In Brief:

After The Librarian discovers the location of a trove of pre-Devastation information, they contract with a rogue Reclaimer and The Voyageur to journey by canoe up the Wolastoq from Fog City to the Currie Mountain respository, braving the river, the wilds, and the ruins of the Old World.

The Currie Mountain Repository

A Tale of the Voyageur

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ARCANA LABS

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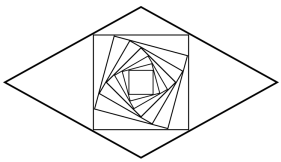
The Currie Mountain Repository

A Tale of The Voyageur



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The price for getting to ride the current down the Wolastoq was having to paddle up it.

With her shoulders already tightened up like stiff iron springs, the Reclaimer tried to puzzle out if that mantra was a reassurance, or an extra millstone around her neck. It was morning, or near enough to it, anyway. The brisk, chill summer air was already starting to warm, as their fibre glass canoe glided nearly-silently between two of the eight poured-stone columns that jutted out from the surface of the river; stone sentinels that marked the downstream edge of Beaverbrook.

“Hey. Kill that light,” her boat-mate hissed at her in a stage-whisper. She obeyed at once, leaning forward to switch off the glow of the lantern that had been nestled carefully between their piled-up backs in the belly of the canoe, and chanced a glance over her shoulder to watch the similar light behind them wink out. The Boatsman had a point. Beaverbrook, like most ruined cities, was a hazard for more than just the risks of accident and disease. People still clung to the bones of the old cities like rats to a ship, but nothing like before, when industrialised societies spanned the continents. Smaller societies meant more edges to those societies, which ultimately meant more friction. That, in turn, meant more peril. Even now, after surviving so much, mankind was its own worst enemy.

But so went the story of the entire Anthropocene.

Of course, the even larger danger than the threat of violence was losing the ability to keep pushing this boat the wrong way up the river. “How much further?”

The Boatsman looked up, at nothing – the sky was too overcast for stars, and the dawn too close anyway, then he gestured with his paddle. “See the next set of pillars?”

She peered for a moment, then nodded. “Brick, it looks like.”

“Stone masonry,” he corrected her. “Not that it matters. About that far again past those is a bridge. From here to

the bridge twice, give or take, and we'll be able to put in to land."

Just the thought had her wish it had been worth risking an outboard motor. But there was, at this early stage of the project, a need for a bit of subterfuge. Setting her teeth, she made sure her next stroke was timed more properly with his, and had some proper back in it. "… Don't forget the hike, after."

The Boatsman chuckled, a bit darkly. "Yes. Then you walk."

The Reclaimer had no witty retort. She chanced another glance behind her, at the other canoe, which had been in the lead until about an hour ago. She was sure the Librarian was struggling even more-so than she was.

An hour ago, the Reclaimer had thought that the other Voyageur might have been letting his age get to him. He was a slighter, gaunter man than the one who had piloted her canoe, and wore the beard so many of his occupation seemed to favour, long and scraggly – in his case, shot through with grey. When they had crested this ridge, he'd taken a deep breath, and looked off to the northwest, and sighed.

"We'll stop here," he declared, in a tone that didn't invite argument. "S'gone rain."

The Reclaimer had objected, but the Librarian hadn't the stomach for getting wet. They'd adjusted their big round glasses and uttered some meek and forgettable caution, and so for the better part of fifteen minutes they had set about, clearing a small area of leaf litter, and suspending a large tarpaulin of canvas doped with beeswax to keep themselves and their sledge full of gear dry, close quarters though it immediately became.

Now, it was coming down in buckets. Big fat drops, like bumblebees, came down in their countless thousands, hammering the tarp in a shockingly restful drumbeat. The Voyageur had settled against the side of the sledge

immediately, doffing his poncho to bunch up as a pillow, and tilting his wide-brimmed hat forward for a shade. Since then, he'd stirred only once, awakened by the first roll of thunder. He kept a weather eye until he saw the next flash, then closed it. After the roll of thunder to follow it, he confidently announced their safety. "S'nowhere near."

The Reclaimer nodded quiet agreement.

"It doesn't rain like this in Fog City," the Librarian said. They adjusted those glasses again. "Big drops like this, I mean. It mists, there."

The Reclaimer did not much care. She wanted her work over with. She couldn't have imagined either Voyageur; the one that was hiking with them because he knew the way, nor the one that had piloted her boat, who had stayed behind ashore to watch the boats from a safe hide, would have wanted to linger in the rain if not for the Librarian's sake. Reclaimers' work kept them outside for most of their days, just like the Voyageurs. Rain was part of the job.

Suddenly, the Voyageur stirred, and started to put his poncho back on. "S'gone stop soon."

The Reclaimer frowned at that. "You sure?"

The man grunted his confirmation. The Reclaimer did not see much point in arguing. Voyageurs knew the sky almost as well as the rivers and the land. If he saw a break in the storm she couldn't, she'd just have to trust him.

The crickets were screaming. Neither the Reclaimer nor the Librarian had ever heard anything much like it. They hadn't understood at first why the Voyageur insisted on them keeping their lights off, either, as they climbed the last half-hour or so of their uphill trek in increasingly murky twilight.

They understood as soon as he hid his face behind a sleeve and flicked the switch on his own lantern. Within seconds, the warm electric light was being harassed by

every manner of insect thinkable. He continued to attempt to search for a few seconds before cursing in an especially frustrated Chiac, and cutting the light.

Then all three of them had had to stand there dumbly for what felt like a short month, waiting for their eyes to adjust back to overcast moonlight.

“Right,” he said, after a slap that had no doubt slain a mosquito. “Tha’s us done for the night.”

Fumbling in the dark, the Reclaimer attempted to follow his lead in helping to pick out a good spot to re-pitch their awning and set up the tent, and together they made pretty good time. It was only on her way back to retrieve the sledge again, and better position it, that she felt her foot catch on something as solid and immobile as the earth, and refuse to follow her. Problem was, the foot following her was part of the plan, and now, with a wrench and shout and an impact that drove the breath out of her, she swung forward two or three times the speed at which she’d been walking and landed with an unceremonious crunch on something hard, solid, and cold.

“Ow!”

She wasn’t seriously hurt. She wheezed, and rolled to her back, and frowned up at the sudden sight of the Voyageur, moving purposefully toward her, the rifle he had carried all this way – “S’fer le coy-yotes, luh” – ready against his shoulder. “Kid?”

She coughed at him, and waved a hand. “I’m fine. I tripped over, uhhhh...”

She wasn’t sure what it was she’d tripped over. Under her other hand, the ground was hard, smooth, and free of debris other than a thin coating of grit. It almost felt like a slab of concrete, but what such an unnatural material was doing out here was beyond her. Slowly, taking about as long as it took the Voyageur to reach her, and sling his rifle back so that he could reach down to help her up, she puzzled it out.

“… Think this is what you saw?”

He crouched, once he was satisfied she was steady, and felt cross the hard surface of the slab. “… Yeah, this is it. Come on back, now. It’ll keep fer the morn’.”

Mornings this time of the year, this far up the Wolastoq, were crisp, cool, and usually clear affairs, though everything had that latent, dewy damp that suggested it had either rained in their sleep, or that autumn was ultimately coming. The Reclaimer had read a story once about the life and times of an engineer who had lived in the city that was now Beaverbrook, back before everything had fallen apart. He’d been the kind of man she hadn’t had a lot of patience for – the sort to use thirty words when five would do, but there was one story he’d written that had just stuck in her throat, and she’d been digesting it for five or six years now.

It had been, fundamentally, a story about nothing. It talked about how he’d lived in the “downtown”, which at the time was rather busy, but that on weekend mornings there was almost no traffic, so he would walk across the downtown to his favourite cafe – a place for consuming his favourite beverage, something called coffee. More than once in the story, he’d talk about a cup of coffee using so many superlatives she could almost imagine the taste, but the story had the problem all stories about the foods of the Before had now – they were self-referential. Coffee always tasted like coffee, which wasn’t very helpful to an erstwhile Reclaimer, who had no idea what coffee tasted like.

She pondered that quietly while she set about getting a half-decent fire going, and used it to bring a pot of water they’d lugged up properly hot and boiling. She wondered if the world of the Engineer’s time was the same kind of alien to her that her own time would have been to him.

The Librarian had snuck up on her. Their cough snapped her out of her reverie, and brought her thoughts away from the ancient potion of coffee and the picturesque view of

the Wolastoq's meandering southbound currents to the matter at hand. "...You scared me."

"Sorry," they countered, crouching down next to her to warm their hands at the fire. "Not really a morning person."

The phrase tickled another memory in the Reclaimer, and she eyed the Librarian carefully for a moment, before busying herself with getting the lid off a jar of eggs in tomato sauce. "They used to treat that with coffee."

The Librarian smirked coyly, and watched her set the open jar in the pot of water, bathed up to its shoulders in a heat that would now slowly seep into it. "Sure. And all sorts of other things."

A silence grew, but it wasn't an uncomfortable one. Merely a vacuum in the conversation, which was slowly filled with robin-calls, the hollering of territorial squirrels, and the wind among the elms. The Reclaimer periodically stirred the contents of the jar, and set about to slicing up a small loaf of bread. It was hard now, and crusty, but a good crumb. It'd toast up just fine for eating eggs on, and the sauce would make it soft enough in due time. "... Why'd they ever stop making coffee?"

The Librarian considered that for a moment, and adjusted those round spectacles of theirs. "I doubt 'they' did, at least entirely. The problem is, they never made it around here in the first place, not really."

The Reclaimer frowned a bit, but said nothing, at first. She was busy spearing up the slices of bread to toast them at a good span from the flames. But now a conversation had started, so the birdsong-silence was less comfortable than it had been the first time. "Are you sure? I read a journal once, from before."

The Librarian nodded, and snapped their fingers for no good reason she could see. "Right, sorry. Yes, they brewed coffee here, in the time before. It was the most popular hot beverage in the world right up until The Fall, and I think

I’ve seen some older recipes that even called for it to be served cold. The thing is, it’s made from a kind of fruit or seed that won’t grow this far north. Maybe a generation or two ago, when things were at their absolute hottest, if you crammed it into greenhouses and cranked the humidity up, but by then nobody had seen a viable seed of it this far north in… who knows how long.”

The Reclaimer almost regretted elaborating. The Librarian, for all their protestations to having not been a morning person, had lit up like a searchlight, and was speaking so fast by the end of their spiel that the Reclaimer was worried they’d hyperventilate. She watched them stir the eggs for a moment, before they perked up again. “… What made you think of that?”

She shrugged, indifferently. “I had a journal from an engineer who supposedly lived near here. He talked about coffee a lot. I figure it had to be pretty special.”

The Librarian nodded, as if that was perfectly understandable, and accepted the slice of toast they were passed. There was no butter brought along, so they scooped out one of the eggs and what the Reclaimer considered to be a pretty insufficient helping of the sauce onto it, and sat in that slightly-forward way that clean-working people often sat when they were aware they were eating something messy, but didn’t feel like risking their clothing.

The Reclaimer figured at this point her clothing was half-waterproof from grease stains alone, and was not so precious. And so they ate in mutually-respecting silence for a moment. The eggs were soft and almost creamy, sweet in their own way, by comparison to the tart-and-spicy sauce they had been packed in – almost as good as they had been on the day the Reclaimer herself had canned them a few weeks ago, during the first flush of tomato season.

That thought brought to mind her own gardens, on the shores of the Lower Kenebec, and the community at Fourty Volt where she spent the colder, less productive months.

“What did you do with it?”

She frowned at the Librarian’s question. “Do with what, sorry?”

“The Journal.”

The Reclaimer considered that for a moment. “My husband made a copy of it, I think, but we traded the original to a Voyageur we know for something like two salmon worth of jerky.”

The Librarian seemed to deflate a bit, and helped themself to another slice of the toast, and another egg. “That’s too bad. Journals are more interesting than useful, but every now and then you get lucky. Someone notes some achievement they had or some reference they found useful in their work, and we get a little more of the old world back.”

There was a crunch behind them. The Voyageur was returning, much better for the wear. He’d apparently washed, as part of the quest to get a sledge load of river water up here. “… I thought I smelled tomaters.”

“Grew them myself. Breakfast?”

The sight of him picking up the jar with his bare hands made the Reclaimer wince. The water had long since fallen from a boil to a simmer to simply “hot”, but it still just rubbed her brain the wrong way. She supposed a Voyageur probably had calluses as dead-to-touch as any set of work gloves. “Don’ mind if I do. Spicy?”

“Peppery, more than spicy.”

He nodded appreciatively, and poured a slop of the sauce and a few shreds of egg onto a slice of toast, took another to make a sandwich of it, and ate on his feet. The first bite brought an irrepressible look of delight to his face, and another colourful chiac exclamation out of his mouth. He made it all the way through his sandwich before he said whatever had kept him upright. “Had a look at the manhole. S’intact.”

The Reclaimer considered that for a moment, and sighed, blowing a strand of her hair out of her face. “That might not be great. You can open anything given enough time, but I didn’t exactly bring a whole machine shop up with me.”

The Librarian, on the other hand, perked a bit, and smiled from the corner of their mouth. “No, that’s good. Something like five thousand years, depending on how you slice it, us weird little monkeys have invented and re-invented ways to write stuff down. None of them are all that waterproof. Especially not the kind of things people were doing right before the end.”

The Reclaimer’s pessimism was less warranted than the Librarian’s optimism. The “manhole”, as the Voyageur had termed it, was a thoroughly-rusted steel disk embedded in a similarly corroded ring of the same material, themselves set in a large concrete slab about ten feet to a side, mostly buried in leaf litter and pine needles. It showed no obvious points at which it could be pried open, and naturally there was no other machinery surround it.

“That’s rubber,” the Reclaimer said, at last, when she’d managed to gouge a bit of it out of the crack between the ring and the plate. “Or something like it, anyway. Someone wanted this to be waterproof.”

The Librarian smirked a bit. “Then I hope they got it right. Can you get it open?”

What does it look like I’m trying to do, the Reclaimer thought. She dug through her bag of tools, and sighed. “Not quickly. I’m going to have to drill a hole or two in the plate, minimum, and hope it’s not latched or anything on the other side.”

The Librarian nodded, and stuck their hands in their pockets while the Reclaimer worked. She’d risked some of her more expensive tools on the trip, and had brought with her an electric brace that worked off of heavy batteries.

They didn’t hold a luxurious amount of charge, but she’d brought a few more than she needed to run any of her tools, and any she used up could be rotated out onto the charger she’d brought with her, and either the Librarian or the Voyageur could crank them over for her.

She didn’t need to replace the battery. The bits she’d brought with her cut finer than rusty Old World metal could withstand, especially when she was careful to keep them cool as they went. Drilling the two holes didn’t take an hour. The delay, really, turned out to be taking a thin knife and coring out as much of that rubber as she could, and in rigging up an A-Frame sturdy enough to support a proper block so that they could get enough mechanical advantage on the lid for it to pop free. When it did, she and the Voyageur flew theatrically backward and landed hard on their backsides, and then a second later the iron plate slammed back down onto the concrete.

A black hole into the earth yawned up at them.

The three stood around the opening – wide enough to admit a person, but not a pack – and none really wanted to commit to being the first down there. Clean-workers like Librarians were not, by nature, adventurous. Voyageurs, by nature, were not inclined to do work that didn’t properly belong to them. And Reclaimers knew better than to enter confined spaces willy-nilly.

“Do you hear that,” the Librarian asked.

“Yeah,” the Reclaimer answered, in a tone that marked her displeasure, and misgivings. She crouched, at the edge of the hole, and listened carefully. There was a distinct, mechanical sound, like a chug, or a hum. As a rule, few technologies survived any long period of operation without maintenance. How could there be anything running down there, unless, somehow, their presence had been noted, and it had only just begun running?

As if in answer, she recognised the march of the distinctive mechanical click of relays. With each one, a dim point of pale yellow light illuminated a bit more of the hole, until

she could see into it properly. There was a short ladder that went about ten feet down, onto a mesh platform, and then stairs of the same steel material that wound around and around the square stairwell until they were about fifty feet down. The steel was a pristine grey, and the concrete floor at the bottom looked bone-dry.

“Well,” she said, suddenly hopeful. “That’s a start. You two wait here. If I signal you that it’s safe, come down. If you see me collapse or anything weird like that, do not come down. Stale air kills more people than poison, and your nose’ll lie to you about it.”

The Voyageur nodded sagely, and moved out of her way, so that she could scrabble down the ladder. Immediately, she felt a strange relief. The air in the shaft was moving, downward. Steadily, and subtly, but she could hear the whirring of mechanical fans somewhere distant. Air she hoped was fresh was being pulled into the shaft from somewhere, and pushed along with fans to force the stale air out.

Still, best not to linger. She hurried down the stairs as fast as she could, mindful of any small movements in them, though they felt as solid as the ground itself beneath her feet. When she’d made it to the bottom, she breathed a sigh of relief, and looked up to the sunlit hole in the roof, raising a work-gloved hand to give the thumbs-up.

“All clear!”

She didn’t hear their reply, but she could see them moving around up there, and so turned her attention to the next obstacle in her way. It was a peculiar door, set about a foot off the floor, two steps up. The door had significantly rounded corners, and was made of some kind of metal that had been painted white, set directly into the wall. There were levers at each of the corners, as well as half way up either side, and massive hinges reaching around it to hold it in place. For all that impressive over-engineering, however, she could tell that she was going to have to round her shoulders and duck her head to pass through it.

A plastic sign, white with red lettering, was glued to the surface of the door. “Station Currie”, it read, in bold letters. Then below that, in smaller writing, “Project AlexandriArk”.

The Librarian had all but bounded down the stairs, and when they saw the sign, they gave a triumphant whoop. “I was right! It’s been here, all along. All this time!”

They put a hand on the Reclaimer’s shoulder. “Can you open this door?”

The Reclaimer chuckled a bit, and stepped forward. Yes, she could open this door, no problem. Each of the levers could be turned a quarter-turn along a path indicated by a little painted red arrow. Once all six of them had been turned, the door was a little stiff on its hinges, but it could be swung open without serious difficulty.

The space beyond it was a boring, unlit corridor. Then, all at once, with a snap and a hum, it was lit. Strips of cool light burned along its ceiling. Shielding her eyes, the Reclaimer squinted up at one, recognising its like from salvage yards and service manuals.

“Goddamn,” she said, unceremoniously. “A working florescent tube.”

The Librarian had no ears for her. They’d hurried along the corridor, stopping only to check the doors on either side. When the first one failed to open immediately, the Librarian had spied a blue stripe stencilled onto the bare concrete floor, and was now rushing to find the other end of it. The Reclaimer’s pace was more conservative. Each door was solid, again of a metallic construction common in the Old World, and had a brushed aluminium lever-type doorknob to open it. Each had a small plastic panel next to it, with raised-and-painted figuring that gave it a number (odds on one side and evens on the other side, with the low numbers nearest the front door, which tickled something in the Reclaimer’s brain that liked organisation). They also had names under them, plain and unfanciful. “Machine Room A”. “Printer Hall.” Below the writing were raised dots, the meaning of which was totally lost on the

Reclaimer, but every sign had them. The Librarian probably would have known what they were.

She caught up with them in a small room at the end of the line, whose placard helpfully declared itself as the “Conference Entry Antechamber”. Sure enough, stepping into the cramped space, the Reclaimer immediately noticed yet another locked door to her immediate left. The Librarian was seated in front of her, at a desk built to work as some kind of reception, and was chewing on their cheek while they frowned at something the Reclaimer couldn’t see on a dusty computer monitor in front of them.

“All this way and it’s dead,” they muttered.

The Reclaimer shrugged her shoulders at this, stepping around the desk. “It’s just one computer.”

The little green LED in the bottom of the monitor was slowly fading on and off. Infuriatingly, pre-collapse computers had as many different conventions for status signalling as there were (presumably) engineers designing them, but the sign alone seemed helpful. That kind of “breathing” animation usually meant some kind of standby mode, but looking around, the Reclaimer couldn’t see the computer itself, which was decidedly unusual.

Opening a small cupboard in the desk that would usually house the working part of the computer, she instead found a large, weighty plastic container. She set that aside for the moment, and searched the other side of the desk. Here, there was a computer, and its power button actuated with a hearty and satisfying click, but… nothing happened. There was no sound of awakening fans, or light of any colour to tell her anything. It must not have been powered.

That’s a little weird, she thought.

By now, the Librarian’s curiosity had turned to the container, and the Reclaimer’s attention to their efforts to remove its top. The seal was snug, though the Reclaimer worried at the stiffness of the lid and was concerned about it snapping more than once as it was removed. Inside was

the holy grail for Reclaimers – pre-collapse documentation. The first thing the Librarian delicately removed from the container was a large three-ring binder with brittle white plastic for a cover, which they set out delicately on the desk's empty space. Beside it, they laid a paperback textbook, with equal reverence. The Reclaimer looked at the cover, and the abstract illustrations on it told her a lot less than the title did. "Canuck Informatics Model 7 Type 2045 Personal Computer – Service Manual and Schematics".

"Oh, this is weird," the Librarian mused, and held toward the Reclaimer a laminated sheet of A4 paper, which the Reclaimer took, and held close to read aloud.

"My dear Reclaimer or Curator,

If these instructions are necessary, I hope it is for no other reason than a drill or test which you are running. If I am wrong, know that we all tried. If the entryway terminal will not boot, please execute the following steps in the order listed, and without exception.

0. Stop Panicking. Frank Herbert was right about the nature of fear. Take a few deep breaths. No matter how urgently you need to access the Library, this is not the "you are on fire" variety of emergency. You will need a clear head and a problem-solving mind for what is to come. When you feel better, go back and seal the entry stairwell door.

1. Enter Room 1 using the key in the top-left drawer of the desk, and validate that both auxiliary and primary power are operating. Instructions for both operations are posted in that room. Amendment: If auxiliary power is generating more than 8 kW you can simply bridge it to the Main Grid.

2. In the same room, follow the listed instructions to ensure that all breakers are in the closed position.

3. Go to room 2. Use the status indicators to ensure that Sump 0 and Sump 1 are at or below seven centimetres. If this is true, stop the pumps if they were running. If the

engines need to be manually stopped, you will have to post a watch to monitor for flooding.

4. Return to the Librarian Conference Antechamber (this room), and boot the PC. If it still does not turn on, use the included service manual (blue paperback) to troubleshoot the problem. Spare components are in Storage Locker A, shelf 11, bins 3 through 9.

5. When the terminal boots, follow the on-screen procedures for Facility Start Up. If the terminal does not start, use the Manual Startup Run-book (white three-ring binder) to handle the operation.

Once the facility has started up, if the tests come back OK, you no longer need to keep a watch on the sump status indicators. Alerts will be sent to active terminals and broadcast over the facility PA.

I am terribly sorry you should find it has come to this and that I am not here to assist you. If you are a Reclaimer, trust our Librarian. She will show you the way.

Your vigilant predecessor,

- A. Proctor”

The Librarian scoffed audibly. “Five gets you ten that boot process fails and their librarian is just flash-tech.”

The Reclaimer shrugged at the suggestion. “Of course it’s flash tech. Nobody just survived down here this long waiting for someone to maybe turn up. How the hell did you find this place, anyway?”

The Librarian smirked a bit. “The Library pays Voyageurs for their tales for a reason. You hear the right rumour, you spend a few years going over mouldering newsprint or trying to tease useful data out of microfiche, sometimes you get lucky. We lost a lot of the last few decades before the Collapse because there was such a big push toward digitizing everything, and the societies of the time didn’t care as much about offsite replication, but every now and then...”

They shrugged. “I don’t know about that ‘trust the librarian’ bit. And I have no idea how to do any of what they talked about.”

The Reclaimer laughed at that, and ruffled the Librarian’s hair. “Fortunately, that’s what Reclaimers like me are for. Stay here and holler if anything changes.”

It was the third day of their reclaimatory excavation when something truly interesting had happened. Up until that point, the Voyageur and the Librarian were pretty thoroughly bored. Both had moved the camp down into the bunker, if only to be warmer, and split their days between going up for fresh air or to cook, and being down in the bunker helping the Reclaimer find goods or be in more than one place at a time.

The Reclaimer, for her own part, was having a much more interesting time of things. This was, after all, her personal area of expertise. This “Station Currie” was not remarkable for pre-collapse disaster preparedness bunkers. Considerations had been made in an age of comfort and plenty that preserved comfort and plenty, and the facility had sat undisturbed almost twice as long as it was designed to. The fuel in old bunkers intended to run the generators the checklist talked about was… not the best. None of those old petroleum fuels could sit in really any kind of storage for this long and still burn properly. Sure, they were combustible: put enough energy into any hydrocarbon and you’d get it to combust. But the generators were turned by fuel-burning engines that expected relatively clean, relatively fresh fuel that burned according to certain math which just… didn’t pan out here. And the energy economy of the world had moved on since then. Nobody was refining this stuff anymore. A few truly-independent groups probably could refine small quantities of expired petroleum distillates into useful states, because industry abhorred waste, but none of the equipment to do that would have fit in the back of a canoe or been much fun to haul up the mountain on a sledge.

Fortunately, they didn't have to. Engine profiles could be tuned, if you knew what you were doing. The Reclaimer was thinking about her latest short burn on the third morning, over another meal of fresh sourdough and canned shakshouka, when the Librarian settled down, hard, on the log bench beside them.

"I hate to say it, but you've been wasting your time," they said, as they took a piece of the bread for themselves. "... This is fresh."

"The Voyageur made it," the Reclaimer said. "What did you mean about wasting my time?"

"Oh," the Librarian answered. "We don't care about booting up the facility."

The Reclaimer did not immediately consider that the kind of news she wanted to hear. "... I'm sorry, isn't the whole reason we've been out here for over a week now to boot up the library?"

"It's to recover the Library," the Librarian insisted. "Which isn't quite the same thing."

They reached into their satchel, and extracted that white start-up binder. "You've been trying to hit a certain power target, because that's the only condition under which the Library will fully boot up and let us into the conference room to speak with their Librarian. But I've been reading this and it sounds like it's trying to power a whole lot of things that really shouldn't exist, or at least aren't strictly needed just to get an index of the library. Including the Librarian."

The Reclaimer sighed. "... Of course. Their librarian must be some kind of AI."

"A really egregiously primitive one called a Large Language Model, yes," the Librarian agreed, with an aura of professional insult about them. "Have you heard of them?"

The Reclaimer nodded, resignedly. In her line of work, you ran across now-useless "AI Driven" technologies all the

time. She couldn't have really told you the differences between all the different pre-collapse approaches to the idea, but the main thrust was that so much of it relied on the actual AI models running on someone else's computers, that now that information networking had really broken down and was only just being brought back up, most of that stuff just didn't work anymore, and was never going to work again. "I mean, AI's normally a problem, but the AI for the library should actually be here, shouldn't it? The whole thing was designed to work without the Internet or a power grid to fall back on. Surely they were smart enough to include the guts of it here?"

"Sure," the Librarian admitted. "But there's two big problems with that. First one, and most obvious one, is that it'd be a terrible librarian. Those pre-collapse LLMs had no gnosis. They aren't intelligence at all, not really, not like you or me or even a dog. They haven't got a concept of incorrect or correct information. Just what the statistically-most-probable sentence to be written in response to your query is."

The Reclaimer stopped and stared long enough that she could watch the Librarian start to feel awkward in real time. "So even if we got it working, it would lie to me?"

"It wouldn't lie to you. It doesn't know how. That's worse."

The Reclaimer nodded. The difference was arcane and technical in a way only a Librarian could appreciate, but a Reclaimer was enough of an engineer to appreciate the difference between wrong information and non-information. "What's the second problem?"

"Whenever you finally get around to turning it on, whenever it's thinking about a question you ask it, it's drawing down about the power a pre-collapse house in this part of the world drew down in a week."

The egg slipped off of the Reclaimer's toast, which now hung limply in her hand. That was unbelievable. "You can't be serious."

“About a tenth of a megawatt-hour, yeah. I think I got the comparison right. What’s that in today’s terms?”

The Reclaimer considered that for a few minutes. “You have one of those under-counter fridges in your house?”

“Yup.”

“If it’s up to the modern standard for efficiency, you could run it for about... four months.”

The Librarian gave a low whistle. “Expensive lies.”

Yeah, no kidding.

The Reclaimer busied herself for a moment, fetching out a bit more topping for her toast. “What’s the good news in this?”

“The Library contains two copies of the actual data. There’s the live copy, connected to the librarian, that we’re trying to boot up. But there’s also a separate, offline, optical disk archive, in case the original gets corrupted.” The Librarian smirked a bit. “And it will honestly weigh less to bring that entire archive back with us, even with a few of their readers for safety.”

The Reclaimer considered that for a few minutes. “... Suppose I can breach the actual computer space and get those records out for you. Can we read them?”

“There are working examples of the readers already in Fog City, and presumably more of the readers here, so yes.” The Librarian shrugged. “The hard part is that we aren’t immediately going to know what’s on each disk or what’s in each record. It’s going to be the work of a half-dozen people for anywhere from a day to a year to catalogue it all.”

It was the Reclaimer’s turn to shrug, as she rose, and shook the crumbs off of her jeans. “Well, that’s still less work than what it would take to supply the kind of power you’re talking about. Let’s go yank some disks and get the hell out of here.”

The Librarian followed her, careful to ease the manhole cover mostly-into-place over the ladder as they went. It was supposed to rain later. “Of course, we’re hoping that it’s something useful on these disks. It could be half a petabyte of cat videos.”

The Reclaimer laughed at that. “If handing the apprentices cameras have taught me anything, it’s that human culture was a long series of technological advancements unseen in any other known form of life, all for the express purpose of inventing the cat video.”

Her hope, of course, was that it wasn’t. That the thousands of compact polycarbonate plastic coasters they spent the next few days pulling out of rack-feeders and carefully parcelling up for transport was more useful. Less technology than most pre-collapse writers would have expected had been lost in the shuffle, but there were always better ways of doing things. A few years ago, an expedition not unlike this one found a notebook at the old campuses in Beaverbrook that had included a snarky remark that a veteran Reclaimer had credited with the breakthrough that made the latest generation of photovoltaic cells something like 15% more productive. Twenty years ago, four margin-notes in different papers categorized at the back of a filing cabinet in Fog City had lead to a field-expedient method to produce shelf-stable inject able insulin without the need for intensive livestock farming to biosynthesize it.

All because the Librarians that society trusted with storing, preserving, and organising this information occasionally got curious, and understood what they were looking at.

About This Manual

The Technology Survival Manual series is created and maintained by Arcana Labs to share knowledge we find to be important to foster an attitude and skillset of self-suficiency, freedom, and cooperation with regard to technology.

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