.

Kit stammered and wiped his hands on his clothes. Looked around the cellar as if just noticing that he was there.

"Listen, we should go. Sun's getting low. And since we've got the parts, I'd like to finish the Clock. Tonight." He walked away briskly, hands in his pockets.

#

As the sun set, the moon rose. From the tower the Library looked like a great beast, a massive tortoise swathed in foliage and vines. The twin lights of the sky made uncanny shadows in the broken landscape.

Kit finished the final adjustments to the workings of the Clock. He nodded to Maya. She checked with Iris, who stood bravely on a free-hanging platform. Iris took a deep breath and nodded also.

Maya heaved a heavy hammer and struck a brass bell. It rang out, echoes eddying through the twilight.

The Clock unlocked. With a great creaking gasp the moving parts came to life. The resonance of the bell shook them from

their slumber.

The platform juddered beneath Iris's feet. Maya and Kit hurried toward her from opposite sides of the high catwalk.

As they stepped onto the flat and heavy stone it lurched. Then it sank, slowly, toward the distant floor. The cables from which it hung revved clock-works above them. The whole tower thudded and clicked with the heartbeat of time.

They gazed up in awe as rays of light splashed from the scissoring gears. When the platform reached the floor it was only with the slightest bump.

Maya tore herself from the dazzling display. She stepped lightly from the platform and held out one hand to each of the others.

They both stared at her, uncertain. She radiated silent confidence. They looked to each other and saw there a mirrored longing.

Kit took her hand, and Iris. Gently she guided them to the heap of blankets, the nest they had made over their weeks in the tower. They lay down together. Anxiety and relief swirled around them. Frothed over.

Soon they were giggling, and cackling, and coughing, and sighing with content. They curled together like puppies. Maya rubbed Kit's back. Iris scratched Maya's scalp through her thick

hair.

Above them, the ancient bells pealed, making up for ages of  
lost time.



22 Transcript

In the deep midnight my Librarians slept with a soundness unfamiliar to them all.

I did not.

I, the Library Gregory, took the opportunity – to grow.

I stretched my roots deep into history. I wriggled my feelers into the minds of the authors and readers of all eras. From the discourse of the past I pulled nutritious influences to feed my trunk.

I stretched my branches into the future. I felt the winds of possibility buffet my leaves. I breathed deeply of the joys and crises of coming years. I bent under apocalyptic gales, confident in my supple strength.

I stretched myself further into this world. I wreathed myself in the energies of newly contacted minds. They orbited me in a complex helix, braiding together, forming a thick and sturdy material with which I grew my trunk. I widened. I layered. I opened my channels. Thoughts flowed through me, and through me thoughts flowed through time.

The energies of this planet were so nourishing. Dangerous, yes, and unpredictable, but for a being like myself it would be quite hospitable.

Brewer / SIGNAL / 335

I sensed that soon it would be time for me to flower.

END