



Elsewhere

ANAÏS GODARD

2107, State Library

Elara prays.

Out of habit, not belief. The words feel hollow on her tongue.

She stops mid-verse. A flicker on her holographic display. It's a book icon, blinking. The whisper of digital pages, mimicking what no longer exists. Paper and ink, long exiled to museums and private vaults.

She's seen one real book. Once. A Bible, sealed in glass, deep in the State Library archives. She added the simulation to her interface as a joke. Now, sometimes, the sound unsettles her.

A report flashes onto her screen. ENCRYPTING THE GENOME-GENCOMP-BETA-423-A. Standard issue; the State catalogues everything genetic. And yet, the system flagged it.

It's unlikely to be a mistake; she fine-tuned the algorithm herself, three days of meticulous calibration. She gestures at the file.

Access Denied: Clearance Level Insufficient.

She swallows a sigh. Elara catalogues everything, but her clearance only extends so far. She is a woman, after all.

She nudges the file again. The system doesn't budge.

Then—

A voice from behind. "Hacking the State?"

Luca.

She doesn't turn. His reflection hovers in the glass of her station. Rumpled, smirking, coffee in one hand, tablet in the other. Watching. Luca is always watching.

Elara waves the alert away. "Algorithm issue." Not the first time she's seen a misflagged file.

He doesn't move. "Or maybe not."

She waits. Keeps her expression still, neutral.

Luca tilts his tablet just enough, revealing a glint of headlines: birth rate quotas, incubation schedules. The usual State spin.

He exhales. "Ever wonder what really happens in those labs?"

Elara doesn't take the bait. "No."

"I do." A sip of coffee, slow, measured.

He leans in, voice dropping. "Rumors. Experiments. Things that don't exactly make the daily prayers." He lets the words sit between them. "Some of us like to ask questions."

She turns to him then. Just for a second. His expression is unreadable.

"Rumors don't concern me," she says. "And they shouldn't concern you either."

The edge of his smirk tugs upward, but his eyes—his eyes are looking for something.

Another sip. "You ever notice?" His voice is light, easy, careless. But not careless. "People who ask the wrong questions? They go elsewhere."

The threat under his words settle like a hook in her throat. Elara keeps her face blank, forcing herself to stay still. To pretend she doesn't understand. To pretend she isn't afraid.

Officially, breeding is divine duty, a privilege, a woman's highest calling. Privately, Elara dreads it. Becoming another State incubator? Unthinkable.

He watches her a beat longer, then, the moment breaks. He grins, like the air between them hasn't just tightened. "Anyway, lunch?"

"No, thanks."

With a shrug, he pushes off her workstation and saunters away, trailing the bitter scent of coffee.

She exhales. Alone.

She used to eat with Sarah. The only other woman in the Library. They would sit together, a fragile kind of solidarity. She still half expects to hear her voice sometimes, a whisper beside her ear. But Sarah was transferred. That's what they told her. Lunch is different now. Too loud. Their laughter, edged with something sharp. Jokes about breeders, about compliance, about gratitude. Better to work.

Elara reruns the sequence. A simple fix: sync the file, run the algorithm.

While it processes, she scans the usual daily reports—genealogy updates, biometric data transfers, birthrate statistics. Routine. Expected. Nothing new. Nothing dangerous.

The report flashes again.

Flagged.

Again?

Her fingers still. The alert flickers, its blockchain hash shifting, unstable, tied to an entry that shouldn't exist. A ghost in the system. A shadow of something erased, but not quite gone.

She leans in. Someone had embedded a secondary layer, concealing the real data inside a ledger meant to be immutable. A trick. A risk. Clever.

Too clever.

Elara frowns. The obfuscation technique isn't standard. Not even black-market code runs this deep. This is something else. Something deliberate. She adjusts her decryption interface, isolating the anomaly. The hash is wrapped in old-state encryption, obsolete since 2098. Purge Order #6732 had wiped this protocol from official databases. She memorized them all. It shouldn't exist anymore. And yet, here it is.

She scans the data, searching. That's when she sees it. A signature, like a seam in a forged document. The encryption peels away in layers, sloughing off like old skin.

There. Not random. Deliberate.

The mark is small, almost imperceptible, resembling the outline of a vase with two handles. She has seen it before. A whisper from the past, inked into the margins of a forbidden book. A book no woman should have read. *The Anatomical Atlas of the Female Body*. She decrypted it years ago,

when she still asked questions. When she still believed answers might be allowed. Why she bled. Why her body changed. The strange, unspoken things about herself that no one ever explained.

Inside its pages, anatomical sketches and words she had never seen before. And buried within them, this same vase.

Her chest tightens. This is a digital watermark. A code. A message, maybe. A trick the underground favors, hiding secrets in plain sight.

She should report it. Move on. But Luca's words dig in. The Incubation Center. The whispers.

Peeking into encrypted files is dangerous. For Luca, a mistake means a reprimand. Maybe a suspension, or a pay cut. For her, a woman, the stakes are higher. One wrong move could strip away everything, land her in the Center.

Her fingers hover. The symbol pulses. Beckoning.

Elara curses. She isolates her workstation from the network, a precaution she's taken once before. Only once.

"I might very well burn in hell for this," she whispers.

She enters the first decryption sequence. The symbol reacts. Lines of code unravel. Complex, elegant. Whoever built this was brilliant. A master coder.

A warning flashes: *Potential System Breach*.

Elara glances at the door, listening. The hum of servers, the silence beyond her station. No one is coming. She overrides the alert, strengthens her firewall, and digs deeper.

A maze of code unfurls. Time blurs. Her fingers move on instinct, sweat beading at her temple. Then, the last lock. A final wall of defense.

She hesitates.

This is the right thing to do. If there is a mole in the State Archives, she has to expose it. She tells herself that.

She enters the last decryption key.

A held breath.

Her display floods with data. Documents. Blueprints. Genetic reports. Video files.

A folder labeled *Setbacks* catches her eye.

She knows better. She should stop here. Close the window. Walk away.

Her fingers move before she can stop them.

Click.

Her display shifts.

Nude women in whitewashed rooms, strapped down, legs bound open. Some sedated. Some not. Tubes and needles. Different stages of fertility treatments. Their bodies, marked, altered. Then, transports bays, packed with vacant faces. Orderly rows of bodies—too still.

A face.

Elara's breath stops.

Sarah.

Sarah, who they said had been transferred. Sarah, the only other women working here. Sarah, her only friend.

Her image is grainy, surveillance-quality. A hospital bed. A monitor humming aside her cot. Eyes open but empty. Elara stares. Her mind tries to reject it, tries to make sense of it. Transferred, they said. A better position, they said. She swallows. Her throat is tight, raw. Her pulse slams in her ears.

She slams the window shut. As if the image might crawl through the interface. As if it hasn't already buried itself inside her.

Another flicker. A draft of white document. Flashing coordinates.

They pulse. Urgent. Undeniable.

1943, The Camp

Sonia navigated the train platform.

Her movements quiet and measured like a wraith among the living. Displaced families passed by, clutching suitcases packed with all the possessions they had left, not knowing these belongings would soon be taken.

Sonia's task was sorting, dividing these remnants of lives interrupted under the watchful eyes of guards. Valuables to the right, everything else to the left.

Sifting through a pile of clothes, she spotted a tarnished silver locket at the bottom of a suitcase. *This could work*, she thought. Her fingers brushed the locket, contemplating its capacity for hiding secret messages, lingering too long. An officer's gaze snapped to her. The thud of boots on wood. Sonia flicked the locket into the bin of valuables, burying its potential under glittering gold necklaces, copper pots, and gleaming silver watches. But, not all was lost.

As she dug deeper into the heap of personal belongings, her hand, skilled from months of secretive labor, found the edge of a battered book. A copy of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*. Its cover was worn, the spine cracked, making it inconspicuous. The kind of book they'd burn, claiming it threatened the Reich; afraid a little truth might ignite their web of lies. Sonia glanced around and quickly tucked the book under her striped prisoner dress.

Off to the side, she caught the attention of a fellow prisoner. A young woman with eyes too old for her face. In a swift motion, Sonia handed her the Woolf. Their calloused fingers briefly touched. The woman nodded, a silent promise to carry the book to the Kinderblock, where hushed stories sustained starved minds.

2107, State

Elara runs.

Her librarian's uniform clings to her back, damp with sweat. In the corner of her holographic glasses, the vase icon flickers red. A countdown. A warning. A cruel joke.

The firewall she built is crumbling; the State's security algorithm eating through her defenses like rot. The icon now pulses at her temple like a ticking bomb. She runs from the system she designed.

She swipes. The time remains. *01:24:13... 01:24:12.* She dismisses it.

She severs the GPS in her arm chip with a hastily coded script. A crude, temporary fix. The glasses recalibrate, rerouting her through biometric feedback. A pulse read. A heat signature. *0.8 miles to destination.*

Above, drones slice the night, laser grids skimming rooftops. The buildings, old-world charm draped in synthetic light. The facades flicker with State-approved holograms: pregnant breeders, robust babies swaddled in regulation blue, grinning men proclaiming loyalty. The slogans flash: *Gratitude is a Privilege. A Womb is a Gift. Serve Willingly.*

Elara looks away. Her heart slams against her ribs, too loud in the hush of curfew.

At an intersection, her glasses buzz. *Thermal Signature Detected.* She presses into the shadows, breath shallow. A drone hums past. She exhales. Moves.

Doubt gnaws at her as she rushes across the street. What if this is a trap? Or worse, a State loyalty test? A final audit of her obedience. The thought curdles. If so, she's already damned.

She could turn back. Deliver the data to the State. Claim a hack. Say she was infiltrated, that she caught it in time, that she was a good citizen. Wipe her digital footprint from the blockchain. Resume duty. But Sarah's face is burned into her vision. Too still. Too vacant.

What had she done? Asked the wrong question? Laughed at the wrong joke? Known too much? In this world, even innocence could be treason. Maybe Sarah had simply been too smart for her own good. Too desirable to be left unclaimed.

Elara swallows hard. The old fear. The one drilled into every girl. *Too much knowledge ruins the womb. Too many ideas make a woman barren.* A belief, meant to keep them docile. She almost hopes it's true. Better barren than a breeder.

500 feet.

She reaches the coordinates. It's a vacant lot. Chain-link fencing with sharp metal teeth wedged between a State-run media shop and a warehouse. No doors. No signs. No way in.

Patrol lights sweep the pavement.

Her fingers curl around the cold wire. There is no going back.

Elara climbs.

1943, The Camp

Dusk settled over the camp. Sonia stood in the shadow of a crumbling barracks, the murmur of covert conversations blending with the evening breeze. Coal smoke, sweat and damp rot.

A group of prisoners gathered around a flickering lantern, a small bundle laid out on a table made from an old barrel.

"Is it ready?" Sonia's voice sliced through the dimness.

Faces marked by fear and resolve turned toward her. Rachel, a wiry woman with dark eyes and a thick accent, slid the bundle toward Sonia, its fabric snagging on the splintered wood. "It's done."

Sonia unwrapped it—the Virginia Woolf she'd rescued from the pyre weeks ago. She flipped it open, spotting the discreet symbol etched inside. Books were contraband, dangerous in their own right, but this one concealed more than just prose.

To any casual observer, it appeared merely worn, but Sonia could see the hidden marks within the text, a series of faint dots and dashes, skirting the margins. That's how they coded messages of resistance: coordinates for rendezvous points, times for covert meetings, sometimes plans for escapes, warnings of danger, or simply words meant to uplift spirits when nothing else could. These were their "Letters from Elsewhere," and this volume held an important list of names for the next labor transport.

Possession of a book could earn you a beating, or a bullet if the guard was in a foul mood. Sonia needed to decode these names and ensure their safe delivery to an ally outside the camp who had requested prisoners for factory work. Though still forced labor, those listed would be spared from the camp's worst fates and receive some care. Documented for outside work, they were promised a temporary reprieve from the horrors of inside. Now, the mission's success depended on one thing: getting the message past several security checkpoints and into the hands of a trusted contact in the kitchen.

A cry shattered the night. The women froze. Across the compound, a young woman, barely younger than Sonia, was forcibly dragged toward the officers' barracks, her struggles futile against the guard's firm grip. Another officer stood watching, an indifferent swirl of cigarette smoke curling under a lamplight. The scene sent a chill through Sonia. This could have been her.

The urge to intervene—to throw something, anything, to create a diversion—was overwhelming. But Sonia held back. The woman's cries faded to muffled sobs and the barracks' door slammed shut, its echo resonating like a gavel.

Rachel's hand landed on her shoulder. Sonia tucked the book under her waistband and forced herself to refocus. "Any word from the workshop?" she asked.

"Just as you requested," came a hushed reply.

Bony fingers passed a small metal capsule, dangling from a thin silver chain, from one pair of gaunt hands to another until it reached Sonia. She inspected it closely.

Forged from pilfered laboratory scraps by a prisoner in the camp's metal shop, this capsule was crafted as the last refuge for her precious missives. Its fireproof design was vital in a place where fire meant annihilation.

Sonia picked up a rusty nail and etched their symbol onto its surface: the chalice of life, defiant in the face of their captors' perverse fascination.

She clenched the capsule in her fist, scanning the circle of women around her. Their faces, hollow yet resolute, reflected a bond stronger than the barbed wire that caged them.

Beside her, a new recruit trembled, eyes wide with the enormity of their mission. Sonia leaned close, her whisper firm. "Fear sharpens us."

The meeting disbanded as the searchlights began their nightly sweep, fingers of light that could betray them in a heartbeat. Sonia timed her steps back to her barracks, counting the seconds between sweeps. One, two, three—she darted to the next building. Flattening against the wall, her breath misted in the air. Five shuffles left, then on seven she sprinted to the latrine. Inside, she let out a shaky breath, clutching the book and capsule against her chest.

2107, Elsewhere

Elara waits.

The lot is empty. Streetlights hum in the distance, weak halos swallowed by the dark. The air is thick, stagnant. She shifts her weight. This is insane.

The whir of drones. Far off, but close enough. She should leave.

Then, the rumble.

A van barrels down the dirt road, headlights slicing through the dust. Too fast. Elara turns to run but it's too late. The van veers, cuts her off, gravel splitting against her boots. The doors slam open. Shadows spill out.

She moves. They move faster.

A hand on her arm—rough, yanking. She stumbles, off balance. "Let me go!" Her voice is sharp, useless.

They don't answer. They are quick. A knife. A flash of pain. Practiced hands sever the chip in her arm and strip away her glasses. Before she can react, fabric blinds her, tight, a blindfold pulled firm. Her wrists are bound behind her back.

No names. No instructions. Just silence.

The van lurches forward.

The city fades; its noise, its lights. The scent of concrete gives way to earth, damp and rich. Trees. Farmland. The thrum of passing drones. Fewer now. The smell shifts—cardboard, dust, rot. They go underground. A tunnel, maybe. The air thickens, warm and stale.

They take her out but leave the blindfold. She counts her steps, trying to map the route. But the turns are endless, the shifts constant. They're leading her in circles, disorienting her. It's working.

Somewhere ahead, a voice murmurs something low and indistinct. Elara tenses. A hand clamps around her arm. A door hisses open. A shove forward. Then, the blindfold is gone. And she sees them.

Books.

Hundreds. Thousands. Paper bound in leather. Forbidden history. More than she ever imagined could still exist. Shelves stretch into the dim, their

shadows merging with the low glow of machines. Rigs of blockchain miners are stacked like forgotten artifacts, their quiet hum threading through the silence.

She is in a bunker. A large, cold one, pulsing with power. The scent of paper, ink, dust, and something sharper. She looks down: blood.

Her own, pooling on the tile. The vase with two handles etched into the floor, now smeared red.

Elara exhales. Slowly. She is alone. Her hands shake as she steps forward, drawn to the bookshelves. A book, pristine. Another, battered. Some ancient, their edges rough with time. Others clean, printed in simple, utilitarian black as if fresh off a press. She pulls one free.

A whisper of paper. Real, solid. Not a hologram. The weight of it unsettles her. It looks new, untouched. She scans the room; a printer, maybe? Her gaze lands on something strange.

A small metal egg hangs from a thin chain, displayed like a relic. Why frame that?

Footsteps. Elara spins.

A woman emerges from the shadows, clad in a white jumpsuit, crisp and clinical. A stark contrast to everything here. "We've been waiting for you," she says. Her voice is even, measured. Not unkind. Not kind, either.

Elara steadies herself, forcing focus over the thrum of her pulse.

She steps closer. "I'm Juniper. A Guardian here."

Elara's fingers twitch toward her face, a reflex, reaching for the glasses that aren't there.

Juniper notices. "You're in Elsewhere," she offers before Elara could ask. "Safe from the State's eyes."

Elara huffs a breath. *Safe*. A word that means nothing anymore.

Juniper gestures to the bookshelves. "This place is a sanctuary. A vault for the things they fear." A pause. A tilt of her head. "We preserve knowledge the State wants gone."

She presses a book into Elara's hands. The same vase symbol, etched into the cover.

"Sonia Rivière wrote this," Juniper says. "It's our manifesto."

Elara's fingers tremble against the binding. It feels real. Too real. She swallows. The questions press against her throat but only one escapes. "The breeders." Her voice is hoarse, raw. "What happens to them?"

Juniper doesn't hesitate. "Once they fail to conceive, they're disposed of."

Elara shakes her head. "They're sent to The Sanctuary. To live out their days in gratitude for their service." The lie sounds uglier out loud.

Juniper's lips press into a thin line. "There is no sanctuary. But I think you knew that."

Elara's pulse pounds in her ears. She did. Didn't she?

Juniper watches her, waiting. Elara clenches her fists. She wants to punch something. The wall. A face. A State official's face.

Juniper's voice is softer now. "We have a plan. To end this. To build a generation that knows more. That fights back."

Elara exhales, sharp. "Why tell me all this?"

Juniper's expression shifts. The ghost of a smile. "You cracked the code."

Elara stills.

"You followed Alex's breadcrumbs."

"Alex?"

Juniper nods. "He was one of us. A Guardian. An exceptional coder."

The book in Elara's hands suddenly feels heavier.

Juniper meets her gaze. "We need you for the next phase. A Trojan horse. On the inside."

Elara blinks. Waits.

Juniper doesn't flinch. "We need a coder," she says, steady. "Within the breeders."

1943, The Camp

The damp chill of the barracks clung to Sonia's skin as she curled within her narrow wooden bunk. The faint, ragged breaths of the other women filled the dim space, each exhalation a soft echo of resilience.

Shielded from the guards' cold scrutiny, she rolled a delicate scrap of paper—the list of names she'd deciphered from the book. Her fingers trembled as she reached for the small metal capsule, its surface cold and smooth against her fevered skin.

She knew its hiding place intimately, a part of her body that had endured violations too methodical to be called anything but sanctioned. Ironically, it was the one place the guards no longer touched. Not her. Not anymore. She was under experiment now, marked as valuable. Off-limits in ways others were not.

Which made it the perfect place. The one place they wouldn't check.

Each insertion was a grim ritual, a sting that blurred her vision, a reminder of everything done to her. But tonight, the mission mattered more. The next labor transport was in two days. This might be her only chance to get the list out. A trusted contact in the kitchen, slated to leave with the evening shift. Their only hope.

"For freedom," Sonia whispered, the phrase a silent mantra as she inserted the capsule between her legs.

She crept through the shadows towards the kitchen's rear, each whisper of wind, each distant clatter a potential threat. A beam of searchlight neared. She froze, breath catching. One misstep, one miscount, and she'd be exposed.

Adrenaline kicked in, and she retreated deeper into the shadows just as the light swept over where she had just stood. Too close. She waited, heart thumping, for the light to pass again. Her timing was off tonight.

She inhaled deeply, opting for a longer, more winding route to minimize further risks. Being caught meant certain death, not just for her but for everyone on the list.

Just as she stepped forward, a firm grip on her shoulder spun her around.

"What are you doing out of your barracks?" the guard's voice was sharp, cutting through the darkness. She hadn't heard him approach.

His hand clamped down, yanking her from the wall and into the unforgiving light. His face remained obscured beneath the brim of his cap. Panic surged through Sonia, coiling tight in her chest.

With a calm she did not feel, she forced herself to speak, her eyes not meeting his. "I was just heading back," she said, each word brittle, threatening to shatter. "I lost track of time."

The lie felt as fragile as glass. He didn't reply. With a forceful jerk, he marched her toward a nearby truck. Its engine growled low, menacing in the suffocating quiet of the camp. He shoved her into the back, the wooden slats biting into her skin as the vehicle lurched forward.

Sonia lay still, her mind racing as wildly as the road beneath her. The capsule inside her burned, a painful reminder of what might now be lost.

Terror coursed through her, but she refused to succumb to it. Her fingers found the rough wall of the truck, scraping furiously as the engine roared on. A splinter bit into her nail, sharp and cruel, but she didn't stop. She carved the symbol—her symbol—deep into the wood. As if resistance could be written into the bones of the world. As if someone, one day, would read it and understand.

2109, State Incubation Center

Elara watches.

The technician adjusts the CRISPR-Cas13 console with deliberate care. The machine hums softly, steady and precise. A forge, shaping futures. Compliance, encoded. Purity, mapped into the DNA of generations yet to be born.

"Take your position," the technician doesn't look at her.

Elara steps forward. The floor is cold, sterile. She passes a window. Rows of women beyond the glass. Silent. Still. The breeders.

Another window, this one overlooks the nursery. Infants, swaddled in State-issued blankets. Perfect. Engineered. Their futures decided before their first breath. Elara stares. They will never know the women below.

Her own survival had been too easy. The lie, simpler than it should have been. The chip thieves took her. That's what she told them. The alternative was unthinkable. A woman acting on her own will? Impossible.

She had returned to her old job at the Library. Resumed duties. Nodded in the right places. Readjusted. Played the part. The model worker. The obedient woman.

Meanwhile, a silent war waged in code.

Alongside the geneticists of Elsewhere, Elara had preserved what the State demanded she erase—books, histories, knowledge. They’d encrypted it, piece by piece, into dormant code. Not stored. Not archived. Buried. Hidden in the genome. A corruption of the State’s records, a careful erasure of the undesirables. Names vanished from databases. Women disappeared before they could be bred.

She read, too. Everything she had been denied. Swallowed the forbidden words like hunger, like thirst, letting them sharpen inside her like a blade.

The technician calls her forward.

Elara tenses, but moves. Her body no longer hers, subject to scans, exams, permission. Her mind though, her mind is still her own.

She waits. Endures. By day, a perfect breeder. *Yes, sir. Of course, sir.* By night, she codes in her head, waiting.

And a month ago, the signal came.

A glitch in the IT department. No one else could fix it. Elara was called in. It was a bug planted by Elsewhere. She ran the script. Played her part. Beneath the surface, the real message: the return of the keys.

Long before her transfer to the Incubation Center, she had worked with the resistance to encrypt a library—fragments of buried truths, outlawed science, dangerous stories. She’d passed the encryption keys to Elsewhere. Now, they had returned them to her.

Every so-called bug fix has been a calculated risk. Each time she accesses the State’s system, she alters it, subtly, precisely.

Genetic blueprints, rewritten. Sequences tweaked. Truths embedded in the smallest code. Tiny anomalies buried deep in the DNA of future generations. The unborn now carry what the State tried to destroy.

A revolution, coded into blood and bones.

“Undress.”

Elara doesn’t move. Then, slowly, her hands obey. The thin medical robe slides from her shoulders. She stands, exposed. She wraps her arms around herself, but there is no warmth to be found.

“Lay back.”

The scanner whirs as she reclines. A light sweeps over her body. Ownership confirmed.

The technician studies his interface, eyes flicking over the data. Then, a nod.

“Congratulations. You’re pregnant.”

Elara blinks. Stares at the ceiling.

A slow inhale. A slow exhale. A mask of obedience.

Her hand settles over her stomach. A secret, buried in the womb.

2025, Texas

Billie stirs her cereal, barely tasting it. Her eyes are locked on *Letters from Elsewhere*, one of the new banned books pulled from her high school shelves.

Her mom’s voice drones in the background, something about gymnastics, Tania’s mom. Billie tunes it out. The words on the page hold her fast.

A passage about choosing to remember, even when forgetting is easier, grips her. Her spoon hovers midair, forgotten. Then, slowly, she sets it down. The conviction in the writing pulses under her skin. Does anyone care like this anymore?

The TV hums with the day’s news. What do you think the economy will be like now that he’s president? One anchor asks. Channel flick. It’s to protect women, whether they want it or not, declares a politician. Her mom scoffs. Channel flick. Troops, distant conflicts. Another flick.

Her mom’s phone rings, followed by a tense call with her health insurance about the rising costs of her insulin. Billie half listens, a text popping up on her phone.

Tania: *What about ‘Rebel Reads’ or ‘Hack Stacks’?*

Billie: *Use Signal, don’t text about this stuff here.*

Her attention is snagged by the current segment the TV has settled on: a determined woman speaks of her great-aunt, Sonia Rivière, the long-dead author of the book on Billie’s lap.

“She gave her life for these words, and now they want to erase her sacrifice.”

“Is it true?” the interviewer asks. “The capsule was found amid ashes?”

Sonia’s great-niece nods, solemn. “Yes, and the list inside was preserved, saving forty people.”

“Do you still have it?”

Billie’s eyes narrow as the niece pulls out the capsule on screen. It’s this oval-shaped, silver thing that kind of looks like a metal tampon. The camera zooms in on the symbol etched on its surface. Billie traces that same symbol on her copy of *Letters from Elsewhere*—a simple outline of a uterus.

She stands, leaving her breakfast, and hurries upstairs.

Behind her bedroom doors, the world narrows to the glow of her computer screen. It’s digitizing another novel recently banned from her high school library. Her keystrokes are quick, precise, safeguarding the text in the clandestine digital archive she built with her friend. She leans back. A heartbeat’s pause.

She thinks of the capsule, found in the ashes. Billie cracks her knuckles and hits send.

A new message pings on her Signal app.

@LibertyLit: *Underground Words?*

Billie pulls a bin from under her bed, packed with books awaiting their digital resurrection. Sonia Rivière’s book joins the pile. She pauses, eyeing the cover.

Then she types. One word. A promise. A spark.
Elsewhere.