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Kylie Bean

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The Library Book

by Kylie R. Bean

It was a grey, rainy, dreary day, but Samar couldn't be happier with the weather. He liked playing basketball with his friends, he liked gardening with his dad, he liked going to the pool with his mom, but on this rainy summer day, Samar was going to the library. It was his favorite place in the whole world. Well, maybe second favorite. He did love the amusement park. Being in second place didn't stop him from opening the car door and jumping out before the car was even fully stopped at the front of the library.

"Samar, don't forget to return your book!" his mom called from the car.

He didn't even notice, already running to the library doors, cold rain blooming on his dark skin and getting caught like crystals in his curly hair. He knew the book was safely tucked away in his bag, the drawstring pulled tight. He should know—he checked it three times at home, and once in the car for good measure. You can't mess up a library book. He ran inside the squat brick building, emblazoned with the words "Clairmont Community Library" in nonsense black lettering. Even the outside seemed to have a warm, comfortably worn look about it, the bricks uneven and crumbly, the lettering home to birds of all kinds. He opened the doors under the small awning, the dusky red paint flaking off as he touched them.

"Morning, Mrs. Weisz!" he called as he whizzed by the checkout desk, orange bag thumping against his back. He had slowed down to a fast walk, at least. He knew better than to run in the library, even in his haste.

"Good morning, Sam," she said, looking up from her steaming mug of tea.

Word Count:

Mrs. Weisz was a somewhat frumpy woman, always wearing a big-buttoned cardigan even now in the middle of July. Today's was a honey-yellow one that matched the beaded chain attached to her reading glasses. Samar didn't know why, but it seemed that all librarians everywhere had reading glasses and a cardigan on hand at all times. It must come with the keys to the library. A stack of books sat next to her on the counter, but it was early yet. Technically, the library didn't open for another half an hour. Before she could say another word, Samar was gone. Evelyn Weisz hoped he had remembered to pack his lunch today.

Samar was already off, dashing towards the small young adult section. The library was small and musty, but they had good books and comfy chairs, and the people were nice. He had been here so often he knew it like the back of his own hand. When Mrs. Weisz didn't know where something was, or something went, she would ask Samar. He hadn't been wrong yet. The carpets were the kind found in libraries, schools, and children's hospitals all over—an unpleasant, worn grey with ugly designs meant to be cheery. They were somehow both soft and scratchy at the same time. The shelves were short and squat and made of light wood. The banks of computers were huge, hulking things, about ten years out of date. Samar could hear them whirring and clicking like hamsters in a wheel from across the room, could feel the heat they gave off. The magazine rack was dustier than all the rest of the library, housing issues of *People* and *Nat Geo* both current and months out of date, next to the children's section, filled with picture books and toys. In the middle was the adult stuff—big, broad books so boring you read the title and you were already yawning—titles like *The History of the Great Accountants vol. 3* and *Rock Legends of the 1980s: Where Are They Now?*. But it was also filled with *The Princess Bride* and *The Universe in a Nutshell*. On the other end of the library was the teen section, filled

Word Count:

with chairs and tables and the best spot in the whole library—a beanbag chair in the corner, where he could see everything.

He trotted over to the young adult section, picked a few promising books, and sat down in the beanbag chairs in the corner of the library. He cracked the first book—a Young James Bond—open with a satisfying crunch and crinkle of the binding and settled back for what was no doubt a long, happy day of reading.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something new. He turned his head to get a better look, and instead of the peeling, flakey corner he was used to seeing, here stood a huge set of wooden double-doors. He got up, only half-aware of what he was doing, and ran his hand along the grain of the wood. It was smooth—not from lacquer and sanding but from age and wear—and whorled. It was solid oak, and thick when he knocked on it, unlike the flimsy, light balsa wood of the rest of the library’s shelves and furniture. With the slightest pressure of his hand, the doors swung open to reveal a darkness beyond. Samar stepped through without a second thought. The doors whispered shut behind him.

Samar dug out his phone and turned on the flashlight after a few moments of awkward fumbling and swept it across the room—or at least, what parts of the room the light could reach. In front of him stood countless massive bookshelves which went so high that they disappeared from view before they reached the top shelf, and along them at each level were miles and miles of walkways snaking along the shelves. To his sides were corridors stretching beyond sight each way, only broken by the breaks in shelves where parallel corridors cut through. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust, as if no one had been here for centuries. Samar slowly turned until he was facing back the way he came, but the door was gone, replaced by another wall of

Word Count:

shelves. He reeled back, hitting the shelf behind him with a dull thud and a puff of disturbed dust.

Samar shook his head, and swept this phone from side to side, illuminating shelf after shelf as far as the light could reach in every direction. He could feel his hands beginning to shake and see it in the darting movements of the phone's light ahead. His breath hitched. His hands shook. His knees went weak as he leaned heavily against a shelf. He closed his eyes and counted down from ten, trying to get himself together enough to find the door. It had to be around here somewhere. He chose a direction at random and started walking, sweeping his phone from side to side for any glimpse of a door. As he did, he trailed his fingers along the spines of the books, feeling the dips and creases and bumps of lettering and age and use, leaving a trail of fingerprints and clear snippets of titles in his wake. His breathing grew steadier and his steps surer as he went and let the familiar bindings, the cityscape of books. He could see better now, too, now that his eyes had time to adjust to the darkness. There seemed to be a light glow around everything—there was no source of light that he could see, but there wasn't complete darkness either. Everything was oppressively silent, the weight of words and even steps amplified in the cavernous space. Then he heard a strange, skittering sound somewhere off to his left. He froze.

A creature rose up from between the shelves, rearing its bulbous head filled with needle-sharp teeth as its mad eyes focused in on Samar. Samar's own eyes widened as he took in the sight before him, the glistening body of the thing a sickening shade of pale yellow.. It grew closer and closer, dragging itself between shelves with a screech and thud following each bunching of slimy flesh. Each thud sent the shelves and the very floor shaking as it wriggled and writhed to get to him. It reared up again, closer now. He could see each needle-sharp tooth in its

Word Count:

gaping maw, the expanse inside pitch black.. Samar tried to move, but he couldn't get his legs to work. Samar could do nothing but watch in anticipation and horror.

Before he could even think, he was pushed sideways, away from the gargantuan thing, and he fell to the ground with a thud. He scrambled up and looked around wildly. There. A girl around his age, with a cloud of curly black hair, was shouting at him, though he couldn't understand her words. The thing screeched, its eyes again on Samar, and the girl repeated herself in desperation.

“Run!” she screamed, grabbing his hand.

His legs followed her command, taking a shortcut that didn't involve his brain. Cara turned every which way, weaving through the shelves as the monster struggled to keep pace, with its huge body and massive weight. It screeched and screeched the entire time, until finally it had mostly faded, lost somewhere among the endless shelves.

Samar collapsed against the shelves, trying to catch his breath as he looked up at the girl that had saved him. She was panting too, braced against the shelf. Her face was filled with dark freckles and her eyes were a warm brown as they danced. Her mouth was drawn up in a grin, and he realized that she was laughing silently—though he couldn't tell if she was laughing at their luck or at him. He suspected the latter.

“Come on, let's get you back to the camp,” she said, offering him a hand up. “I'll explain everything there.”

He could think of nothing to do but follow her. He couldn't find a way to respond besides a nod.

More slowly now, and more quietly, she led him through the Library, shelf after shelf. All the while Samar trailed his fingers across the books, each step and the feel of each spine calming him. After minutes of walking in silence, his mouth finally caught up with his brain.

“What is this place? Why’d the—”

She whirled around, a finger to her lips. When she spoke, it was in an intense whisper.

“When we get to the camp. Not before. Understand?”

Samar nodded quickly.

“Good.” She turned her back on him once more and led the way to a ring of shelves, with narrow gaps between them. She squeezed through and stuck an arm out again to beckon him to follow, waving her hand. Samar obeyed, and immediately regretted it.

“Cara Areshla, where have you been?!” The yell echoed throughout the library, and Samar ducked down, covering his ears. A woman stood before them, frowning, with her hands on her hips and her eyebrows raised. Her box-braided hair reached almost to her waist. She was large and loud and would have been intimidating if not for the deep concern and care in her eyes.

“I—I went out and—”

The woman melted and hugged Cara tight. Samar stood there, off to the side, and waited awkwardly.

“Cara, I told you not to go out there on your own. It’s dangerous!”

“Ms. Tam, I knew there was somebody out there, and he would’ve died if I hadn’t been there. This wouldn’t be a problem if we could just all leave already...”

Tam sighed. “Please tell me before you go running off. We were all worried sick.”

“Okay.” Cara mumbled.

Tam turned her attentions to Samar. “Now, you must be very confused and very scared. I’m Tam. What’s your name, honey?”

“Uh...Samar. I’m Samar.”

“Alright. It’s nice to meet you, Samar. I’ll introduce you to everyone here, and then I can explain what’s going on. Okay?”

He nodded. She ushered him to the opposite side of the circle, where a man in his twenties was leaned up against the wall, a gun holstered and clipped to his belt, a grim expression on his face. The man had sandy blond hair, a shadow of a beard, and a scowl etched into his face. He offered the group only a cursory glance.

Tam piped up quickly. “This is Malcolm. Malcolm, this is Samar.”

Malcolm stepped forward and Tam took a half step back. He held out a hand to Samar, who shook it.

“Hi.” Samar turned back to Tam. “Uh...how did you all get here?”

“I saw a door and walked through. I was in the library, and there it was. I managed to find Malcolm, and then we found this place.”

“And, um, where are you from? Cause for all I know this isn’t even the same world.”

Tam offered a warm smile. “I’m from Maryland. And it sounds like you’re from somewhere similar.”

“Yeah.” Samar took a deep breath. “Yeah, I’m from Virginia.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I’m just glad we’re all from Earth.”

“Not... everyone. That would be just you and me.”

“Oh.”

“How about we get everybody to introduce themselves? That might make it a little easier.”

Samar nodded, not trusting his voice, and sat down. Cara sat cross-legged next to Samar. Malcolm sat alone with a knee to his chest, absently flicking the chamber of his gun. Tam sat on Samar’s other side, folding herself small.

Cara was the first to speak. “I’m Cara Areshla and I’m from Selsai. I found the door in my school.”

“Like I said, I’m Malcolm. Got here when I was hunting some beasts and found that damn door in a gutted library.”

“Now, you must be very confused. You might be wondering what this place is and how you got here. We had a lot of the same questions when we first arrived. It’s easier to read about this place than it is to explain it.” She plucked a thin volume off the shelf behind them that read: *The Library Book* by Anonymous.

“Where’d you get that?” Samar asked, eyeing the book.

“The shelf. It was here before we were.”

Samar frowned but nodded, taking the book from Tam and settling in to read.

It read: *The Library is a magical place that connects all worlds in the shared goal of knowledge. The people of the universe can share their ideas, their knowledge, their books. From the beginning of time, or at least from the beginning of intelligent life, it has been overseen by a mysterious Librarian, who guides it and keeps it running smoothly. This role as passed from master to apprentice for centuries—as the previous Librarian grew old, a new one was trained to replace them, so that there was always someone to guide it.*

Word Count:

The Library has doors to everywhere knowledge is shared, whether visible or not. Inside its walls, every book ever written has a copy marked with the Library's seal. Time is slowed here, so that patrons can spend however long they like absorbing and sharing knowledge without consequence. It is sturdy and bright, made with the finest materials and with the finest staff dedicated to making the Library welcoming to all. The Library is dedicated to accumulating and disseminating knowledge freely and openly among people, peoples, nations, and worlds. Welcome to the Library, patrons.

Samar closed the book and stared at nothing for a long moment, wondering when he was going to wake from this dream. He was probably snoring on the beanbag chair at Clairmont Community now, much to the dismay of Mrs. Weisz. He pinched himself, but to no avail.

After a long moment, he said, "So the Librarian keeps this place running? But what is this place? How did we get here? Where's the Librarian if this place isn't working anymore?"

"I don't have all the answers. We're about as lost as you."

"We have to find the Librarian, right? Then we can go home?" He glanced at Tam.

"That's what it sounds like, yes."

"But how do we do that?"

"I don't know. Right now, our best plan is to go out into the Library again. Malcolm is teaching us combat, and Cara is figuring out some sort of code in the book to help us."

Samar's eyes lit up as he looked from the book to Cara. "A code?"

"Mhm!" Cara held out a hand to take the book, which he passed over without a word.

She flipped to the very back of the book, at the top of the endpaper. As she did, he hunted for his library book, *The Code Book*, in his backpack. As he fished it out, she pointed to the pasted-down page.

Word Count:

“There’s some numbers and symbols on the back page, but I don’t know what it means.”

Samar sat next to her, peering over over her shoulder and craning his neck to get a better look. Inside the last page was a string of numbers and letters and dashes and dots scrawled above the printed words. It read:

920.2 ANO 3-14-4 006.3 ARB 103-3-11 398 CAR 17-23-1 291.13 CAM 86-28-1
652.809 SIN 34-42

“It looks like some kind of code,” Samar said, looking over the numbers and dots and dashes. “I’d say Morse, but the dots and dashes aren’t together...”

“It might be coordinates. I saw something similar in a book I read about navigation.”

“But what about the dashes? And what could have that many coordinates?”

Cara shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s a lot of places.”

They sat and puzzled over the code for a long time, until they were both tired of reading it over and over in the hope that it would make sense eventually. Eventually, Cara looked up, her eyes shining bright with a new idea.

“It’s in this book, right? So why this one? Maybe we can find a clue there.”

She flipped to the front of the book and began reading again, hunting for any clue of what the code meant, or a way that they could decode it. Samar read over his code book, looking for anything like the dots, dashes, and numbers in the back of *The Library Book*.

They read the books again and again, forwards and backwards and even up side down when they were truly at the end of their rope and too exhausted to care if it made any sense at all, but nothing new showed itself, and nothing old said much that wasn’t as enigmatic as the code itself.

Word Count:

After what felt like hours, they were startled from their thoughts by the clearing of a throat, coming from right in front of them. Samar shook himself back to reality and looked up to see Malcolm standing over them, an eyebrow raised.

“It’s time to train.”

Cara walked over to where Tam was already waiting, and Samar jogged over right behind. The books were left, nearly forgotten, on the floor. He peered over at Malcolm, who picked up what seemed to be a pile of discarded wood from the other end of the encampment. After a moment, however, he glanced back at Cara.

Samar watched and waited in silence until he couldn’t stand it any longer. A moment passed, and he was playing with the hem of his shirt. Another moment passed, and he was bouncing on the balls of his feet. Another moment passed, and he felt as if he were going to explode either from the anticipation or the awkward silence.

Finally, he coughed and cleared his throat. “Thanks for... saving me and everything.”

Cara looked at him with a mix of confusion and concern. “Of course. I wouldn’t just leave you there to get eaten.”

“Right, yeah, but...”

“But...?” Cara looked at him, eyebrows furrowed.

Thankfully, Malcolm came back before Samar had to respond. He hoped no one noticed his sigh of relief. Malcolm was carrying what looked to be a pile of wood. After a moment, however, Samar understood what it was they were doing—and what the wood was for—as Malcolm passed him a piece that turned out to be the wooden approximation of a sword. They

Word Count:

were thick and curved but were also warped and gnarled and covered in splinters. They hardly resembled the real thing except for their crudely replicated shape, the weight of it heavy and imbalanced, dragging at the tip. There was no cutting edge. He handed another to Cara, and then to Tam.

“First thing’s first. Drills. Line up.”

They did. Samar was a beat behind the others.

“Block, like this.” He demonstrated. “here sets, ten times each.”

They did. They went through blocks, cuts, feints, and parries until their arms were sore and soaked to the bone with exhaustion. All the while, Malcolm barked orders.

“Stop.”

Cara and Tam let their arms—and their swords—fall by their sides. Again, Samar was half a beat late.

“It’s time for combat training. Pair up.”

Cara went to stand in front of Tam, but Tam shook her head slightly. Cara turned and faced Samar instead. Malcolm turned, facing Tam. Samar followed suit, turning to face Cara. He raised his wooden sword, in a clumsy copy of the samurai warriors he had seen on tv. Now the pairs were parallel, Samar and Malcolm facing Cara and Tam. Samar glanced over at Malcolm, whose sword was up like his, but angled slightly. Samar adjusted his grip to match.

“First, hitting your enemy. Aim for the chest, the ribs, or the knees.” Malcolm gestured to each on his own body in turn, then looked at Samar. Samar looked back, nodding. Malcolm gave an encouraging half-grin.

Word Count:

Then Cara piped up. “That doesn’t make sense if we’re not gonna fight humans. This is for fighting monsters, yes?”

Malcolm’s expression soured into a scowl. He spoke slowly and deliberately. “The principle is the same. Aim for joints and ribs. And don’t speak back again, understand?”

Cara nodded slowly, though Samar felt like something was off. “I understand perfectly.”

Whatever it was, Malcolm did not seem to pick up on it, and Samar couldn’t identify it.

“Now, Tam is going to try to block me. Watch.” Again, he looked at Samar, ignoring Cara completely. Samar watched, his eyes glued to the two of them.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Malcolm slashed across and down, aiming for her ribs just as he had said. Tam brought her own sword down to block it just in time, and the *thwack* of solid wood hitting wood at full force resounded in the circular encampment. Malcolm immediately pivoted, slashing up and over, aiming at her collarbone. Tam tried to block it in time, but the sword was only two-thirds of the way when the sickening sound of wood against flesh echoed through the encampment on the heels of the last. Cara winced in sympathy as Tam stumbled a few steps back, a welt already blossoming on her chest.

Malcolm stepped back as Tam regained her footing and addressed Samar again. “Now you.”

Samar nodded and took a deep breath before turning again to face Cara. He raised his sword and she raised hers. Her gaze was steady and sure, and for a moment Samar was again mesmerized by the warm brown of her eyes. That moment was just enough time for Cara to find

an opening and tap him on the ribs, before he was even aware. He started, stepping back and readjusting his grip.

“What, are you just going to take that?!” Malcolm called out to him.

Samar shook his head and swung his sword down, aiming just as Malcolm had at her ribs. Cara took a step to the side, avoiding the strike entirely. He tried again, this time aiming at her chest. She took two steps back, and he missed again, lunging too far forward and barely regaining his balance.

“C’mon, mean it!” Malcolm called out again.

Again, Samar swung his sword, first left as a feint and then right, this time landing a hit clumsily on her ribs. But even though the hit was clumsy, he had put all his strength into it, and as Cara stumbled backward he saw a welt already forming though the small gap on the side of her sari-like dress. He stepped back as she looked at him, anger, confusion, and hurt mixing together in her expression. She turned away.

Malcolm clapped Samar on the shoulder. “Good work. You’re a natural at this.” He grinned.

Samar offered a half-smile in return, though he couldn’t quite meet his eyes.

“I think that’s enough training for today. Now, how about a chat, just you and me?”

Before Samar could respond, Malcolm was already leading him away from the others. He nodded, but took another glance back at the other three, who were all sitting together speaking in hushed tones. He turned his back and followed Malcolm to the opposite side of the encampment.

Word Count:

Malcolm leaned up against the shelf and dropped the wooden sword, pulling out his gun instead. He idly flicked it back and forth, making the chamber of the revolver go in and out, in and out. Samar sat and laid down his sword as well, turning his back on the others to face Malcolm.

“You did good, kid,” Malcolm said with a nod.

Samar beamed, but his grin faded as he thought about the fight. “Um... I hurt her, didn’t I?”

“What does that matter? Besides, it’s training. People are supposed to get hurt, and better her than you.”

“Yeah, but...”

Malcolm sighed, though he managed to keep the scowl off his face. “Look, kid—if you’re faster than them, you deserve to take your shot. If you’re stronger than them, then they deserve to get hit. That’s the only way they’ll get better.”

“Yeah....” Samar looked down, but after a moment forced himself to meet Malcolm’s gaze. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Malcolm offered a smile and a hand up. “I’m glad we had this chat.”

Samar took the hand up and nodded. “Me too.”

Feeling as if he had been dismissed, Samar walked back over to the other side of the encampment, where Tam and Cara were talking in low tones, *The Library Book* clutched to Cara’s chest. He padded over, unsure of what else to do. When he was a few feet away, Cara glanced over, and they went quiet. He couldn’t meet her eyes, though he still walked forward.

Word Count:

Cara pulled herself up without a word, still clutching the book tight. She grimaced as she walked away from him, the bruise on her side a sickening shade of darkening red. She walked over to the bookshelf, where the space that the book occupied was now gone, replaced by the leaning covers of its neighbors. Samar watched as she shoved the books aside to make room for *The Library Book*, but the moment she put the book in its place, she took it down again and leafed through it. Samar and Tam rushed over. Malcolm was close to follow.

“What is it?” Samar asked.

Cara didn’t respond—she simply flipped the book over so that the gathered crowd could see the spine of the book. The title was the same as ever, *The Library Book*, but Samar saw what she was pointing at with her free hand that he hadn’t noticed before. On the bottom of the spine was a laminated tag, like the ones at the Clairemont library, which ordered the books. It was small and unassuming, the tag just like any other he had seen a million times before, but this one had a familiar number.

It read: 920.2 ANO

“It’s gotta be in the book. These are books in the library!” Cara said, beaming with pride. “And those other numbers with the dashes—those have to be page numbers or something!”

The rest of the night was spent pouring over the book, looking for any idea of what the dashed numbers might be. They soon realized that they weren’t all page numbers, as the three pages together made no sense. They tried different things, backwards and forwards and sideways until finally, they found the one that fit. The others had been trivial words, or unconnected pages, but as they finally tried another method, they found a word that struck them. Cara flipped to page three, then traced her way down to line fourteen, and then from there to word four on that line. The word was ‘Librarian’.

Word Count:

The next few days passed by in a whirlwind of training, sparring, and recovering. Samar slowly grew accustomed to the weight of the wooden sword, anticipated the dragging weight of the top-heavy tip. He learned how to hit harder and better during the seemingly endless drills and put it into practice during the sparring sessions where he was always paired with Cara. And every time after, Cara gave him the cold shoulder and Samar went to talk with Malcolm instead.

After a couple days, however, Samar couldn't stand the tension any more. Instead of splitting off from Cara and Tam, he followed after training. He was sore and stiff, muscles aching from the dozens of drills, but that was not what weighed on him. Cara turned around a moment later at the sound of footsteps behind her. Samar offered a sheepish grin and stepped forward to where Cara was standing, where she and Tam had set their things. Cara took a step back.

“Hey, uh, why've you been avoiding me?”

Cara raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, as if the answer was obvious. He searched for an answer.

“Is this about the training?” he asked, not quite meeting her eyes.

“Yeah. It is.”

“Well, that's just how training is. It's nothing personal. It's just how we've gotta learn.”

“Yeah? Did Malcolm teach you that?” she hurled the words.

“Yes..?” *Was that a trick question? He taught all of us?*

“That's not how people learn how to fight. My friends back home are wrestlers and they never—they don't hurt each other like that.” Her eyes were brimming with tears.

“Why are you being so emotional? I said I was sorry—why are you still hung up on it?”

Word Count:

Cara turned her back on him, instead facing the wall. Samar reached out a hand to grab her shoulder, but she flinched at his touch. He stepped back quickly, unable to hide the shock on his face. Cara took a shuddering breath, plucked *The Library Book* from the shelf, and sat down without giving him a second glance. She raised the book to her face, almost in time to hide her tear-tracked face. Samar turned away, biting his lip hard.

A moment later, he saw Malcolm leaned up against the next shelf, watching him. Tam was standing by the opposite one. They moved at the same time, Tam toward Cara and Malcolm toward Samar. Tam gave Samar a long look, hurt and loss and fury mixing together, before turning toward Cara, crouching down to talk to her in low tones.

“Samar,” Malcolm called. “Let’s have a chat, yeah?”

Samar nodded and followed Malcolm to the other end of the encampment. He sat down, and Samar followed suit. Malcolm idly flicked the chamber of his gun in and out.

“What happened back there?” Malcolm’s voice wasn’t soft, but it wasn’t the barking tone that Samar had come to expect from the drills and practice.

“Cara still won’t talk to me.” He paused. “She’s still hung up on that first training.”

“She’s mad at you?” Malcolm raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. I tried explaining, but that just made it worse.”

Malcolm sighed. “Some people are just ungrateful. They don’t want to learn what you’re trying to teach them. What’s important is you keep at it. That’s what leading means.”

Samar nodded, but his brows were furrowed. “But I really like Cara. I don’t want to hurt her. I don’t want to lose her by doing this.”

Malcolm stopped flicking his gun, and instead put a hand on Samar’s shoulder. He looked at him straight in the eye. “If you don’t, then she won’t know what to do when real

Word Count:

danger comes. She'll get hurt or worse if you don't. Besides," he offered Samar a smile, "she'll come around eventually, when she figures out that this is for the best."

"How do you know?"

Malcolm stretched out, shifting into a more relaxed position. He flicked the barrel in and out. He paused for a long moment before speaking.

"I was like you once. Young, naïve, all that." Malcolm glanced at Samar. Samar was frowning, his ears burning with embarrassment. "That's not a bad thing, mind. It just means you're ready to learn. I was about the same age as you when my dad started teaching me like I'm teaching you. My dad taught me how to be strong, how to be a leader, how to be a man. Those lessons hurt a lot, but they were worth it. I didn't get it for a while, but I do now. My mom hated him for a while—threatened to leave, call the police, everything in the book—but she understood deep down why he did what he did. Eventually she apologized to him. Not the other way around."

Malcolm gave Samar a pointed look. "Don't ever apologize for what needed to be done, yeah?"

Samar gave a smile. "Yeah. I won't."

There was a moment of silence before Malcolm spoke again, pulling something from the pocket of his worn jeans. He held it between his thumb and index finger, and Samar saw the glint of steel.

"I want you to have this. It was my dad's, and he gave it to me. I want you to have it." Malcolm passed him a folded piece of plastic and metal, guiding his hand to an indentation in the plastic. "Press here."

He did. Out popped a three-inch blade, wicked sharp and gleaming.

Word Count:

“Just press on the dull side, and it’ll close in a snap.”

Samar stared at the blade. “Thanks. I... thanks.” He pushed it closed and slipped it in his pocket.

Malcolm grinned. “Don’t mention it, kid.”

The fourth day started as any other—Malcolm passed out the misshapen, splintered swords, and as any other day, the group lined up to train. Malcolm turned to gather his things before turning around to face them. He shook his head.

“No,” Malcolm snapped. Samar dropped his sword in shock and winced as it clattered to the ground. “We’re going out today. Get your things.”

The group dispersed, grabbing whatever they had. Samar slunk over to grab his backpack, pulling the zipper open to check that he had everything. Lunchbox, check. Library book, check. Jacket, check. He plucked the book on the Library off the shelf and crammed it inside with the rest before zipping it up again and flinging it over his shoulder. The others had already gathered. Tam had nothing. Malcolm had his gun and a few things in his pockets, from what Samar could see. Cara had a messenger bag that seemed full to bursting—from the gaps he could see a few pieces of charcoal and the corner of a sketchbook. And everyone held a wooden sword in one hand.

Malcolm looked at them each in turn. “When I say run, run. When I say stop, stop. And when we get the real deal,” he held up his wooden sword, “don’t be stupid. Now go.”

Malcolm stalked off to the small gap between the bookshelves without a glance back. Samar was only a half-step behind him. Samar glanced behind him and saw that Cara and Tam were following too. He let out a sigh—either of relief or frustration, he couldn’t say.

Word Count:

The Library was eerily silent as they walked along the endless dusty shelves. Malcolm fiddled with his gun, looking every which way. Cara adjusted and readjusted her bag. Tam stayed mostly still, except for the worried glances she would give everyone, her face ashen. Samar ran his fingers across the books' spines, feeling each bump and shift and crevice. As it went on, he remembered the story of the minotaur and the string and hoped that the trail of disturbed dust he was leaving in his wake would do the same.

They walked and walked, and as they did some of the tension began to ebb and instead flow into boredom. Tam broke the silence first.

“Let's get to know each other better, since we don't have anything else to do, okay? What's home like for everyone?” Her voice, though soft and muffled by the tight space, was booming after the oppressive silence.

Cara spoke first. “Home's great—I really miss it. I'm on an island in Selsai, and there's a spot in the jungle where you can see the entire place from up in a tree. The nymphs are great, if you visit when they're in the right mood, and the jaguar spirit won't hurt you if you respect it. The sunsets are the best.”

Samar balked. “Nymphs? Spirits? Does your world have magic?!”

Cara stiffened. “Magic exists, but it's not allowed.”

“Well why not? Magic is so cool!”

“It just isn't allowed,” she said quickly.

“She doesn't want to talk about that right now,” Tam said gently. “How about you tell us about your home instead?”

Samar hesitated for a moment but saw the look on Cara's face. He spoke. "Home's good. It's summer, so I don't have to go to school, and some cool new kids moved in next door. You already know the big stuff, though."

"I do. But Cara and Malcolm probably don't."

"Oh, right. Um... everybody's connected all the time. There're more movies and TV than anybody can watch, and you can be friends with somebody halfway around the world. Everybody has to go to school. It can get boring, but everybody gets some sorta education. People can get mean, but people are mean everywhere. And everybody's really up in arms about some sorta election going on."

"An election? Do you mean the midterms?" Tam asked, looking at him for the first time since they had begun the conversation.

Samar shook his head. "No. It's the presidential one."

Tam asked her next question quietly and carefully. "Samar, what year is it?"

He raised an eyebrow, again wondering if this was some sort of trick question. "It's 2016."

Tam paused before speaking. "I'm from 2018."

Samar's eyes brightened. "Really? What's it like?"

"It might change, if I tell you. And, well, you aren't going to like it much even if I did."

"Please?"

Tam shook her head. "It's too risky. You've read that Bradbury story, haven't you? The one with the butterfly?"

"'A Sound of Thunder'? Yeah, but what—oh. Telling me would change everything, right?"

“It might. It’s best not to find out.”

There was another beat of silence as Samar processed this, and as they all waited for Malcolm’s turn. He stayed silent.

“What’s everybody going to do after we get out of here?” Cara asked in the silence.

Samar answered, “I’m gonna go home and play video games with my friends. Have my mom’s homemade falafel and baklava for dessert. I’m gonna sleep in my own bed for about a week, and not run for a month.” He could already feel where the calluses and blisters were starting to form on his feet.

Tam was next. “I’m going to see my friends, tell them how much they mean to me. But honestly, I won’t do much different than normal—it’s not like anyone would believe where I’ve been.”

Again, they paused for a moment for Malcolm to speak. He didn’t.

“I’m gonna tell my best friend everything about this place,” Cara said, smiling. “And then I’m gonna beg his mom to make us her caramelized mangoes. I’m not gonna have a long time to recover though. I’m gonna be on a boat to get to school next week—an engineering program.”

“Oh, my dad’s an engineer!” Samar beamed. “He makes buildings.”

Cara smiled. “I’m gonna make airships.”

“What are airships?”

“They’re like ships, but they fly through the air.”

Samar thought that the dismissive comment would be the end of the conversation, until Cara spoke again. “Do you wanna see some?”

Word Count:

Samar nodded. Cara pulled her sketchbook out of her bag as they walked, flipping it to the middle. She handed it over. On the thick, rough pages were designs the likes of which he had never seen before—hulking, sailed ships like in his pirate books, except for the inner workings she had drawn, which somehow kept the thing afloat not only in the water, but also in the air. Others had giant balloons, like the Goodyear blimp he had seen a couple of times on TV.

He passed it back, his voice low. “You’re gonna do great.”

They continued walking and chatting, Malcolm leading them silently. Samar was deep into his thoughts when Malcolm stopped suddenly, and it was all Samar could do to stop himself from running into him. The others followed suit. Cara peered over, craning her neck to see whatever was going on. Tam made her way to the front, though she seemed as if she wanted to step back further instead.

“Is this the place?” Tam asked, her voice soft.

Malcolm ignored her and knelt next to the shelf, where he began throwing book after book behind him. Samar braced as best he could, covering his face with his hands and hunkering down. Malcolm swore.

“They’re not there?” Tam raised an eyebrow.

He snarled. “Someone must’ve stolen them,” he turned to face Tam and Cara. “And who here has a habit of sneaking out, hm?”

Cara balked. “You think I did this? I didn’t steal your swords!”

Her back was straight, her fists balled, and she glared up at Malcolm, as if daring him to outright accuse her. Tam stepped between them, shoulders hunched and not quite meeting his eyes.

“Malcolm, think about this. What would she do with the swords? We all want to—need to—get out of here and taking away our weapons just hurts all of us. I know—”

Word Count:

The harsh, jarring sound of the slap resounded between the shelves. Samar stepped back in shock, and Cara ran to Tam's side, where she had taken a few jarred steps back. Tam's face was already beginning to swell. Cara kept her head down, her hands shaking.

Her voice was soft. "I didn't steal anything, I swear."

"I don't care," he snarled.

He kept walking as Cara helped Tam to her feet. Samar followed him closely, though he glanced back at the pair with a pained expression. It was some time later before Samar could finally find his voice again to ask the question that had been burning on his lips.

"Why'd you do that?" There was a twinge of fear in his voice.

Malcolm looked at him for a long moment, and Samar felt like a bug under a microscope. He grunted. "She was hysterical. Had to keep everyone calm and collected. It's what we've gotta do to keep order."

"What do you mean?" Samar swallowed hard.

"We've gotta keep them in line. We can't get out of here unless we keep order, and that's how we keep order. That's our job. Always has been, always will. Besides," Malcolm offered a smile. "You're already on your way. I saw you training with Cara. You'll be a proper man in no time, don't you worry."

Samar only nodded, lost in thought.

A few moments later, Cara ran up to the front of the pack, though she gave Malcolm a wide berth.

"I need the book. We need to find the next one."

Samar nodded, but stopped halfway, glancing at Malcolm. Malcolm shook his head slightly.

“No. I’ve got it handled.”

“Don’t be an idiot. We figured it out together, we find them together. And if you had it handled, why haven’t you gotten the book out yet? We’ve just been wandering, not looking for anything with the code! You forgot, didn’t you? So you could have a chat?” Her voice rose until she was nearly screaming.

“Stop.” His voice was steady, but he looked at her pleadingly, nodding slightly towards Malcolm. He dropped to a whisper. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“By him, or by you?” She turned on her heel and walked back to where Tam was trailing behind, not waiting for a response.

After a few moments of fumbling, he unzipped his bag and took out *The Library Book*, flipping to the back page where the scrawled code was written. The next was 006.3 ARB. He glanced the the books he was walking past and saw, in order, 121.1 AGR, 121.1 BEC, 121.1 DAR.

“We’re going the wrong way. We need to turn around.”

Cara turned on her heel and started leading the way without a moment’s hesitation. Samar rushed to the front again, this time next to Cara. Cara stared straight ahead, silent. Samar buried himself in the work, looking instead at the shelves as they walked past. But within a few moments, he was pulled out of the work by a sharp tap on his shoulder. He looked up, bewildered.

“What...?”

Cara stood next to him, her voice a harsh, insistent whisper. “There’s something coming. I dunno what.”

Samar finally heard the sound, one that he had drowned out until now, too engrossed in his work and his thoughts. It was a whirring sound, like gears, but it wasn’t quite right. It didn’t sound metallic. It sounded organic, the clack and clatter of bone against bone.

They ran. Cara led the pack, turning corner after sharp corner wherever the shelves had a break in them. Samar was close on her heels. Tam and Malcolm were in the back of the pack. The whirring sound grew louder, closer. Cara ran faster, as fast as she could, and the others pushed themselves as well. Still, the sound grew louder, closer. Cara flew around every corner, but the sound still grew louder, closer. Samar risked a glance back.

The thing was massive. It had no face, no eyes, no body or limbs. Instead it was a massive ball of teeth and claws, rending the wooden floor below and tearing up the books on either side of it. Samar saw the wicked sharpness of curved claws, the jagged edge of a serrated tooth. Though it had no face to speak of, it looked ravenous. And it was gaining on them.

They ran and ran and ran, but still it gained on them. Samar whirled around to face it as the others turned the corner, holding the wooden sword in both hands. Samar held the sword high, though the tip of it still dragged with more weight. He readied his weapon and steadied his breathing, looking directly at the oncoming blur. It grew nearer and nearer, and as it did Samar could see the details more clearly. He nearly gagged. Around the outside of the ball were the freshest bones. Some were splintered; others had the residue of dried blood still on them. Closer in, from what he could see, the bones were polished, gleaming white. He wondered if his bones would be added next.

Word Count:

When the whirring, clacking, clattering cacophony of the creature became deafening, and he could see the minute details of each bone, he swung his sword down, aiming for the center of the creature. Halfway through the swing, however, he was jerked away. The creature kept going, its path of destruction rolling over where he had just stood a moment ago. Tam pulled him into an embrace as Cara, wide-eyed, put her finger to her lips.

A minute passed. Samar held his breath. All were silent. Cara had her hand over her mouth and nose to quiet her breathing. Tam held them both tight, eyes closed tight and breathing shallow. Malcolm stood perfectly still, his gun still half-raised. He was ashen. The seconds dragged by agonizingly. Every moment they listened for the clatter and clack, ears straining and hearts beating fast in their throats. Samar hoped that the thing couldn't hear his, it was beating so hard, so fast, so loud. The whirring faded into nothingness. Tam let them go, and he looked around wildly. He spotted his sword that had clattered to the ground, the noise of it masked by the deafening creature. He took his backpack, ripping it open. He looked on the ground around him. He peeked around the corner where he had stood just a minute before. But *The Library Book* was nowhere to be found. He realized with a sinking feeling that he must have dropped it—and that it must have been in the creature's path of destruction. *The Library Book* was gone.

Samar couldn't look at any of them, instead staring at the ground. "I lost it." He swallowed. "I had the book. I dropped it. Now it's gone, and we can't get out..."

Tam sat next to him, putting an arm around him. "It's okay. You're more important than any book, even if it would get us out. We would've saved any one of you before we got the book safe."

“Um, about that...” Cara said, opening her satchel. Samar looked up in time to see her pull the familiar volume out of her bag, scuffed slightly by the charcoal but otherwise undamaged. He stared at her in amazement.

She shrugged. “Tam had you, so I snatched the book before it got run over. We can’t do anything without it other than wander.”

Cara nodded and put it back in her bag before giving Samar a half smile. “Don’t do something stupid like that again, yeah?”

Samar looked down. “I won’t drop it again, I promise.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Samar picked up his sword, unsure of what to say. He simply gave a nod.

Cara held out the book for him to take back.

“No, you keep it,” Samar said with a weak smile. “It’s safer with you anyways.”

They walked in tense silence for hours, ears straining to hear the telltale whirring clack that meant the beast had returned, but it never came. Samar had his club raised for most of it, though by the time Cara quietly called for them to stop, the chunk of wood was dragging on the ground behind him. His feet ached, his legs were stiff and sore. He could feel each blister and callus on his feet, and when he sat down beside the shelf, he fell heavily on the floor, sighing in relief as he bent his legs, knees close to his chest. Tam and Malcolm were in similar states. Tam sat next to him, cross-legged on the ground, slipping off her shoes to rub life back into her feet. Malcolm sat, leaned up against the opposite wall and rubbing his temples. They were both exhausted. He looked up blearily to see Cara plucking a book off the shelf, peering at it, eyebrows knitted together as she turned it over in her hands. She was clearly exhausted too, shoulders drooping and posture no longer straight as it was before, but she picked up the book

Word Count:

from the shelf before she sat down. She wasted no time in searching through it, heedless of the pain she was clearly in.

“Is that it?”

It took a few moments or Cara to respond. She shook her head, making her spring-like curls bounce and wobble before settling again. “Maybe. I...don’t know what this means.”

She passed him the book. On the spine was the right number, 006.3 ARB , but the title was odd. On the spine, in big blocky letters, was the title: *The Metaphorical Brain: Neural Networks and Beyond*.

Samar said, “Well, we learned about metaphor in class last week. It’s when you’re saying something is something when it’s not. So, it isn’t about actual brains. And I think ‘neural’ means brain stuff—how it gets information and sends it back out.”

“And networks are how things travel,” Cara said slowly. “So, it’s a book about how information travels like things do in the brain?”

“Seems like it.” Samar shrugged.

“But why this book?” Cara said, coiling and uncoiling a finger in her hair.

“Does it matter?”

He flipped to the page, and Cara took out *The Library Book*, flipping to where the code was written. He glanced over and found the line and word, tracing his way with a finger in the gloom.

“The.”

“What? What does it say?” Cara asked quickly, craning her neck to see.

“It just says ‘the’.”

“Oh.” Cara sunk down to the floor before looking at the others. “We should rest here. I can take watch.”

START REVISIONS HERE START REVISIONS HERE START REVISIONS HERE

Samar nodded, but stopped himself as he looked to Malcolm, who was leaning against one of the shelves, arms crossed and gun down, fiddling with it with an unoccupied hand.

“We keep going until we find the next. Got it?” Malcolm raised an eyebrow at the rest of the group, though his stare rested squarely on Samar.

Samar was half a beat too late when he responded, “Yeah. We should do what Malcolm says.”

Cara looked as if she were about to argue when Tam shot her a warning look. Instead, she started stretching, folding over to stretch her legs and arms. Tam did the same, loosening her stiff muscles as best she could.

“Now!” Malcolm snapped, scowling at the pair.

Samar jumped to his feet and immediately regretted it. His muscles locked up, and pain shot up his legs at the sudden movement after walking for so long. He wanted nothing more than to collapse back on the floor. But that wasn’t an option. He stretched a little, and the pain eased a little until he could move without too much trouble. Samar offered a hand to Cara, but she ignored him, pushing herself off the floor to stand alone. He looked away.

They didn’t make it even halfway to the next section of code before Malcolm called it, hunkering down to sleep. He was out in seconds, gun still held loosely in one hand. Samar, Cara, and Tam sat, Samar on one side, Tam and Cara on the other.

Word Count:

“I...” Samar began, looking down.

Tam spoke quietly. “It’s okay, Samar.”

“It’s not.” Cara said quickly. Her eyes were shiny with tears.

“Cara—”

“Don’t.” She turned away, settling down to sleep, though he could see her shoulders shaking with sobs. Tam gave her a sympathetic look before turning to Cara. Samar turned away, settling down to sleep. He thought it must have been hours before he finally drifted off into restless sleep and muddled dreams.

Hours later, Tam woke the group, gently shaking each out of their dreams and nightmares. Samar woke up and uncurled from the ball that he had been in to see Cara blink awake, still sitting up, slumped over the still-open books. He couldn’t help but smile. Malcolm woke last, and Samar couldn’t help but notice the way Tam touched him, gingerly and fearfully, like waking a venomous snake. He suppressed a shudder.

Malcolm stood and surveyed them before holding out a hand. The Library was silent as the moment hung in the air. It was only a moment later that Samar realized that Malcolm was looking expectantly at him, showing the faintest hint of a frown.

“I don’t have it.” Samar said quickly, glancing at Cara.

“I do.” Cara held her bag tighter, where the corner of the slim book was visible. “We found it. We solved it. We’re keeping it.” Her voice only faltered slightly.

Malcolm stalked closer, and Tam stepped between them again. “Malcolm, no one has to get hurt. She has a bag she can carry it in, and she can tell you what to look for.”

He turned on his heel. His voice was short. “Follow.” They did.

Cara's voice was soft when she read out the number. "You're looking for 823.8, on the binding."

Malcolm did not respond, and the rest of the journey was spent in tense silence.

Malcolm stopped abruptly; Samar almost ran him over before skidding to a stop.

"Here," Malcolm barked, and Samar saw what they were looking for: a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* with the designation 398 CAR. Cara rushed forward to take it off the shelf.

Cara pulled the book. Samar's eyes grew wide as he looked over her shoulder and he backed into her with a dull thud. Oozing darkness was cresting above the impossibly tall shelves, seeping through the joints and cracks between the shelves. Cara turned around, a faint scowl on her face. It disappeared a moment later as she took in the sight.

"Run!" she screamed. Samar started sprinting before she had finished the word. The others were close on his heels.

They ran and ran, but no matter how fast or how far their legs carried them, the seeping dark seemed to grow ever closer. The only sound they heard was the deafening roar of the dark waves, the only sights the darkness of the waves themselves and the darkness of the shadows they cast ahead of them. It was growing louder, the shadows growing longer ahead of them. The darkness was gaining speed, rushing towards them with frightful force. Samar turned, stricken, and saw Cara do the same, stuffing the books inside the safety of her bag. In moments, they were enveloped in darkness.

It was warm and thick and stifling, slightly uncomfortable, like the sweater your aunt knit you that she started two years ago when you were three sizes smaller, pilled and picked and hideous but still comforting and warm. Every sound was muffled and slowed by the viscous black, and there was no light at all. His aches and pains melted away as a wave of calm washed

Word Count:

over him. He sank to the ground. He had never felt so rested, so relieved. Days on end walking on and on with no end in sight, the darkness was warm and safe and comforting, the weight of it reassuring. He sighed deeply, his heart slowing from its previously panicked staccato rhythm.

It took all the strength Samar could muster to call out to the rest. He was greeted by silence.

Then a voice pierced the silence, warm and comforting like the darkness itself. “Is everyone here?” Tam asked. There should have been an edge of panic in her voice. There was none.

“Here,” Samar called, half-certain the darkness would flow into him. He tried to get up. The darkness seemed to pull him back down as the bone-weariness began to sink in again. He sank back to the ground.

The others echoed, one and then the other, a chorus of ‘here’s. Everyone was accounted for, though they seemed farther apart than they had been before. But that may have been the muffled darkness making it seem that way.

Tam called out again, her voice surer than just a moment before. “Everyone, I need you to drop your weapons or put them away if you have room. Then follow my voice and find each other. Hang onto each other. Understand?”

They echoed variations on ‘yes’. He pushed up again and immediately regretted it. Though he still was comforted by the surrounding dark, but it was thinner here. It was not the same. Still, Samar shuffled towards Tam’s voice, every step unsure. He heard a step behind him and spun around, eyes wide but unseeing. He reached out and felt a hand grasp his, small and warm.

“Cara?”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

They walked through the darkness, following Tam’s voice. Cara took her hand in her free one, and Malcolm took Tam’s free hand. Samar breathed a sigh of relief.

Tam spoke again. “Let’s keep moving the way we were before. We need to go there anyway.”

Samar nodded. A moment later he realized that no one could see him—he couldn’t even see the back of his own hand. Instead, he said, “I think that’s a good idea.”

Malcolm snapped. “No. We go out the other end. Follow me.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. We have no idea how large this thing is, but we know how fast it’s spreading and—”

Malcolm’s voice was low. “Stop. Now.”

Cara squeezed Samar’s hand tight. Samar squeezed back. He could feel the color draining from his face.

Tam took a deep breath. Her voice was shaky. “No. I’m not going to sit here and do nothing when you’re endangering us all!”

A shot rang out. Cara and Samar were pulled to the ground as the weight of Tam’s body hit the floor below with a dull thud. Cara screamed, but the sound was swallowed up by the darkness. Samar fumbled for something, anything in the dark, and found his hand on a shoulder. He shook it, but whoever it was—Tam or Cara—didn’t respond. He shook her shoulder harder, and her head lolled to the side. He could feel something warm and wet on her cheek. He jerked back. He couldn’t feel any breath. Samar scrambled back, heart pounding, until he backed directly into Cara. Again, he felt a wetness on her cheeks. He froze, holding his breath, until he heard her sobs as well. Tears. Just tears.

Word Count:

Samar's voice was dull, hollow. "She's not breathing."

"No no no no no," she muttered desperately as she crawled over to Tam's body. She pressed an ear to Tam's chest and jerked back a moment when she felt the hole, small and deep. A moment later, she raced into action again, pressing over and over on Tam's chest. It only pumped out more blood as her body began to cool. Samar sat with her, unsure of what to do or say. He was frozen in shock and fear.

He heard Malcolm's gruff voice. "Follow me. Now."

He scrambled up, heedless of the darkness around him now. He pulled Cara up beside her, feeling the shake of her shoulders as she sobbed silently.

"But—" Cara began between sobs, but Samar squeezed her hand tight in a silent, desperate 'no'.

She ripped her hand away.

Samar whispered, "Don't run, please. We'll get out of this. He'll follow. It's safer to get out first."

Cara hesitated before taking his hand back. Hers was shaking.

Samar felt for Malcolm's hand but felt the gun instead, the warmth of the muzzle. He smelled the sharpness of gunpowder, just like at the shooting range at summer camp. His stomach dropped and soured before finding Malcolm's hand. It was all he could do not to jerk his hand back instead.

Malcolm led the remaining pair through the darkness, though each step became harder and harder, as if the darkness were growing thicker and thicker, trying to pull them in and keep them. But every time they faltered, Malcolm would jerk them violently along until the darkness began to thin and the pull began to lessen, and they could see the light streaming through the

Word Count:

darkness like it was a thin piece of fabric. Malcolm parted the last remnants of the darkness, and Samar stepped through, squinting at the sudden light. He turned and pulled Cara through. Her hands were covered in blood, and her cheeks were streaked with it. He saw the blood that was on his own hand and went ashen. He turned to face Malcolm. Samar was about to say something when Malcolm stopped him with a sharp look. He gulped and nodded.

“The book. Now.” Malcolm barked. When she didn’t hand it over immediately, he lowered his voice to a growl. “Or would you like to join your friend Tam back there, hm?”

Cara handed it over with shaking hands. Malcolm snatched it from her, turned, and began walking without another word. They followed silently. They walked and walked until they found the next book, the weight of what had happened as heavy as the darkness had been, if not more so. They walked for hours upon hours, silent, waiting for the rush of darkness, the clack of bone against bone, or the lilt of Tam’s soft voice. But they never came.

After what felt like hours, Cara spoke quietly. “We left her. She’ll never go home now.”

“We didn’t have a choice. But well...my dad always says that when people die they’re in a better place.”

Cara shook her head, her hair flying every which way. “Not here. My...if you aren’t home you just wander, or worse. It—it happened to my uncle and now it’s happened to Tam. They’re just gonna wander forever and nobody’s even gonna know what happened to her...”

Samar laced his hand in hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “We know.”

“If we ever get out of here, I’m coming back for her.”

“I will too. I promise.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way, until Malcolm stopped them.

“Here.”

He plucked the book from the shelf and threw it at Samar, who caught it with fumbling fingers. He threw *The Library Book* at Cara, who was only marginally quicker. Samar turned the book over in his hands to read the number and the title. The number was correct—291.13 CAM. The title was strange—*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Malcolm pinned Cara with a sharp look. “What page?”

It took a moment before Cara could find her voice, and in that time Malcolm grew impatient. He began flicking the chamber in and out, in and out. Samar went ashen as he saw the one missing bullet from the chamber.

“Page eighty-six, paragraph twenty-eight, word one.”

Samar flipped the page, scanned each paragraph, until he found the word. “I,” he said dully.

“On to the next. Pack up.” Malcolm plucked the book out of Cara’s shaking hands and started walking. They could only follow.

The rest of the journey was spent in tense silence. Samar felt numb, and everything seemed just as muffled as in the depths of the darkness. The only things that anchored him were his backpack filled with books and the reassuring weight of Cara’s hand on his. Time had no meaning, and neither did direction in the dim, maze-like belly of the Library. He kept walking and kept walking, eyes straight ahead but unseeing.

He was shaken from his stupor by a sudden stop and Malcolm’s roar of rage. It took a few moments for Samar to process that what he said were, in fact, words.

“What the hell is this?!” Malcolm turned around, eyes gleaming.

“What’s what?” Cara asked, taking an instinctive step back. She let go of Samar’s hand.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

Malcolm advanced. Samar leapt to the side.

“You stole the swords. You stole the book. You’re responsible for all of this!”

Samar saw the cityscape of books behind Malcolm was missing a thick volume, making each side lean in.

“I didn’t steal anything! There weren’t any swords to begin with, I never saw the book, and I’m not the one who killed Tam. You killed her!” Cara screamed, tears streaming down her face.

Malcolm stopped fidgeting with his gun and instead raised it in a steady hand directly at Cara.

“I thought you’d learned your lesson from Tam. Guess I was wrong.”

“No, no, please, I—I won’t talk back again I swear!” Cara cried.

He didn’t even blink. “Samar, here. Now.”

Malcolm jerked his chin, gesturing for Samar to stand by his side. Samar complied, ashen. *She’ll wander forever.* Cara’s words echoed in his mind. He could feel the knife in his pocket, the heaviness of it. He could feel the weight of Malcolm’s order bearing down on him.

“I’ll hold it steady. All you have to do is pull the trigger.”

Samar nodded minutely. He could feel the heavy coldness of the blade in his pocket, but knew that the gun would somehow be heavier, colder. He took a step closer. He looked Cara in the eye. He took his hands from his pockets. He reached towards Malcolm, up towards the gun level with his torso. He put one hand on the gun, one finger on the trigger. He moved his other hand to the shelf behind them, only a few inches away. Malcolm smiled. There was a small click as the mechanism was struck.

Cara’s eyes grew wide. “Please, Samar, you’re better than this, you’re my friend and—and I can’t die, not here, just not here—”

Word Count:

Samar pressed the blade to Malcolm's back, between two of his ribs. Malcolm balked, wordless, like a beached fish.

Samar's hand and voice were steady. "Drop the gun."

Malcolm scowled. "If you touch me with that knife, I'll shoot her."

"You'll die too." He paused. "You're too much of a coward to risk that. You shot Tam when she was in the dark, when she couldn't see it coming, couldn't defend herself. You're a coward and a fraud. Drop the gun."

He did.

"Now kick it over to Cara."

"What?" Malcolm's voice dripped venom and contempt.

"Kick it over to Cara, now."

He complied. Cara grabbed the gun, staring at it with a mix of amazement and horror before stuffing it in her bag.

"Now lean against the shelf with your hands behind your back."

He complied. Samar fumbled with Malcolm's belt for a moment until it came loose. Within a minute, he had fastened it around Malcolm's wrists as makeshift restraints. After giving them one more tug, he stepped away, toward Cara.

"Are...are you okay?" he asked.

Cara nodded, brows furrowed and eyes tightly shut. "I thought you—"

"I didn't. I wouldn't."

There was a long moment of silence, until Samar spoke again. "What do we do now? The book is gone."

Cara gave a weak smile. “We’ll figure it out together, like always. But for now, I think we all need some rest.”

Malcolm had already sunk to the floor, and Samar sat on the opposite wall a moment later, exhausted. Cara sat nearby, though she stayed awake, keeping watch.

Samar wasn’t sure how much time had passed between falling asleep and waking, but Cara was already up and moving, laying out the books she had in her bag—*The Library Book*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Metaphorical Brain*. She had them all lined up in a row, open to their respective pages, as she pored over them. And she had another book with her too, one that Samar had only seen in the camp site. Her sketchbook. In its place in her bag, strapped across her shoulder, he could see the glint of the gun. She had a piece of charcoal poised in her hands, her tongue sticking partway out as she concentrated.

Samar cleared his throat. Cara looked up as if waking from a dream.

“Oh. You’re awake! I need the books in your bag.”

There was no room for argument, though there was always room for confusion.

“What? What for?”

“These books mean something.”

“Yes...?” Samar said hesitantly, hoping she hadn’t cracked. “They’re the ones on the code. They spell out stuff.”

“More than that. Give me yours and I’ll explain.”

Dumbfounded, Samar handed her the books he had—*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and the book from his local library, *The Code Book*. He gave her both of them, but she quickly handed *The Code Book* back. She placed the other alongside the rest, matching them up in line with their place in the code.

Word Count:

“We have ‘Librarian the am I’ and then an empty spot, but that doesn’t make any sense.”

Samar flipped them around so that it spelled out, ‘I am the Librarian’ with a space that he wasn’t quite sure of where to put. “Maybe the last word is his name? I mean, if he didn’t want to be found, it’d make sense.”

Cara shook her head. “No. I mean, that might be it, but we’re missing something—and not just the last book. Can’t see the jungle for the trees... there’s something about these books in this order beyond the words. I mean, there’s thousands of books here that have the word ‘am’. Why this one?” She tapped on *Alice in Wonderland*.

“Well, Alice went through a door and got trapped in a new world, like we did,” Samar said, beginning to catch on.

“And *The Metaphorical Brain* means something that thinks but not like us.”

“And *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*... honestly, I’ve got no clue with that one.”

Samar sighed. “This isn’t helping. Maybe we can try another code?”

Cara shrugged. “It’s as good a plan as any.”

Samar pulled out his code book again and set it on the floor so that they could both see. They read and read until they heard the clink of metal. Samar’s head snapped up, and Cara whirled around to see that Malcolm had managed to worm the restraints loose, just enough that it could slip halfway down each hand. Malcolm froze, and Cara stood, offering a hand up to Samar. He took it with a nod of thanks.

Cara reached into her back and took out the gun, aiming it at Malcolm. He paled and tried to worm away. Samar held him back by his restraints.

Cara spoke, on edge. “Hold still. I don’t want to kill you, but I will if I have to.”

Malcolm froze. Samar tightened the restraints again, more tightly than strictly necessary.

“We should take turns watching him. One of us watches, the other reads.”

Samar nodded. “You’ve been working on the code for a while. I can watch him.”

Cara nodded back and, without a word, went back to her reading.

They both read the books in turn, cover to cover, looking for any answers they might provide, any clue that they might lead them towards. When his head hit the book for the third time, he knew it was time to take a break and rest. Malcolm was already knocked out for the night. He carefully closed the book and set it sideways to put it back in his backpack when Cara grabbed his wrist, wide-eyed.

“Wait.” She took *The Library Book* again and flipped to the last page until she found what she was looking for. She grinned.

“Uh... are you okay?” Samar asked. There was a gleam in her eye that was a bit unsettling.

“Perfect. This is it! This is the book!” She tapped on the spine of the book in Samar’s hands, where the Clairemont tag was placed. The formatting was different, but the number was unmistakable: 652.809 SIN.

“Page thirty-four, paragraph forty-five!” she read off. Samar flipped to page thirty-four, but only counted five paragraphs. Nowhere near the forty-five it demanded.

“Did you mean paragraph four, word five?” he ventured.

She shook her head and passed the book to him. Sure enough, there was no dash between the two numbers, not even a space. On a whim, or some sort of intuition, he flipped back to the table of contents and traced his way down.

“Page thirty-four is where the chapter “Book Ciphers” starts and the next chapter doesn’t begin till page forty-six! That’s it!”

Word Count:

They waited in silence for something to happen—a door appearing, a trick shelf swinging open—until they realized with sinking stomachs that it was not happening. Samar stood and paced, clutching the book close to him, until he stopped face to face with the empty space on the shelf. And he thought, *well, it's worth a shot*. He put the book in where there was an empty space. It fit perfectly. Nothing happened for a long moment. Then he heard a quiet click. Then nothing again. Again, he thought, *might as well*.

He whispered, “I am the Librarian.”

It was only after a long stretch of silence that he realized nothing would happen. Within the same breath, he realized Cara had joined him. He felt his cheeks grow hot with embarrassment, but Cara gave him a smile.

“Mind if I try?” Cara stepped forward. “I am the Librarian.”

“Oh, would you all just give it a rest already?” Malcolm had cracked one eye open. His voice cut through the moment like a warm knife through butter. “It didn’t work the first time, it’s not gonna work the—”

He was cut off as the shelf behind him swung open and he toppled over, cursing. It opened to reveal a small alcove with a podium and a single, familiar wooden door. Cara stepped through, then Samar. Malcolm scrambled to his feet. The shelf closed behind them.

In the small, now-closed room, a voice boomed from everywhere. “Hello. I have been waiting for you.”

“And who are you?” Samar asked, looking around wildly.

“I am the Library. And one of you must be my Librarian.”

“We’ve been looking for the Librarian ever since we arrived, but we haven’t found him...” Cara faltered.

Word Count:

“But you have.” The voice—the Library—sounded amused.

“I don’t understand. We didn’t find anyone.”

“You found each other, and you found me. That old Librarian in that book of yours is long gone. He abandoned me, left me to my own devices. Well, you can see how well that turned out,” they said bitterly. Images of the darkness, the claws, and the gun floated through their minds. “I can’t be trusted to run things by myself here. Alone, I have no context. The book says ‘a blur of hands and teeth’ so I make that. The book says, ‘the black pit of despair’, so I make that. It is what it is, without context. I need one of you.”

Samar gulped. “To—to keep?”

The Library chuckled. “I would not make you stay forever. As you might have noticed, time stretches here. I need company and context, not a fellow prisoner to watch rot like I have been rotting. Cara, you are my Librarian. You found the first and last books in my code. You solved the puzzle.”

Terror and fury warred on Cara’s face, but Samar couldn’t help but be disappointed. She shook her head. “No.”

“No?”

“No. I won’t do it. You trapped us here, hurt us, chased us, let Malcolm hurt us. You let Tam *die* in that darkness alone. I won’t help you. I don’t want anything to do with you. Just let me go home!”

“Wait. I was not finished. You may come and go, but if you choose to leave for good, I ask only that you take on an apprentice so someone else can become the Librarian. The title has been passed down from master to apprentice since I came into existence—since the first people shared knowledge. Once you are the Librarian, you may begin to train your apprentice.”

Word Count:

There was a long moment of silence. Cara looked from Ollie to Samar. He hoped that he did not show his disappointment.

“And I’m the Librarian now, right?”

“Yes. That is correct.”

“Then I’m taking Samar as my apprentice right away.” She smiled.

Samar stared at her, dumbfounded. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. This place is weird, and it—if it hadn’t taken us, put us in that darkness, Tam might still be alive. I can’t help it. I don’t want anything to do with it. Besides, I’ve got work to do elsewhere.”

He nodded, feeling the heat coming back to his cheeks again.

“One more thing,” Cara said. “How do we get back home?”

“Touch the door and step through. You will be where you were before you came here.”

Samar looked behind him, where Malcolm was leaning against the wall, still bound. He looked at Cara, who met his gaze. They grinned and rushed at Malcolm together, pulling him towards the door. He tried to struggle, but it was no use. Within moments, they had the door open to an unfamiliar library. Together, they pushed him out the door and slammed it behind him

“Look, Cara, now that we’re alone...”

Cara raised an eyebrow. “We aren’t. If we’re gonna talk, let’s talk outside.”

Samar nodded and followed her out into the maze of the Library, though they did not venture far.

“So, what is it you wanted to tell me?”

“Well uh,” he started fidgeting. “So, I’m sorry I was a jerk earlier to you and Tam and everything. It wasn’t right. And uh... it’s really cool that you figured out the code, and I’m so glad I get to be your apprentice and I really hope you don’t take this the wrong way but I really like you, and I have since we first met and...do you wanna go to the school dance with me?!” he blurted.

The few moments of silence that followed seemed to stretch an eternity.

“Samar, I only like girls.”

“Oh. Uh. That’s great. I mean, I like you. And I wanted to go out with you. But it’s cool you like girls. Cause I like girls too, and—”

Cara laughed. Samar went silent. “I’d love to go to the dance with you, but just as friends, okay?”

Samar chuckled, rubbing his neck. “Yeah. Okay.”

They both smiled and headed back into the chamber, where the door was still waiting. Cara gave him one last glance and one last smile before she stepped through the door. He saw a small classroom, brightly colored but dulled with age and wear. A shelf with a few books and many, many scrolls covered one wall. He grinned. Samar was not far behind, opening the door a few moments after it had whispered shut behind her. He stepped through and the solid oak door closed behind him.

He took one last look at it, before turning away, headed back to the front. To his shock, the lights were still on, the library still open. In fact, it was still daylight out when he looked out of the windows. He looked around in amazement. It must have only been a few hours at most. He could hardly believe that it hadn’t been a lifetime ago when he ran into the library, out of the rain.

Word Count:

Samar was startled out of his thoughts with a clearing of throat nearby. His head snapped to the side to see Mrs. Weisz, who looked at him sharply.

“Five minutes to closing, Sam.”

“Oh—oh, right. Um.”

Samar could feel his ears burning as he fumbled with his bag. He pulled out *The Code Book*, which had been stuffed inside his bag so quickly he hadn't noticed it had been open. The binding was cracked slightly, and on the page it was open to, in the same margin space that the code had been written in, was the seal of the Library. He handed it over with a sheepish smile.

“I dunno what happened, but...”

Mrs. Weisz glanced at it, and instead of her usual scowl that she gave those base enough to damage books, she smiled. She had a glint in her eye.

Samar grinned back. “I am the Librarian.”

THE END