It was cold for August. Breanne and Isaac’s bones shook from a close peal of thunder, as tiny drops of rain pelted them. The night was coming on strangely fast and their ride was late. Nearby sat an old, low building—a library, if the hand-painted sign above the door was true.

It was cozy inside. Isaac plunked his backpack down on the wood floor, sat at the table in the center of the room, and pulled out his phone. At the other end of the table lay a thick, white book; a taste of the ancient, beautiful, dusty volumes lining the walls. Breanne stood still and stared at them all. The books were packed onto darkly stained wooden shelves, and their fabric covers of dark greens, reds, and navy blues were frayed around their spines.

A cheerful, old voice drifted from a back corner of the room, “Hello, there!” Breanne, wrenched from the books, turned to see a wrinkled man, frizzy grey hair framing his dark skin.

Isaac looked up from his phone, which had died. “Hey.” He looked back at it, trying to make it light up.

The old man smiled. “Let me know if you need help finding something.”

“Thanks,” Breanne said, “we’re just here to wait for our ride…” She gave up on the excuse, not really wanting to leave the treasure trove of books. With gentle reverence, she slid a manuscript off the shelf and let it fall open. It opened near the beginning to page fifty-seven.

Page fifty-seven had been torn out and stuffed back into the binding. The ripped paper was the same ancient, crusty stuff as the rest of the book; only torn in places, one corner completely broken off. Breanne turned to the old librarian. “Hey,” she said, “this book is ripped.”

“I know,” he said, and chuckled. “All of them are.”

She thought maybe he was going deaf. She brought the book over to his desk. “It’s ripped,” she said, pointing. “Look.”

He smiled sadly up at her, “I know,” he repeated. “Every book here from Paradiso to Webster’s Dictionary to Canterbury Tales is ripped. See?” He stood from his desk and selected a random book from the shelf. He let it fall open and held it out to her.

One page near the beginning was ripped out and stuffed back in. “Page fifty-seven, just like the other one,” Breanne noted.

Isaac gave up on his phone and stood up to look. “What’s so special about that page?” he asked.

“Strangest thing,” the librarian said, scratching his wiry hair, “One day, some twenty-five years ago, a bunch of kids stormed in here all dressed up in some kind of army uniform. They ripped out the fifty-seventh page of every book here and carried ‘um all off.”
Breanne gaped. The sheer idea of tearing books (especially beautiful, old books) made her queasy. “How’d you get them back?”

“Now, that was even stranger,” his dark eyes lit up with long-remembered joy. “A couple o’ weeks later, I got all the pages back. Showed up in a big ol’ box right on my doorstep,” he shook his head. “It took me a while to put all those pages back in their books, and I must a lost one somewhere, ’cause one book’s still missing its fifty-seventh page.” He pointed to the book on the table.

Breanne picked it up, lifted the heavy cover, and began thumbing through the pages until she came to a place where they clumped together; as though they were pretending that one of their number wasn’t missing in action. The remnants of the page were poking jagged from the spine. Breanne looked for the adjacent page-numbers. “These aren’t numbers.” She looked down at the words. “What language is this?” she asked.

Isaac looked over her shoulder. “Arabic?” he tried.

Breanne shook her head. The figures scratched into the thick pages almost looked like pictures, like in Chinese, she thought. She glanced at the librarian. “Do you know?”

“Best I can figure,” he said, gently taking the book from her. “It’s some kind of ancient Babylonian. I once knew someone who could read it.”

“What was it about?” Isaac asked.

“Star-gazer’s stuff. Prophesy of calamity. He couldn’t make it al out.”

“Do you think those page-stealing guys were looking for a prophesy, and they didn’t return that page on purpose?”

The librarian pursed his lips. “Maybe.”

Isaac looked impressed. Breanne asked, “What would anyone want with one page of old star-gazing stuff?” She looked down at the mysterious pages, “Even really cool star-gazing stuff?”

Isaac’s face suddenly illuminated with excitement. “Maybe that page predicted a solar flare!”

Breanne and the librarian studied him quizzically. “What’s a solar flare?” Breanne asked.

“I learned about it in science,” Isaac said. “It’s where magnetic energy builds up in the atmosphere around the sun and then explodes! A big solar flare would completely kill everything on the planet that uses electricity. Sort of like a giant electromagnetic pulse. Cars, computers, even flashlights,” he glanced at his black-screened phone. “And phones.”

The librarian looked skeptical. Breanne reached nervously for her phone in her back pocket. “Would something like a sun explosion be possible to predict?” she asked, trying to explain away the hairs pricking up on the back of her neck.
“I mean, maybe,” Isaac shrugged. “It’s just a suggestion. But you never know with prophesy! And it might explain all the weird weather.” He winked at her. “Imagine, though! If you knew when one was going to happen, you could really use it to your advantage.”

Breanne pulled the phone out and turned it on. For a moment, the screen was normal: 73% battery. 4:55 p.m. Then it flickered and died.

“You kids better get home,” the old man said. He looked scared. Breanne nodded, and Isaac picked up his backpack.

With a thump, the librarian shut the white book.

Suddenly, the whole world went dark.