

REST

Burlap Sack and Blasting Powder sat on the corner of the old dock outside the Five-and-Dime sitting up prickles and flicking them onto the churn.

"She should have announced herself long before now," Blasting Powder said, squinting at the speck of a silhouette on the horizon.

"I don't know how you can even see her from here," said Burlap. "She's a speck of a speck even with the binoculars."

"She moves like a snake." B.P. adjusted his irises. "She moves like someone strapped down with explosives. She moves like the Sword of Truth. She moves like a—like a—what's the word. Not an antelope."

Burlap dusted off her prickle hitch-hikers. "I don't see why you have your binoculars out here in the first place with eyes as good as that."

"They're for you mainly," said B.P.

"That's sweet. I thought it was for your cowboy aesthetic."

He shrugged.

"You want anything?" Burlap gestured with a thumb to the Five-and-Dime.

"Nah," B.P. shook his head. "Wait, get me a cheese."

"Sure." She stepped into the store.

When she came out, Blasting Powder was still sitting just where he had been a moment ago, hand up against his forehead, holding his cloth wrappings in place against the wind.

"Her name's Lorelai," he said.

"Oh," said Burlap. "Is that a prediction?"

"It's a strong hunch."

"I see." Burlap pressed the milk she had just bought against her forehead, rolling it around to distribute the cool wet and using the condensation to wick her hair behind her ears. She stayed standing, looking at the horizon, bouncing her foot on a loose board.

"She's past that big rock bridge now, that means she can see us," she said. "Should we wave?"

"I don't think she's noticed us. She's veering off to the right again." B.P. caught the wheel of cheese as it arced over his head. "Or she doesn't care that we're here."

"Hmm."

"She's running from something."

"Is that a prediction?" Burlap Sack asked into her resonant milk bottle, which, as it was Thursday, was sponsored by the word "BIVOUAC", printed in bold, black letters.

B.P. put the binoculars up to his face and hunched forward. "No. It's a fact."

"Do you think she knows the right way?"

"I hope so. But she's sure not acting like it."

"And she should have given a signal by now."

"Long before now."

Having eaten his cheese wheel and its plastic wrapper, Blasting Powder started work on grinding up an old toothpick.

In the distance, as she grew nearer and nearer to the spot where the earth was churned up, untouchable, the woman was still turning right and left at random, apparently, going always either parallel to or towards the Five-and-Dime but never away, and so gradually slaking the distance at a constant, wide-eyed, limp-kneed, keel-over run.

At this distance, Burlap could just make out the person's features with the binoculars. The figure had light brown skin, and dark, thick hair that stuck to her face from sweating. Her clothes were sun-bleached and tattered, full of thousands of holes, like they had been chewed on by burrowing bugs.

"Vitamin A deficiency," said Powder. "Vitamin C deficiency. Vitamin K deficiency. Torn ACL. Dehydration. Sunburn. Appendicitis."

"No, there's something about her. I think this is the one," said Burlap.

"It's obvious she doesn't know the route."

"I think she has a winning strategy."

"I've never seen a worse approach."

"Exactly," said Burlap Sack.

B.P. shrugged and went into the Five-and-Dime to fetch his bolt-action rifle.

When he came back out, the woman in the distance had closed to half a mile and was turning more rapidly and in a greater variety of directions, like she was solving an invisible maze.

Powder let off a shot with the rifle, and the report rang out across the sandy plains and up into the bowling, green mountains.

It was hard to tell if the woman, who already looked as terrified as possible, had even noticed the shot.

"Again," Burlap said after a minute had passed on her stopwatch. B.P. fired another blank, and the canyons re-echoed the sound.

Whatever was beginning to emerge from all over the loose soil shot back underground, stilling the sudden churn, and the woman, after 11 or 12 more shots, tripped up over the first step onto the old dock and collapsed in a pile of gangly limbs.

Burlap Sack and Blasting Powder looked down at the visitor.

"Wow," said Burlap Sack. "I actually didn't think she'd make it."

"A bug. That's the word," said Blasting Powder.

The woman's stomach heaved, like something was grabbing and pulling from inside, and she began vomiting something up.

It came out in a puddle of slime. A black, six-legged amphibian thing with opalescent skin, that false black that's translucent when held to the sun, and an open, neutral face, like a newt. It instantly scurried into the Five-and-Dime.

"Hey! No!" Burlap yelled, running after it.

The dock was silent, for a while, as the wind ran through the valley, and B.P. stood contemplatively over the woman's body.

She took a sharp breath suddenly, like someone shooting to the surface of a large body of water, and coughed out a final bit of phlegm.

"Can I get you anything?" Blasting Powder said.

"I'm fine," the young woman said, wincing. She rolled onto her side, plastering some hair out of her face.

"We have milk, water, blue paste, jerry chips, juice—" said Powder.

"Um. Water might be good actually," she said, attempting to prop herself up on her elbows. "You're Doctor Blastings, aren't you?"

"Not a doctor," said B.P. "You're thinking of Burlap. She's a hydrologist. And an amateur mystery novelist."

"No, no, they um. An honorary," she coughed, "degree from. Mize Reire."

"You should get out of the sun. You're very badly burned. You have a number of critical nutrient deficiencies. Your knees are hyper-extended in both legs. What's your name?"

"Maria and Less Lepeleph," said the woman.

"What an odd name," said Blasting Powder.

Maria struggled to stand again, but couldn't bring herself to move. "It's nice to finally meet you," she whispered. "We read your file while we were in orbit. That trick shot, on, I mean like when you were on Kasemnto, and Prarster—it's like you could subverted the laws of Physics. I mean—. You just can't predict that kind of motion, it's got to—you've got to feel it in your gut."

Blasting Powder scratched his metal head. "Thanks."

"I'm really looking forward to training with you," she managed to roll part way onto her back, her legs following along limply behind her torso. "Did Leph? Uh. Is he in the monument already?"

"The newt?"

There was a loud crash from inside the Five-and-Dime, like a display case shattering.

"HA!" Burlap shouted from inside.

She emerged, greying blonde hair wildly askew, holding a wiggling newt-like thing. She held it aloft, by the tail, all six of its slippery legs squiggling in the sun, like a gummy.

"Ah," said B.P. "Maria, this is Dr. Burlap Sack. She's the hydrologist."

"What is this thing!?" Burlap Sack asked Maria and Less Lepeleph, holding it up as it squiggled. "It was inside you—Jesus Christ—" she tried to push her glasses back into place with back of her hand, leaving a black drop of sweat on the lens.

"And Burlap, this is Maria and Less Lepeleph. She's the new trainee."

Maria had rolled fully onto her other side now, and seemed to be trying to use her right leg to rotate her body to face the two volunteers. "Dr. Sack! It's wonderful to finally meet you," she said. "I'm looking forward to working here. I've been obsessed with temple-builders since I was a little girl. Do you have cross sections of the deep? I brought a radio-mapper just in case. It's just so amazing to be here."

"So you really are our replacement, then?" asked Burlap. "They didn't tell us they were sending a new volunteer so soon. It's been...two years, I guess. Since the last one tried."

"Nearly," said B.P.

"Blehh," said the newt-thing in Burlap's hand.

"But there's only one of you," Burlap asked. "The policy requires at least two volunteers on the mon on any given night. What happened to your partner?"

"We are," said Maria. "Two." She tried to point to the amphibian, but managed just to flop her hand, catching her sleeve on a nail.

"Oh!" Burlap said, looking at the newt, and at the newt again. "My apologies. I'll just, um." She knelt down and released the newt.

Less Lepeleph wiggled free and immediately scurried back inside the Five-and-Dime, knocking over the sunglasses stand, the postcards, and all the items in the frozen section.

"Leph!" Maria shouted.

The rummaging stopped and the sound of the magnetic seal clicking shut on a plexiglass door was heard.

"I guess he needs to cool off. I hope that's okay," Maria said.

"We weren't informed of a replacement being sent down," said Blasting Powder. He looked to Burlap. "They usually tell us. We usually warn against it."

"The last one they told us about was someone called Nora Novara. That was two years ago. They were a promising candidate, but they didn't make it."

"Oh," Maria said. "They didn't like working here?"

"No," said Powder. "They died."

"Oh," Maria said. "Are they okay?"

"No, they died," said Powder. "In the churn."

"I see," said Maria. "Maybe we could fish them out."

"Uh huh," said B.P.

"You should come inside," said Burlap.

"Right," said Maria.

She flopped her left leg and it landed on the bottom step.

"We'll carry you," said Burlap.

"Right," said Maria.

When Maria had recovered enough to be able to drink water on her own, she walked with Burlap and Blasting Powder through the store and up the stairs to Blasting Powder's room, which was the de facto guest bedroom.

She tried not to seem too interested in his decorations, but when he had left her to change and sleep, she peered wide-eyed at his tchotchkes, the carpentry of the end tables, the plastic cup on the nightstand, the nuts and bolts on the plywood dresser, and the spines of the six or seven of books on the charstone shelf.

Briefly, she stared out the window at the churn, at the sand beyond, at the mountains, and at the creatures that gathered in the shadows of the small trees, watching her as she watched them, a folding set of crepuscular hands and long faces and a reminder that she was never truly un-observed.

She blinked, tightly, and fell asleep immediately.

Blasting Powder stayed awake, like usual, winging shots at the animal shapes that cascaded from nowhere to jostle at the edges of the churn, bulking black clusters in the dark, improbable heads and limbs, pressing together in a mass, lit slick with moonlight

jumbling to solve the shifting, wriggling maze in the blue before being felled sooner or later by a silent gunshot from the roof, and being trampled by one of a thousand thousand thousand other creatures, caught by the worms in the churn, dragged under, and catabolized.

In the morning, Maria and Less Lepeleph walked down the stairs into the Five-and-Dime, tentatively in the golding-grey. At the bottom of the narrow, dangerously steep, carpeted staircase, Maria and Leph brushed aside the curtain to the blue and white interior of the monument, stepping inside curiously, reverently.

The glass had been un-smashed, the lighters had been put back in their packages, and the frozen section had been organized and restocked. There were new brands of milk available, sponsored by the word "QUANTITATIVE".

Maria-Leph cracked the freezer door open and inspected one of the milk bottles, a somehow refreshingly cold, condensated bottle. She looked at the small holes in the blue- and white-tiled floor, trying to see any sign of the microscopic workers.

"Have you tried it?" B.P. said.

Maria and Leph turned around to see B.P. on the other side of the room, leaning against the empty cotton candy machine. His cloth wrappers had slipped from around his head, and the dented silvery chromium reflected the fluorescent light.

"No," said Maria and Less Lepeleph.

"Tastes almost like real milk," said B.P.

He fell forward into a casual walk, through the short aisle of jerry chips, cool gum, and banana asphalt. He stopped about a foot from Maria and Leph, looked them in the eyes, and leaned against the flimsy metal divider that held the licorice longs.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Good," Maria said.

"You should have slept in. Burlap won't wake for another hour."

"I noticed you never come back to your room."

"I don't sleep there."

"Where do you sleep?"

Blasting Powder shook his head, a slow river current motion like a buffalo.

"You don't sleep?"

"I'm always sleeping. I'm never awake. I'm asleep right now. I don't need to sleep."

"You stay awake at night to keep the mass away."

"That's the job," said B.P.

"But you don't sleep during the day, because if you slept, Burlap would be lonely."

"So you're an expert on Rest," said B.P.

"I wasn't—" said Maria.

"You know how to balance the equation."

"I didn't say that—"

"You know how to keep a ship from sinking by pushing it from underneath? You hold your breath, you kick, kick, kick? Easy enough."

"All I—"

"You drown kicking underneath. I sleep now, and I drown. I sleep in the snatches between turns in the dialogue. If I truly slept I could attend to you as a human being, but I don't, so I can't. But you—Maria Less Lepeleph," he said. "I re-read our comm logs with Headquarters last night. And it was five years ago today Headquarters sent us the communique that named our first replacement," his hand slipped on the metal and he caught himself. "And it was you."

Maria nodded, slightly open mouth.

"How long have you been running?"

"A normal," she said. "A normal amount of time."

"You landed on the wrong side of the planet."

"We were beginning to think something like that had happened. We were pretty beat up. Our ship."

"You run all day, and all night, you. At night, you what."

"It's harder to run at night, it gets dense, um."

"Do you fight them? Do you dig a hole?"

"I push through the crowd. They don't actually want to eat me, I'm just in the way. They want the monument builders. Did you ever find out why? I read the Erickson paper, but he never really winnowed the data from the conclusion." Maria chewed idly on the blue twist-off milk cap.

Blasting Powder rubbed his face in a way that made the smooth articulating fingers of metal seem like the beginning of the 12th mile of a 20 mile hike. He looked at her. "Is that what the newt is? One of them? That's why they don't eat you? Your insides rotted and it pulls the strings and tendons? And you're a corpse?"

"Oh, no no no," said Maria. "Hahahaha. No, I've had Lepeleph for a while."

"A while," Blasting Powder said. "A while." He turned, and walked to the end of the aisle, then walked back towards Maria down the adjacent one. "How long."

"We met when I was a student on the Pellicle," Maria said. She put the milk down and picked up a bag of licorice longs. Then, holding the longs, she tried to unscrew the chewed cap of the milk. "He helps, but we're. We're partners. He's the hydrologist, and I move us—"

Powder looked at her, not exactly... angrily, but with a rude, blunt kind of concern, his mouth actuators grinding purposelessly.

"From place to place."

"I know you know this—" Powder said. "I have to assume you know—" He walked to the glass door, and nudged it open with a foot. Maria followed him part-way, tentatively up to the slushie machine. "You can't always be running. The motor gets hot. The cells need oxygen. The lactic acid builds up. You slip down, through a crack that you made yourself in your own bones. You get shin splints."

"But I made a promise," Maria said.

B.P. looked back at her, squinting narrowly, and walked through the door onto the dock.

"I just promised myself that I wouldn't stop," Maria said to the empty Five-and-Dime. "That I just can't give up. That's it. Hey, wait!"

She hurried after Blasting Powder.

"Dr. Blasting Powder! Wait up, I—"

Outside, there was a crack, as if the old boards had snapped and a body had fallen through the dock into a hidden part of the churn in the shade of the monument. There was a noise like a shovel going into unbroken sand, and then of sand filling in a small hole.

Maria grabbed the edges of the splintered hole and stared, horrified at the place when Blasting Powder had fallen through the wood and vanished. "Help!" she yelled. "Dr. Sack!"

There was no sign of recognition from the window.

"Shit," said Maria and Less Lepeleph.

They looked at the door, the big rock bridge on the horizon, the shadows of the trees on the mountain, their own ratty shirt, steeled themselves, and plunged down the hole, into the churn.