

In my sophomore year of university, my friend Enrique and I set out for the lost library at the edge of Mexico City. At the university, the lost library was one of the first things you learned of.

Before physics, before history, even before your first meal in the dorm cafeteria, you would hear from prefects and professors alike the story of the lost library.

The story of dark mists that obscured the vale to the east of the city. The story of the ancient monsters that guarded its dark corners. The story of the winding maze that hid the true depths of the library from the prying eyes of mortals.

Upon returning home for Christmas my freshman year, I asked my father about the library. He was an alumnus of the institution. After dinner, in his study, the fire blazing in it's hearth, I asked him.

His eyes glossed over, a tumbler of mezcal slightly shaking in his hand. He stared out the window for long seconds, then turned and stared into my soul. Half plea, half command. "Don't."

But for Enrique and I, the temptation of the legend would only grow and grow through our first year. For every story of danger and evil, there were two of lost powers and ancient Aztec

treasure. The divine claims of our ancestors hidden away beneath the mountains to the east.

That was the first fact we had gathered. Always the stories spoke of a vale to the east, and the library hidden beneath it.

The second fact came from my Professor of Mesoamerican studies. An old German who had moved to the City after the war. He always said he was from Switzerland and denied spending time in the trenches. The heavy gash across his left eye always left me wondering.

I don't remember how Enrique & I learned of his mutual fascination of the library, but after a semester of conversation and questions it was from the old German we learned of the maze at the entrance.

"Not a labyrinth, like that of Minos." He spoke in a harsh accent. "This is not a contraption to keep a darkness in, but a gate, to keep the weak out." A fire burned in his eyes as he spoke these words. His eyes darted about the dusty office. At the stuffed jaguar head on the door behind us. At the shrunken head floating in a jar on his desk. As if this artifacts would reveal these secrets to the Dean of the History department.

He leaned in close. "You must promise to tell no one of this." Enrique and I looked at each other, then back at the

Professor. "No, of course you wouldn't and it is only us three in the room..."

A dark smile crept across my teacher's face. A chill ran down my spine. In one dramatic motion, the Professor swept the papers from his desk and unrolled an ancient map. The vellum creaked as its long tensed fibers were exposed to linearity and oxygen. A red ink covered the canvas. No, not ink, but blood. A crimson lined outline of the valley and its mountains filled its expanse.

In the east, in the forest surrounding the mountain, seemed a particularly detailed street map. I leaned in and gasped. It was no roadmap, but rather the outline of a maze! The old man laughed.

"That's right. Here is the entrance to, and the outline of, the maze that guards the library from the world. Do you see how close we are to finding the truth of this mystery! I'll begin preparing for an expedition, but I will need you two to do your part as well. Find us a map of the library itself, for there is sure to be more treachery once we find ourselves past this first trap."

While walking away from that meeting Enrique also confessed to feeling a cold draft blow through the room at the moment the German first cracked his vicious smile.

During the summer between semesters, Enrique and I departed for our respective hometowns. I returned north, he traveled south. That summer I swept through every library I could get into. Private or public. Old or new. If there was even a chance of an old map or book I sought it out. On one occasion I even got ahold of an ancient tablet. I am ashamed to admit that there were some buildings I broke into and sometimes I stole from their rightful owners. Still, my escapades turned up nothing.

I do not know what Enrique's summer was like. I never asked and he never told. Yet in the weeks leading up to the fall semester, I received a telegram from him. "I found something."

We waited until after All Saints day to set out. So as to give whatever dark spirits might reside within the library the chance to wail and moan themselves to sleep before our arrival. The Professor had secured a truck and stacked its bed with a weeks worth of provisions.

"It is only a day or two east of here, but who knows how long it will take us to reach the depths of the library." he said, once more flashing his wicked grin.

The expedition set off in high spirits. Even the truck seemed to hum as we traveled east. By the end of the first day we had passed from the city through the suburbs and into that peculiar rural wilderness that surrounds a city.

Close enough to hear shouts or see lights in the darkness, but lonely enough as to be worried about coyotes or thieves in the darkness. We posted a watch through the night, but thankfully nothing came of it. A sign of good fortune I thought, an indicator that our journey would be successful.

The next day we began our ascent out of the valley and into the mountains of the east. We followed a stream up the mountain and into an alpine field at the edge of the old forest. Cobbles had long given way to mud, but here at the edge of the forest the muddy trail gave way to untouched nature.

The Professor consulted his compass and map, cross referenced it with an old army survey he had found in the archives. Nodding to no one in particular, he pressed on the gas and we began to push our way into the old forest.

"Growing up, my mother told me stories of ancient spirits who lived in the forests of Mexico. Before the Conquistadors, before the Aztecs, even before the first humans on the continent." Enrique could never stand silence and had begun to

chatter at us as the old truck pattered deeper into the forest. "They sing, always in the distance. Sometimes to warn travelers of danger. But usually to tempt them into dark pits and winding warrens where no one will find them."

Heavy silence washed over us again. Only the sound of the engine turning over filled the void of the forest as our ears strained to hear something at the edges of sound. All I heard was the trickling of a distant stream, but Enrique seemed even paler than usual.

The Professor seemed entirely focused on navigating us through the forest, dividing his attention equally between gas and gear shift, the map in his left hand, and the forest ahead.

As darkness fell on the second night, a chill fog had settled over the forest and clung to our cloaks and tents. It was a tense few minutes as we fought over lighting a fire or not, but the chill in our bones won over our paranoia.

That night as I stood my watch, no wolves howled, no crickets chirped, and no spirits sang. Even the breathing of my companions seemed to disappear into the night. I have never felt such silence before. I do not recommend it.

Mercifully dawn came quickly and penetrated the fog of the forest, turning the black night into a hazy grey. With the last

of the coals, we warmed coffee and ate cold bread with cheese before setting off.

Midway through the day, an unseen rock cracked the rear axle of the truck and we found ourselves stranded in the forest. Enrique begged for the professor to let us turn back, but the old man seemed possessed. He raised his nose into the damp air and inhaled deeply.

"Do you not smell it boys? I know the mist clouds the senses, but there, underneath the dampness is something else. I'd know the smell of an old library anywhere."

I put my nose in the air and sniffed and my eyes opened in shock. It was true! On a breeze from the east, or what my compass said was east, came the scent of decaying paper. Of drying glue. Of a library.

We tied a rope to the truck to keep us anchored, and loose end in hand we set out into the fog. It took us twenty minutes to zero in on it, but eventually we found the entrance. There in the middle of the forest, a staircase into the cold earth. Stale air blew out of the pit and into our faces, carrying the scent of lost knowledge with it.

The professor bid us return to the truck for supplies, most importantly more rope and torches. After an hour of hauling

boxes back and forth, we took our first steps down the weathered staircase and into the maze.

It took us the better part of an hour to navigate the dark corners and slick stones, but to the Professors credit, he had properly charted the maze on his map, and we found ourselves in a looped chamber filled with shelves upon shelves of books and scrolls. Tomes and tablets. Stone and vellum and even a bit of papyrus here and there.

The aisles were marked with sigils I could not understand, but the Professor rattled off with no effort. "Here we have history, here geography. Agriculture, astronomy, art, music, but where is the magic...?"

Mumbling to himself, the old man wandered off to a distant corner of the chamber. I decided to wander in the opposite direction.

There I found Enrique, looking between the paper in his hand and the room frantically. I suspected he was debating between throwing up or eating the map in his hand. As I passed a few shelves on my way towards him, I felt a warm draft blow out from between them, heard the hiss of air from a chamber further in. Perhaps another chamber hidden behind the shelves? I stopped



and turned to look. He hadn't mentioned a chamber hidden deeper in the pit.

I felt something grab my elbow and it took everything in my power not to shout. I turned to see Enrique at my side. "Friend, we should leave this cursed place! Do you not hear the banshees wailing in the distance? The spirits have been singing to us for the last day. I couldn't sleep last night for their wailing. And in here? This place is filled with nothing but evil!"

Another warm wind blew between us, but this one was filled with decay and the scent of burning copper and dust. My nose began to bleed. A shadow passed over us. The German's grin loomed from ear to ear.

"My boys, what do you have here? Do you not smell it? There is magic hidden in the depths here. Behind these shelves perhaps? Will you seek it with me, or run like cowards? Why are we here if not to learn more about the mysteries of the world. Let us see this expedition through to the end!"

Enrique stepped forward, to stand behind the Professor and the passage. "Enough! Don't you feel the evil emanating from this chamber? My friend here already bleeds because of it. I know you hear the voices. Do you think that is a choir of angels that sings to us? It is a cacophony of devils that tempts us!"

You were wrong. That maze wasn't built to keep us out, but to keep the evil within!"

The dark grin dropped from the Professor's face, replaced by a snarl and a hiss. Suddenly he fell upon my friend, striking blow upon blow. But then a counter, and Enrique was wailing upon the head of the Professor. The two shouted and argued in my ears. I felt the blood pumping there, as I did on my nose and in my hands and heart. The taste of copper filled my mouth.

My vision began to narrow, as if I had just run ten thousand miles or stood on stage before the whole city. Reality drifted further and further into the distance as my friend and my teacher tackled and wrestled on the slick stones of the library, each attempting to gain the upper hand.

The stones... I glanced to my feet and noticed a loose cobble on the ground. Ice and moss and time had wedged it loose from its brothers in the floor. I bent down and grasped it with both hands, feeling the chill of time in it. Standing up, I carried it with barely any effort towards the quarreling men. As I lifted it above my head, its weight settled into my palms.