

LEVITY

This is not fun, thought Blasting Powder as he tumbled through the dark beneath the earth, propelled by millions of grasping fingers in the unnatural labyrinth of soil runnels and vertical chutes beneath the monument.

He fell for one minute and five seconds, according to his internal clock, before being spat out by the churn into a narrow crawlway that felt like suspiciously high-quality masonry as it smashed into his perfectly smooth metal face.

He landed in a heap, with his rifle in front of him.

"AAAA!" he yelled, hitting the ground twice and shattering it into tiny clay triangles.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" he added, kicking the ceiling, sending dirt everywhere.

"FUCK!" he said, after some consideration.

There was a proverb that came to his mind about the Hoopoe and the Hawk, and Proverbs.Helper started to offer analysis about the futility of the Hawk's rage and the Hoopoe's sadness, but Blasting Powder deleted Proverbs.Helper and dragged the proverbs folder into the trash, and dedicated his processing power towards drilling his fist pointlessly into the ground again and again.

If Burlap Sack were with him in this dim, slightly slanting, mosaic-tiled runnel, she would probably say something like "We'll laugh about this later," but she was not in this dim, slightly slanting, mosaic-tiled runnel. He was alone, a mile beneath the monument, which would surely be overrun and devoured by a mass of shadowed husks as soon as the sun went behind the mountain if he couldn't find a way back up.

A one minute and five second fall was a long way to climb.

The dirt above shifted, and something was spat out with the heavy impact of a human body.

"Blasting Powder?" said the human voice belonging to the human body as she crawled blindly forward.

"Ow! Oh! There you are!" she said.

"Great," confirmed Blasting Powder, lighting a small red torch. "Now two of us are stuck underground."

"Are you hurt?" asked Maria and Less Lepeleph. She crawled forward again, until her face was much too close to his, lit red-brown in the stale glow.

The torchlight swelled, illuminating the walls around the two volunteers: a pristine surface of porcelain tiles, random patterns

and colors, hexagonal, and somehow all perfectly interlocking despite being different sizes, like soap bubbles on the surface of water.

Maria looked down at the side of the wall to her left and noticed the intricate, jumbled, organic-looking loops, arcades, branching keel arches, porticos, balustrades, and tiny beveled dentils on doorways too small to even fit her pinkie.

"I'm glad she spat us out in this tunnel and not in the middle of the dirt somewhere," Maria said. "That would have been uncomfortable."

"She?" asked B.P.

"The churn," Maria replied.

"The churn has a gender?"

"UNIS didn't tell you about Driving Dusk?"

B.P. was silent.

"For a moment," he said, "I thought I would surely die."

"The churn only eats organic tissue."

"Ah," said Blasting Powder, looking down at his leather belt and bandolier, which had been torn to shreds.

"Then how the hell are you still alive?" he asked. "And why the fuck did you jump after me?"

Maria patted her stomach. "Less likes to keep all my blood and flesh in the right place."

"Right," said B.P. "You have a magic lizard."

"But you're not hurt, are you?" Maria asked again.

Blasting Powder hauled himself on one side, glaring at his knee, which had twisted an actuator, then slammed it on the ground knocking it back into place.

"No," he said. "I'm just pissed off."

Admitting the anger made half of it boil off, and the empty space was quickly filled in with guilt.

"Okay," Maria said. "Okay. Uh. I'm sure there's a way back up if we follow this tunnel. The builders need some way to the surface, after all. Are you able to turn around? We can follow the path."

"We'll see," said Blasting Powder.

Shoving his rifle further up the crawlway, B.P. compressed himself as much as his largely inflexible metal body would allow, and spun around so that his head was pointing uphill. Vulnerable parts of the arcades, arches, and walkways crumbled to the floor as his head and feet scraped the sides of the burrow and they began to crawl.

With the torch now on the other side of Blasting Powder, Maria could see very little other than the totality of his silhouette in the red light. His head made a kind of eclipse, and the eerie half-light made the walls seem like they were teeming with insects.

"Wait, Dr. Powder – shine the torch here," Maria said.

The torchlight came, and the teeming flickering resolved into dozens of orderly lines of hard-shelled red insects, marching over the inch-wide walkways, down the ridges of the keel arches, and in and out of each regular gap in the arcade.

"Oh my god! It's them!" Maria shouted.

"Them?" Blasting Powder asked, turning his head.

"Wowzers!" said Maria.

The insects between the shadowed arches on the walkway slowed for a moment to watch the giant pair of wide brown eyes excitedly studying them.

"I don't see anything," said Powder, adjusting the magnification on his eyes.

"They're all over," said Maria, peering down a tiny hallway. "Repairing the holes we made in the roof, moving the dirt behind the tiles, sealing the cracks, fixing the detail on the cornices, the brackets and porticos. Platoons of little shield bugs! Little stag beetles, walking sticks, termites, millipedes! They're making a new archway! You don't see them?"

B.P. shook his head.

"They're all deep red with golden legs, gold antennae, gold highlights around the edges of their elytra-like decoration on a fingernail," said Maria, unable to pry her eyes from the eye-spy-esque miniature city. "I thought they would all look the same as the one we have in the museum on Clasp-Kraton, but they're specialized! They all have different jobs! Look, this one's lifting this bit of stone, and here these two are sealing it in place with their long legs and their bug-gum! I could watch them all day!"

"We don't have all day," said B.P.

"Right," Maria nodded, refocusing.

Blasting Powder began to move again, and Maria pulled her eyes away from the monument builders, following his perfunctory crawl up the gentle slope.



A few thousand meters above them, Burlap Sack woke to the gentle creaking of the wind on the roof of the volunteer housing modules.

She got dressed, and tied her hair back. A few grey strands slipped out around her temples, and she tucked them back in. She straightened her shirt, and went down the stairs into the monument where she made coffee from the coffee powder in aisle four.

Today was a coffee day.

It had been nearly five years, and Burlap Sack still wasn't exactly sure what was responsible for the monument causing a coffee day.

She had ruled out hundreds of possible corollaries: the previous day's wind speed, the following day's wind speed, time of year, passing satellites, cloud cover, moon phase, primes, Fibonacci numbers, the Cascabel set, and various iterations of her own (and B.P.'s) actions and movements including things like the number of steps they took in a given day, the number of shadow creatures Blasting Powder had shot the previous night, how many bullets he used, how much food they ate, what kinds, when, the number of words they said, which tenses and grammatical moods, what letters they started with, or just how often they said the word "coffee" which lead to one day where Burlap and Blasting Powder said nothing but the word "coffee" with different intonations, another day where they said nothing at all, and another day where they dressed as historical figures and had a fancy dinner party.

But today, when Burlap woke and descended into the monument, she knew for a fact that it would be a coffee day.

It just felt like one.

And despite her every empirical impulse, she couldn't shake the feeling that the monument somehow understood and read her feelings, somehow, on a subjective level. That it was a coffee day purely because she felt like it was going to be a coffee day.

She stirred the powder into the hot water, and let it cool. Then she went out onto the porch and saw the hole in the planks where Blasting Powder and Maria and Less Lepeleph had fallen into the churn and almost surely died.

Burlap Sack took a sip of her coffee, tried not to panic, and ran back inside the monument.

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For a long time it felt like the tunnel was leading them upwards, but all the while, B.P.'s altimeter registered only a steady drop in elevation, a large negative number becoming an increasingly large negative number.

After forty minutes, the light of the glow stick seemed to catch something that wasn't more, perpetual, tiled tunnel.

"Are those stairs?" Maria and Less Lepeleph asked as what appeared to be stairs made their way out of the gloom.

The tunnel ended, the passage widened, and the roof eased up above their heads.

In this cavity, a room like a cramped, hollow heart or the inside of a bagpipe, the hexagonal mosaic tiles made a mural of many figures dancing hand-in-hand. Many other crawlways shot off in different directions, including a shaft that led straight up, although no light came down from it.

Blasting stood and swung the rifle over his head and onto his back, taking a step up onto the first stair.

"They sure seem like stairs," he said.

He took another step, expecting Maria to be beside him, and feeling her absence, he turned to find her still standing in the cavity looking at the mosaic which swirled like white air currents over the many other colors.

Each of the other crawlways had their own tiny row of walkways for the monument builders, still coming and going, disappearing into the dark spaces behind the little doorways.

"Maria," Blasting Powder nudged, and Maria hastened after him, stealing a last look at the mural before it disappeared from view.

A few steps up, Blasting Powder frowned. Or, rather, deepened his frown.

"What is it?" Maria asked.

"We're still going down," he said. "We're getting deeper."

"How can that be?"

"I don't know. But I trust my altimeter."

"Should we try going back?"

B.P. took a few steps down, back into the cavity.

"No," he shook his head. "There's nothing for it. It's down this way too."

"Your altimeter decreases both ways? That can't be right."

"And yet, its reading is clear," he replied.

"Alright, well. My gut says we go up." Maria gestured forward with her index finger.

"There is no way up!" Blasting Powder insisted.

"What else can we do?" asked Maria.

"We can't keep following the path. The monument must be messing with distance somehow. We need to get outside it."

"How?"

At that moment something moved in the tunnel behind them and they both fell deathly silent. They watched as a dog-sized red stag beetle with gold edges pushed out of the passage they had just emerged from.

The beetle stopped two steps into the vestibule, rubbed its face with a foreleg and walked past them up the stairs. Six steps up, it stopped to glance back at them, and Maria and Blasting Powder exchanged dumbfounded looks.

"There's a symbol on it," Blasting Powder said as they hurried up after it into the oncoming dark.

"Huh," Maria said.

"It doesn't match any language in my database," said B.P.

"You should update your database with ancient languages." Maria teased, testing a coy look.

B.P. glared at her, and she instinctively apologized.

Then he looked away and shrugged, letting her off the hook. "You know what it says?"

The little beetle went along mechanically, pulling itself up step by step, struggling in the same way with each one, its pace never wavering.

"Well, it's Amber B," said Maria. "It's the language Akirikari's true name is written in." And when Blasting Powder's face showed no indication of understanding, she added, "you know, from the Amber Scroll?"

The beetle struggled up another stair, and another.

"No," said Blasting.

"I studied it on my home planet," Maria said. "I think this character is part of a pair. I don't know what it means by itself."

"What does it mean with its partner?" B.P. asked.

"Uh. Crushing weight," Maria answered.

"Specifically—connotationally—the crushing weight of tons of stone and glass."

"Why," asked B.P., "do you know that?"

Maria shrugged.

Soon, they reached the top, and the beetle cleared the last step and scampered off along a rail-less foot-wide ledge away into the dark. The glow stick's light revealed before them a large

circular chute with a spiral staircase inset within the walls, leading up clockwise and down counterclockwise.

"Aw," said Maria. "Bye, Baby Crush."

"Why is part of your god's name 'the crushing weight of tons of stone and glass?'" Blasting Powder asked.

"Oh—well," said Maria, peering over the edge into the chute's new darker dark, through which similarly large beetles crawled, carrying bits of rock, food, wires, gears, leaves, and gemstones. "Those ideograms are from that stanza where Akirkari drops the Precarious Menagerie on the Five Lords of Drofsum-Dim. Crushing them with their own menagerie."

"Ok," B.P. said to himself. "Ask a stupid question."

"They had it coming," added Maria, helpfully.

"*Everyone* has it coming," he replied.

"Do you feel that?" Maira said. She stepped forward, toward the edge of the chute.

"Feel what?" asked Blasting Powder.

Maria jumped a little jump on the spot where she stood, and instead of coming back down, she kept going up, floating carelessly toward the underside of the stairs above.

"Woah-oah," she said, grabbing the overhang with one hand and pushing herself back down.

B.P. shook his head, exhaled, and started walking up the stairs. After a few steps he swiveled and shook his head again and passed Maria on the way down, counterclockwise along the slowly descending slabs. He returned almost immediately, his altimeter apparently having shown its negative number become increasingly negative.

Maria, unable to keep herself anchored on the ground, was now floating horizontally over the ledge, her stomach up against the floor, holding the side of the stairs, knees bent and feet pointed upward at a slight angle like she was underwater.

"Why are you doing that?" sighed B.P.

"What?" said Maria.

"You're floating."

Maria gave a little shrug, and felt a tinge of guilt reduce her buoyancy, her chest sinking down to touch the floor like she was a balloon. She grabbed the edge of the ledge and spun herself around to face her coworker. "It feels like we're in the center of a center-spinning ship. Like the Starry Pellicle or the Derivative Sun—"

"We don't have time to mess around. It's already 10:30."

"I know—"

"Why did you follow me into the churn?" Blasting Powder suddenly asked. "If you had stayed on the surface, the monument might have stood a chance. But now we might both not make it back in time. Burlap Sack will do her best, but she's not a fighter. The monument will almost certainly be destroyed, the tunnels broken open, and the builders killed and eaten."

"I couldn't just leave you."

"You're a soldier. A sentry. Your duty is to the monument first and other volunteers second."

"I'm not a soldier." Maria said. "I'm a generalist. Do you feel that breeze?" Saying this, she pushed off from the edge like a swimmer and drifted out into the dark beyond the reach of the glow stick.

"Stop!" yelled B.P.

As he said this, Maria seemed to falter in midair swinging her arms for something to grab onto.

"Get back to the ledge!" B.P. commanded.

"I'm trying!" she yelled.

"Get back to the ledge or we're getting a different replacement!"

Maria felt her stomach drop, and with it, the rest of her body, which plummeted into the deep dark center of the monument and was gone in an instant.

"Damn it," said Blasting Powder, and, without a moment of hesitation, jumped after her into the dark and sank like a rocket. He caught up to Maria almost immediately and the two of them grabbed hold of each other by the arms, their momentum spinning them around in a slow, weightless circle as if they were skydivers.

"Oh, hey there!" Maria yelled.

"Angle yourself towards the wall, and I'll slow us down!" replied B.P.

"You'll destroy your hands!"

"Don't argue!"

"What happened to putting the monument first?"

"Fuck you!" Blasting Powder said, though, as he did, he found that it was his turn to notice the incidental background detail of the monument; the tiles rushing past in the faint light of the glow stick twisting in the air above their heads.

Like a zoetrope or a reel of film, the tiles were showing a picture, changing frames each level as the spiral staircase wrapped around and around.

The tiles told a story, one that Maria remembered from childhood, from her mothers and grandmothers.

It was a story of the gods when they were animals, when one white drop of light split into seven, and the seven sculpted animal shapes and danced together in the first forest clearing. As the light expressed different aspects and took different shapes, the one light forgot that it was one, and the animals went their separate ways. One by one, the animal lights dimmed and went out, until only the red fox was left. He hopped from marble to marble, saying "where have you hidden?" Limping along over the uneven seashore, he looked inside each marble, he peered down as he balanced on it, and each time he saw the same white light split many ways. Little animals bickering inside as though they weren't hands of the same whole. And he understood that he was a temporary, arbitrary division, and he began to float.

The little marbles all winked out and the mosaic swept up into darkness, and Maria remembered that they were falling.

"I guess that's the end," she said.

And in fact the ground was visible as a thin disk in the distance, rapidly approaching.

"I guess so," replied B.P.

As they braced themselves for an impact, though, Maria observed a subtle coalescing of insects in the shape of two long arms clothed in what seemed to be red banners, swirling outward like the spiral arms of the galaxy, with black blocky ideograms in the pattern of a traditional 72 stanza narrative epic.

"Wh—" she said, as the arms solidified and caught them, slowing their hurtle to a feather's pace just in time, and setting them lightly on the ground by the backs of their shirts.

There was a doorway at the bottom of the stairs, and the ambient light of the wine-purple mosaic tiles in the grey stone turned pink at the edges of the doorway, where it met with an almost physically dense warm orange light that emanated from deep inside.

A lone figure was silhouetted by the light, which caught them both off guard.

She seemed like a cut-out, the result of a collage artist's decision on a magazine, taken and pasted somewhere else. The absence suggested that she had black hair dyed in stripes of white, cut unevenly, like the jagged edge of a poem. She was a monument to asymmetry and random colors, which seemed to stay in place as she shifted her weight onto her right foot and put her hand on her hip,

as if there was a stationary background behind her and she was only a person-shaped absence.

"Maria and Blasting?" the figure asked.

"That's us," said Maria.

"Follow me," she said.

The figure motioned for them to follow her. Maria took a step forward, but stopped. Blasting Powder didn't move at all.

"Who are you?" Maria asked.

She paused, and turned around, giving Maria almost a sense of vertigo, like seeing something two dimensional become three dimensional. The look on the figure's face was something like *what kind of question is that?* Like Maria had asked what planet they were on. And she said, "I'm Driving Dusk."

"Oh!" said Maria. "You're the—"

"Akirikari wants to talk to you," she said, and disappeared down the corridor.



On the dock overlooking the churn and the sand wastes beyond it, Burlap Sack was frantically re-reading the instruction manual for the 45-pound autonomous vertical ditch digger that she had just hauled down the narrow flight of stairs from the volunteer housing modules, where it had been gathering dust for the last five years.

It was an emergency item, but this was an emergency use-case. The consequences of blasting a hole into a delicate, mostly unmapped subterranean ecosystem with a high-powered laser were in fact what the instruction manual's warnings were mainly concerned with.

As she turned the page, there was a tumble in the sky. She looked up. Sand swept over the churn, and the roof of the monument creaked in the wind.

A rumble in itself was unusual, because rain was a rare event, although occasionally a stray dry storm cloud would sneak behind the low hills to the east.

But the rumble was not thunder—it persisted, becoming the distant deafening roar of dispersion engines.

The auto-digger's instruction manual was ripped out of Burlap's hands as a minivan-sized grey-blue shuttle swung overhead in a tight arc. Its thrusters drowned out the quiet shifting of sand. Burlap felt a sinking feeling as it lowered over the space where the old, warped dock overhung the churn. A small ladder descended, and two people came out.



"This is going to end badly," Blasting Powder said.

"Ooh," said Maria. "Is that a prediction?"

Driving Dusk glanced back at them, a quick flicker like an involuntary reevaluation of an optical illusion. "Unfortunately," said Blasting Powder.

"I've heard about your predictions, like on Yassin when that freak storm swept away the elluiheim's tracks but you had—"

"So, Driving Dusk," Blasting interrupted. "You were a volunteer with the 12th cohort, weren't you?"

"That's right," said their guide.

"I'm sorry if this seems blunt. You sacrificed yourself to save the monument. I thought you died."

"I did," Driving Dusk said nonchalantly, turning back around.

"Did you say Akirikari wants to talk to us?" Maria asked.

"Yes," said Driving Dusk.

She led them to a doorway where many red insects were coming and going through small hexagonal perforations around the edge of the door.

Driving knocked, and a voice from inside said, "Come in!"

Their guide beckoned for them to follow, and then phased through the door, disappearing.

Maria took a step forward, then thought better of it, and put a hand to the door to test its physicality. It was solid.

The handle turned and the door opened from the other side.

"I'm glad you could make it!" said the clear welcoming voice. "You're in good time for breakfast if you're hungry."

"I'm starving," said Maria.

The room was a kitchen in so far as a kitchen is a homely room with a stove, shelves with sugar, flour, and recipe books, and pots and pans, but it seemed to be another thing too — a nexus or a node. The room was full of doors — every available spot on the walls and ceiling had one, all different colors and shapes with different numbers (one through seven) and letters (A through E).

A sun lamp shone on a row of plants whose vines draped down over the recipe books, organized by color on a white shelf. The chairs around the small, circular table were mismatched in a matching way.

In the free spaces on the walls, hung a handful of storied weapons: the Sun Bow, the Wellaway Glaives, the Tome of the Exeter,

and the Phantom Knife, although Akirikari's famous partisan, the Starry Pellicle, was nowhere to be seen.

As the two of them entered the room, which seemed empty except for Driving Dusk standing gloomily to one side like an apathetic butler, a second optical illusion caught their eyes. The mosaic tiles on the opposite patch of wall seemed to pop out in the shape of a person.

Leaning back in the dull yellow chair, his eyes twinkling and his long black hair seeming to twinkle like fog or mist, was the unmistakable figure of the mythic trickster Akirikari. Maria bowed immediately, averting her eyes and prostrating herself, but Akirikari quickly gave her leave to stand.

"Come, sit," he said, gesturing to the four mugs of steaming liquid.

"Lord Akirikari," Maria blurted out, slipping back into her first language to imbue her words with adequate respect, "you're the monument!"

He bowed slightly and tapped his heart. "Well, I suppose that's technically true. Please, have some pancakes."

"Are you telling me—" B.P. cut in suddenly, as Maria started devouring the fruit, pancakes, eggs, and toast like she hadn't eaten food in years, "that the endangered species we've spent the last five years protecting are little bits of a long forgotten god?"

"And you've done an excellent job, Dr. Powder. I want to commend you for your service."

Blasting Powder glanced toward the door they came in through.

"You won't be able to make it up the stairs before sunset I'm afraid," Akirikari said, and seeing the alarm in B.P.'s posture, added, "but don't worry, I have a plan."

"Akirikari always has a plan," Maria whispered to Blasting Powder through a mouthful of pancakes and fruit.

"The trickster," said Blasting Powder. "I've heard about you. I thought you had died as well. Centuries ago."

"Many people thought that for a long time," replied Akirikari. "But over time certain enemies grew wise, and now I am bombarded again daily by enemies I made in my youth."

"You don't look how I pictured."

"This is only a projection. My real body is here." He pointed to the beetles on the stove, the moth hovering above the plants with a watering can, the praying mantis behind the door, and the many other half-inch long and smaller insects carrying fragments of material through holes in the other doors. "Small parts of me in

other rooms are weaving magic to make me appear before you in this way. I could just as easily be your faithful great aunt Amaranta, or your dear old drill sergeant Gryces Braver,” he said, taking the forms as he named them. “But I think this shape, this absence, weighs a little lighter on the mind.”

“One must perceive an absence,” added Driving Dusk.

“That’s incredible,” said Maria, swallowing a big bite. “You weren’t always able to split yourself like that, right?”

Akirikari shook his head. “It took many thousands of years of secret practice.”

A small beetle crawled out from behind Maria’s teacup carrying a cube of sugar.

Akirikari’s illusory form lifted its finger, and the beetle crawled onto it. He glanced up at Maria, who held out her finger, and the beetle crawled from his finger to hers, and then up her arm onto her shoulder. “I have so many questions,” she said.

“What do you want to know?”

“How is the monument powered? Where does the food come from? How do the different parts of you communicate across the hundreds of light years that separate the monuments? How much do you weigh? Did you weigh less before you became millions of bugs? Did the battle of the rainbow gate really last 300 days or was that a misinterpretation? Is the Breathbellow ladder a real ladder or a metaphor? What happens when one of your insects dies?”

Akirikari paused for a moment and then chuckled. “Let me show you something,” he said, rising from the old yellow chair.

The red praying mantis walked to the door marked “1” and opened it, its forelegs fitting into the grooves on the handle perfectly, like a gear.

“This is the most impressive part,” said Akirikari.

On the other side of the door was a hallway very similar to the one through which they entered, which eventually took a turn to the right, beyond which they could see no more.

“I’ve always been fascinated by dim, featureless hallways,” remarked Blasting Powder.

“This is the lowest level of the monument on Preservation-Aster,” said Driving Dusk.

“Oh my god,” said Maria.

“Let’s adopt a different view of it,” Akirikari said, the mantis closing the door and opening it again.

This time, the door opened on an aerial view of the Pres-Aster monument, the only monument whose architecture could be traced to a

once-extant building: the monastery at Ferin-dûn, whose original blueprints were still available in the library at the University of Kibelo on the Starry Pellicle.

Wind rushed in through the open doorway, and their view was slanted in a way that made Maria feel as though they would all slide out the door and tumble a thousand feet into the ocean.

The monastery was built right on the edge of the cliff in a radial flower pattern with a large tower in the center. Some six hundred feet below it, the ocean crashed and fizzed, and Maria could smell the salt in the cool air.

But something was off. Pres-Aster was usually buzzing with tourist ships, but the air was silent. There was no movement from pilgrims or monument staff on the ground, even though it was mid-morning. And there was thick black smoke issuing from the far side of the tower.

Akirikari closed the door, and opened the one marked "2". Door 2, and the following doors, opened to similar views of the other monuments – the lighthouse, the library, the derelict – but they all seemed strangely empty.

Behind the door labelled "A" was a small bridge that led over a small canal of clear cool water. The space inside was massive – a long room lit at the edges by gas lamps and covered entirely with earth, plowed into furrows tended by hundreds of beetles. Open archways in the centers of the other walls seemed to lead to identical rooms.

Door "B" led to some kind of power plant; "C" led to a long labyrinth of drawers and cabinets through which insects were carrying components, fragments of bone and text, gold rings, and lapis lazuli.

"A god is a thing that fills whatever container you put it in," said Driving Dusk.

"Isn't it grand?" Akirikari beamed. "What a joy it all was to build. An interlocking, self-sustaining system whose output is mystery. Thousands of tourists flock to the more accessible structures, but the real joy is the depth of the daily discoveries of people like you and Burlap, and the pure wonder of people like you, Maria."

Blasting Powder clasped his hands together. "Fascinating. Well, thank you for the tea, your Lordship. But we need to get back to the surface. Burlap must be worried half to death about us. And apparently you don't actually need us after all, so I suppose we'd better call a UNIS transport and get our escort settled."

"I need you more than you can imagine," Akirikari said, closing the door to the cabinet labyrinth. "You've saved my life countless times."

"You're a god," said Blasting Powder. "What does a god need from a person like me?"

"The same thing you need from Dr. Sack," he said. "Don't worry about her, by the way. UNIS has already arrived. There's been an unprecedented catastrophe," said Akirikari. "The volunteers from the other monuments have all been evacuated."

There was a thump on the door that Akirikari seemed not to notice, but which made Dusk flinch.

"What?" said Maria, her stomach dropping out from under her.

"Well..." said Akirikari, "All the other monuments have fallen. The five-and-dime on Ilari is the last one, and it will soon fall too."

"What! No!" Maria demanded. "What can we do!?"

"You could stand and fight, but you would soon be overrun, so I would counsel against it," Akirikari smiled.

"We can't just let you die!"

"You can! I've been looking forward to this day for a long time."

Maria was dumbfounded. Blasting Powder was gritting his teeth.

"I devoted too much of my body to soft things, too much of my time to study and art. Now my greatest defense is you, the people I built it for. But I wouldn't have it any other way and I won't have anyone else sacrifice themselves on my account."

As he said this, another thump was heard from door "4" and a horrible clawed hand bled through the crack on the side, feeling for the handle.

"Everyone must die, and every great kingdom must fall to ruin," the trickster continued. "In this way I can grant those who would seek my ruin their long-sought peace."

The door burst open, and a husk of solid shadow leapt into the room with two thin swords held aloft. In his mouth he had a wriggling red beetle, which he bit down on, biting a chunk out of, before springing toward the Akirikari's mosaic mirage.

He swiped at Akirikari's face, and the blade passed through, distorting the illusion like TV static, and Blasting Powder sank him with a shot.

"Fly," said Akirikari. "If you are to escape with your lives you must return to the surface at once."

A broad *thump* and a soft splintering was heard from door 6, and a mandala of shadowed hands jammed themselves through the space between the door and the wall, searching for the handle.

"We'll never make it in time!" Maria exclaimed.

"All you have to do is lighten up!" Akirikari grinned as the door burst open and the room was swarmed with shadow.

And Maria and Blasting Powder scrambled out the way they came.



"Dr. Sack, please step away from the auto-digger," requested Director Nadine Fete.

"We can't leave them here," replied Burlap. "They're still underground, I'm sure of it."

"Burlap. The longer we stay here, the worse our odds become. They're coming up from underground; they're eating the monuments from the inside out." Nadine had expected leaving Ilari to be a difficult sell to Burlap and Blasting Powder, the two most famously stubborn volunteers in the entire program, but hadn't expected to walk into . . . whatever this was.

"There was something special about that girl," said Burlap, failing to step away from the auto-digger.

"Please don't make me force the issue," said the Director.

"Force. Force is a bold word to use on a woman with a 45-pound laser."

"Was that a threat?"

"You can call it an observation," said Burlap, looking down at the auto-digger. Her voice sounded tired, old. But she liked how it sounded now in comparison to the new director. With Blasting Powder she never thought about what she sounded like, she was never self-conscious. Here she felt self conscious, but also venerable, powerful in a way that the much younger UNIS Operations Director wasn't. "Perhaps the other volunteers you evacuated had more to lose than I do," she said. "Saving Blasting Powder is more important to me."

"I understand the position you're in," said Nadine.

"Do you?" asked Burlap.

Nadine smoothed her short, black hair back into its professional swoop. *Nervously*, thought Burlap Sack.

"But we can't leave you here."

"You might have to," she said, without looking up from the machine.

Stooping, she prepared to prime the laser's countdown, but she was pulled back by the security specialist.

"Get your hands off me." She shook them off, and they let go.

"We have the authority to remove you by force," said Nadine.

"Authority." Burlap looked her in the eye for the second time since she and the UNIS security goon had disembarked. The shuttle's engines still roared above them, its pilot idling in the air, probably wondering what was taking so long.

Nadine held her gaze while the wind whipped over them, and Burlap could tell she was genuinely afraid for both their lives.

"Fine," Burlap acquiesced, taking one last look at the ground. "Let me get my research."

As she entered the automatic glass doors and grabbed her research off the counter, the churn shifted, and the ground for half a mile in every direction dropped suddenly about five feet with the *schwump* of millions of pounds of sand.

Then the worm-like tendrils compressed into a single area, roiling like a pot of leeches, and opened a hole in the sand through which Maria and Blasting Powder came rocketing out like they had been double-bounced by the world's strongest trampoline.

"Let's go, let's go!" Blasting Powder shouted to the people on the dock, landing on his feet and helping Maria to hers.

"Blasting Powder!" Burlap shouted.

"Emotions later!" Blasting Powder said, scrambling up the ladder after Nadine. "Good morning Director!"

"Good morning, Dr. Powder! I'm glad you're alive."

"How the fuck did everyone find out about the Doctor thing before me!"

As they all piled onto the ladder and began to climb, the monument quaked and rattled, and the crepuscular gods emerged slashing and biting with wild abandon at the last few red-shelled insects as they tried to skitter away into the desert.

Burlap helped Maria and Less Lepeleph into the shuttle, and peered over the edge at the monument, which shuddered and collapsed. "Well. I guess our work here is done," she said.

"Everyone made it out safe, that's what matters," said the Director.

The shuttle listed suddenly, and the engines strained as something grabbed onto it from below, pulling it down.

Anaria-Noria, Queen of the Moon Ballet vaulted up, through the open door and landed in the middle of the volunteers.

“At long last,” she said, calmly, with a formal bow, as though reciting a poem, “that noisome pest is dead. We’ve crushed him, burned him, smoked him out of every nook and microscopic hole.”

Maria started forward, face furrowed in rage, but Blasting Powder held her back.

“How does it feel, Maria?” Anaria-Noria gloated, backflipping off the edge of the shuttle and falling back towards the swarm of vengeful ghosts. “How does it feel to be the last devotee of a long-dead god?”

The shuttle rocketed away, and they clung to their supports in stunned silence as the desert grew smaller, the mountains rolled away and became forests, icecaps, an ocean, and Ilari became a small orb of light, like a marble.

Something moved in Maria’s shirt pocket, and she nudged it open to look inside. A tiny movement. An antennae. And a little red beetle with a gold-edged carapace crawled up and clung to the top of her pocket. The two of them watched the small marble fade to a pinpoint, one among a million others. And they floated away, weightless.