

Villidge

J. D. McGuicken

"It's not an actual written language. He was French. It's the phonetic spelling of something he overheard."

"So... we *intone* it?"

Her torchlight picked and hesitated across the debris.

"Like a *rite*?"

"We're not *wizards*. We don't do anything with it. We can fiddle the linguistics later." A long pud-

dle ran a sectioning line across the cave. "Runoff from yesterday? Some issue with groundwater?"

She craned back the way they'd come—"Still pretty fierce out."

Their landing had been almost vertical, the skinny beach between bridges a natural funnel for headwinds. The entrance was a raised nub up into the storm, a threshold between wet and dry cold, noise and still, an awkward splice of media across the rear of the long-buried little chapel. Here—another transition, stone slabs ending at what was once a wall, now a cavern floor sloping off into deep-black and further branches.

Entirely encompassed within the larger town of B—, scaffolded within the underside of its supporting bridge network—the remains of the historical *village* of M— sur M— were a warren of tempo-

rary housing and storage space grown up alongside the bridge-web as it slowly spanned an expansive, fractal delta, now long-gone. It eventually became a location in its own right through the quirk and fancy of B-'s early aldermen. Its total effective area was a little under twenty thousand square feet. Since the network had never been fully completed it was impossible to walk solely upon, under or through it from one end of the notional village bounds to the other. It existed in pockets only, pooling and congealing alongside cycles of structural decay and renovation.

This breaching space was something more modern, part of a later expansion of B-, running through the old village at a tangent in a long tunnel of last-century brickwork intended as part of a

cistern, eventually opening up this wide wedge down into the exposed caves.

This is where the text had been found, part of a tiny, esoteric library-space hidden under rock and fallen masonry. The oddly-distributed set of marginalia listed times, dates and placenames too obscure to correlate; scribbled pseudo-tongue commentary within a little-known antignostic tract.

It wasn't clear whether the library had been within M– sur M– itself–detritus knocked through into the upper portion of the caves by the structural work–or if it had always been here, in some unrelated den, maybe not even in use around the time of the chapel. The disruption was significant enough to have churned any potential boundary into mulch.