

Upon a Shifting Plate

David D. Levine



Unwritten

Adventures in the Ages of MYST™ and Beyond

Upon a Shifting Plate

by David D. Levine

<http://www.daviddlevine.com/>

for

Unwritten: Adventures in the Ages of MYST and Beyond

<http://www.unwrittenrpg.com/>

© 2014 David D. Levine

All D'ni references © 2014 Cyan, Inc.

& used with permission



The only beer in Kahlo Pub is Bud Light. This is the fault of the self-appointed bartender, a guy who goes by the handle Skate, who ferries it down from the surface in an insulated backpack and sells it for ten bucks a bottle. He says he likes it, but I think the main thing he likes about it is that it's cheap.

I hate Bud Light. But I like a beer every once in a while, especially after a long day exploring, and the Kahlo Pub is a pretty good place to find like-minded people to hang out with.

And rumors. There are always rumors at the Kahlo Pub. And you never can tell when a rumor might lead to something important.

On this particular night I was sitting at a table for two -- actually just a broken stone slab, reasonably flat on the top, with two smaller rocks nearby for chairs -- with my friend Ja'Neesa. I had just come back from the bar with another couple of Buds, and we clinked the necks and drank deeply. It was my second, her fifth.

She'd been acting a little cagey all night, hinting at having had an "interesting" day's exploring but not sharing specifics. I hadn't pressed her -- I knew her better than that -- but I'd stuck close, kept my ears open, and kept the beers coming. We hung out together a lot, but we'd always been more than a little competitive and it was interesting that she'd chosen to drink with me this night.

The loud party at the next table broke up and left the bar, laughing. In the comparative quiet following their departure, Ja'Neesa got kind of subdued herself, staring contemplatively at her bottle as she rocked it back and forth on the rough stone of the table.

I kept my mouth shut. People will often talk to fill a silence.

"What would you do," she said at last, "if you stumbled onto a secret? Something you weren't supposed to have seen?"

"Depends. Whose secret?"

"The DRC's."

That got my attention. Information the DRC didn't want to get out could make a reputation -- could turn you from just another guy scrambling around a ten-thousand-year-old cave in New Mexico to a big name in the explorer community. Could even lead to real fame in the outside world. "I wouldn't just blab it around," I said. "But I might share it with a friend. An *old* friend."

She smiled at that. I was six weeks older than her and she sometimes gave me good-natured flak

about it. Then her face turned serious. "It might be kind of dangerous."

Even more interesting. "They say the Chinese sign for 'crisis' combines the sign for 'danger' with the sign for 'opportunity.'"

"That's BS, actually." She glanced side to side, leaned in close over the table. "You know that cave-in in Gahreesen?" she said, her voice low. "The one just past the barricades on the lower level, by the left as you come in?"

"I know it," I said, holding my voice level.

"I was poking around there this morning, like you do, and I saw that it had subsided a bit. There's a big rock on the right-hand side, back away from the light, that's rolled away from the wall, and there's just room to squeeze in behind it."

"And?"

She took another sip of her beer, a small sly smile on her lips. Teasing me with what she knew and I didn't. "There's a crack in the wall. A whole new room, maybe a whole complex of rooms."

"Find anything?"

"Bunch of junk, mostly. But also this."

From her pocket she pulled a small dark object and set it on the tabletop with a *clack*. I picked it up.

It looked like a paperweight, or an amulet, in the form of a trilobite or something like one. Palm-sized, made of the smooth black stone the D'ni called *deretheni*. And carved on its underside was the sigil of the Guild of Maintainers.

The carved lines glowed faintly.

I pursed my lips and nodded my head, outwardly cool, acknowledging the impressive find as I handed it back. No telling what it was, but it was definitely something new, and it might portend other, even more intriguing things to be found nearby. "You going back for more? Looking for a partner, perhaps?"

She shook her head firmly, took another sip of her beer. "Not going back. Ceiling's unstable. But if you want to check it out..." She shrugged. "I figure you've got until tomorrow morning before the DRC spots the opening and seals it up."

I knew Ja'Neesa. If *she* thought this site was too hazardous to return to, that meant the danger was serious. But the potential payoff was equally great. I took a swig of my beer to hide my nervousness, then clinked the neck of my bottle against hers. "To new discoveries."

"To old friends," she replied, and drained her beer. "Good luck."



The gap in the cave-in was right where Ja'Neesa had described it, but I considered it for a long moment before going any further. My flashlight beam revealed a dark, jagged crack, nothing more, but a breath of musty cave air from the gap hinted at larger spaces beyond.

I swallowed hard and slipped in behind the shifted rock.

Apart from my flashlight beam the space was completely dark, but as I scanned the light around I saw a large space, maybe twenty by thirty feet, with what had once been a high arched ceiling. But half of that ceiling had fallen in, littering the floor with jagged stones the size of automobiles, and I had to agree with Ja'Neesa that the rest of it looked as though it might follow at any time. The place stank of mold and decay. But as I moved deeper into the room I saw among the rocks and litter on the floor some objects that looked manufactured.

Most of them were nothing new or interesting -- broken crockery, belt buckles, bits of leather that might once have been anything. But then, sticking out from under a suitcase-sized boulder, I saw something that made the breath catch in my throat.

Was it the corner of... a *book*?

I got my fingers under the boulder's edge and, grunting with the strain, managed to raise it far enough that I could nudge the object out from under it with my foot. Eagerly I snatched the item up and inspected it with my flashlight.

It *was* a book.

The cover was scarred and badly water-stained, and I feared that what I would find inside would be nothing but rot. But when I opened to the first page, though the page edges were brown and ragged the image was clear and complete -- a crisp three-dimensional view like a little window into another world.

A link.

I'd found a *Linking Book*!

And the destination... was no place I recognized. A sandy beach at a bend in a river, at the bottom of a steep canyon.

I should present this find to the DRC. Share it with the explorer community and the world.

Expand human knowledge and all that.

Or I could take a chance. And maybe get my name in the papers.

I slapped my hand down on the image.

Everything went black and I felt the familiar queasy falling sensation of a link.

And then I was surrounded by light and air, and the sound of rushing water and twittering birds.

I looked around.

Beneath my feet lay fine river sand littered with sticks and small, rounded stones. A couple of paces away to my left, the beach disappeared beneath a fast-moving stream, maybe fifty feet wide -- clear water that burbled like laughter. Off to my right the beach extended a hundred feet or so, ending in a scree of fallen stones at the foot of a steep canyon wall. As I tipped my head back, shielding my eyes from the sun, to see the top of the canyon, I noticed a low grinding noise coming from behind me.

I turned and gasped.

The river bent in an oxbow at the bottom of its canyon. And in the loop of that oxbow stood an enormous cylinder -- big as a city block, maybe three hundred feet in diameter and eight or ten stories high -- apparently carved from a single slab of stone, dark with blackish-green marbling. *Nara*, the D'ni had called it, thirty times as strong as steel. The cylinder's walls showed some signs of age, but they still looked smooth and sheer and impossible to climb. There were no visible windows or doors, but the Maintainer symbol was deeply carved at intervals around the top of the cylinder. And extending above it...

Rising from the *nara* cylinder like an enormous cork in a bottle was another cylinder, this one of lighter-colored stone. It was slightly smaller in diameter than the base, rose a further ten or twelve stories above it... and was *rotating*. Slowly, majestically, inexorably. The low, nearly subsonic rumble of its motion transmitted itself through my feet more than my ears. I supposed that it was somehow powered by the river.

I'd never heard of anything like this outside of Gahreesen itself. This rotating building was much smaller than the fortress of Gahreesen, true, but still, it was nearly unique... and I might be the first living person to see it in thousands of years.

It isn't possible to Write a link to a moving location. That was why the D'ni had gone to the trouble and expense of creating rotating buildings -- to keep anyone from getting inside except through the main door. Surely whatever was inside this one was something they thought was exceptionally worthy of special protection.

I rubbed my hands together and headed toward the building, slogging through the soft sand.

The smaller cylinder was just as smooth and sheer and windowless as the larger one from which it rose, up to the top couple of stories, which were pierced with windows protected by out-facing spikes. It took maybe ten minutes to make a complete rotation... and as I drew closer I saw a single door, four or five stories above the base, revolve into view. It seemed to be tightly closed and I couldn't see any knob or button to open it, even if I could somehow reach it. But still... why would the D'ni make a door that couldn't be accessed? I changed my path to move around to the side of the building that faced the canyon wall. If there were some means of reaching the door, it was most likely on that side rather than above the river.

My surmise turned out to be correct. Although the rotating building stood at least thirty feet from the cliff edge, as I approached, a stairway up the canyon wall came into view. And at the top of that stairway... a bridge, just at the level of the door!

I broke into an eager trot. But as I continued on my path around the building, my heart fell.

The bridge was only a stub. The middle of it had collapsed, leaving a gap of twenty feet or more and a heap of broken green-marbled stones on the beach ahead of me.

I paused, panting, with my hands on my knees. And swore.

But I didn't give up. After catching my breath, I continued on around the building in hopes of spotting another way in.

The collapsed bridge blocked my way, but I clambered up on the pile. From here I could see that the fallen bridge had definitely been the only connection between the building and the outside world. The wall of the lower, non-rotating part was continuous, smooth, and devoid of any openings all the way around...

...with one exception. I peered closer and realized that as the bridge had fallen it had torn a gash in the wall, barely visible against the dark *nara* of the wall and the fallen stones that surrounded it. If the light had been different -- just a few hours earlier or later in the day -- I would surely have missed it.

I picked my way down the other side of the uneven, unstable heap of broken stone that had once been a bridge until I reached the gash. The opening was perhaps twelve feet high and eight feet wide, but it narrowed as it ran through the wall's thickness. At the back it was only a couple of feet wide, barely big enough to step through.

Except that there would be no stepping through. My flashlight revealed that the gouge ended at the inner side of the outer wall, where the smooth gray stone of the rotating part of the building slid

continuously past. A low, nearly subsonic rumble made my teeth rattle.

I sat in the gap, my back braced against one rough wall and my feet planted on the other, and watched the stone of the inner building's wall pass by. It was made of something not quite as tough as *nara*, but it was moving fast, maybe as much as two feet per second -- there would be no chance to chip a hole in it. The space between the inner and outer walls was less than an inch wide and I was sure that jamming a crowbar into it would simply grind the tool away to nothing. Even explosives might not do the trick... not that I had any explosives.

Finally I sighed and began to climb out of the chasm -- though I had little hope of finding another entrance anywhere else -- when a subtle change in the sound made me look back over my shoulder.

The moving wall at the back of the cleft had vanished, replaced by a dark, enticing opening. A moment later the opening slid shut, a ragged edge of stone slipping across it like a closing eyelid. But that tantalizing glimpse had been enough to kindle hope in my heart and a tentative plan in my head.

The opening in the inner wall must have been torn at the same time as the outer gash, as the falling bridge had ripped itself away from the building. It would be back.

My digital watch had a stopwatch feature. I hadn't used it in years, but I puzzled it out in time for the next rotation. Pretty soon I knew that it took exactly ten minutes and eighteen seconds for the building to complete one revolution.

And the gaps in the inner and outer walls aligned for just a second and a half.

It would have to be enough.

When the opening rotated by again, I pressed the button on my watch to start a countdown timer for ten minutes and sixteen seconds. That would give me two seconds' warning of its next appearance.

I stood in the chasm, feet spread across the gap below, facing the rotating wall, breathing hard.

My watch beeped. I tensed to spring. I counted "one one thousand, two one thousand"...

...and I watched the gap in the inner wall slip past.

My footing was too uncertain. The hole was too small and too briefly open. I had no idea what awaited on the other side.

And I couldn't put the vision of myself crushed and torn in half out of my mind.

I had "panic linked" dozens, maybe hundreds of times, slapping the Relto book on my belt and linking away to safety after missing a jump, slipping and falling, or having something collapse under me. But I didn't think I would be able to react quickly enough to save myself if I didn't make it all the

way through that hole during the tiny time it was open.

Five times I tried. My watch beeped. I planted my feet and hands. One one thousand, two one thousand... here we go! Jump! Now! Nothing ventured, nothing gained!

But no matter how hard I tried to convince myself to take that leap... I couldn't do it. I couldn't throw myself into that horizontal guillotine.

The opening swiftly shut itself again, replaced by a wall of gray stone, rumbling past smoothly and serenely as it must have done for the last ten thousand years.

Clenching my jaw, I turned and stormed out of the cleft, then planted myself down on the tumbled dark stones of the fallen bridge and had a good think.

Bridge out. Wall unclimbable. Door locked. Opening too brief to jump through.

This problem was as hard as *nara*, thirty times stronger than steel...

I sat up. I blinked.

I was sitting on a pile of *nara* fragments.

It took a while to locate one that was the right size and shape, but eventually I found a piece of bridge about two feet long and as big around as my arm. It also weighed at least seventy pounds, but before I came to D'ni I worked out at the gym every day and my weeks of exploring since then had kept me in shape. It wasn't *too* hard to haul it into the gash and position it properly.

I watched the gap go past one more time, then started my stopwatch.

Ten minutes and sixteen seconds later, my watch beeped.

I braced my feet and shoved the fragment against the rotating wall as hard as I could, holding it in place though the juddering scrape of its tip against the moving stone made my teeth rattle.

And then the gap appeared.

The fragment slipped into it like a knife into its sheath.

And with a mighty **BANG** like a blow from Thor's hammer -- a sound that reverberated through the whole moving structure and sent a shower of small rocks raining down on my head -- the moving wall *stopped*.

I shook my head, deafened and half-stunned by that massive sound.

But past the ringing in my ears I could hear a hideous groan rising... a sound of stone under tension on a nearly geological scale. The whole building shuddered and shivered like a bucking bronco getting ready to throw its rider.

With a *crack* that I felt through my feet rather than heard with my ears, a jagged fracture

appeared in the inner wall next to the *nara* fragment.

The crack quickly spread... forking like lightning from the point of contact. Then the wall began to crumble, bits of gray stone flaking and spalling away from the rapidly expanding crack.

The opening jerked closed by half an inch.

Before I could let myself think about what I was doing I leapt through the opening, landing and tumbling in a choking cloud of dust.

Then the opening slid closed, leaving me in pitch darkness.

The building juddered and lurched beneath my hands and knees, and from behind me came a tremendous clattering and crashing like a thousand bulls in a thousand china shops. Sharp fragments of stone battered my back and shoulders. The air was full of acrid rock dust.

Coughing and sneezing, eyes burning, I got to my feet and scrambled forward into the darkness, wanting to get as far away from the destruction as I could as quickly as possible. I held one hand over my nose and mouth, the other one out in front of me.

Almost immediately I encountered a wall, and began to feel along it in search of a doorway, but I couldn't find one. Behind me, the sounds of destruction built to a crashing crescendo and then receded, though the floor continued to shudder and lurch.

I found my flashlight and turned it on.

The curved wall behind me was a complete wreck. A large crack extended from below the floor to above the ceiling; marks in the thick dust on the floor showed that this was where I had entered. To the crack's right, the wall was torn to bits, as though a fragment of incredibly tough *nara* had cut through it like a chainsaw through a loaf of bread. Through the tear in the inner wall I could see the dark green-veined *nara* of the outer wall rotating past, though not nearly as smoothly as before. Fist-sized chunks of rock still fell from the shattered edges.

Dear God, I thought, what have I done?

The rent in the wall extended all the way to the wall to my right, and through it. There was an open doorway into that room.

The destruction continued into the next room, and the next, but in the third room the rent in the outer wall dwindled to nothing; even *nara* could be broken, or worn away. But the damage it had done to the rotating inner structure was severe.

The floor rumbled and shuddered beneath me, making my footing unsteady.

This extraordinary moving structure had turned smoothly for thousands of years. Even an

earthquake, or whatever had brought the bridge down, hadn't been enough to stop it. But I'd damaged it, and maybe worse than that.

I was so heartbroken I had to sit down. Or perhaps it was because the building gave an unexpected lurch.

There was no telling how much longer this place might remain standing. I should leave now... or, if I stayed, I should at least use my KI to call in some other explorers.

But if I left, I'd never know what was inside this building, something the D'ni had gone to enormous trouble to protect. And if I shared the discovery with others, I'd also have to share the credit... and admit to the damage I'd done. Much better if I could cushion the bad news with an amazing discovery or two.

I checked to make sure my Relto book was at my belt, in case I needed to make a quick escape, and began to explore the building.

The rooms along the structure's curved outer wall were fitted with workbenches and cabinets, but these held nothing more than common tools -- hammers and pliers and other ordinary stuff, nothing of particular interest. But when I moved inward...

The center of the building was a single enormous round atrium, eight or ten stories high, with sunlight streaming down from windows in the high arched ceiling. Galleries overlooked the space from the walls above, with sweeping curved flights of stairs joining the different levels; arched railings and slim flying buttresses of the unreasonably strong D'ni stone gave the place an airy cathedral ambiance. The building's rotation sent the sun sweeping around the space every ten minutes, cutting hard-edged beams of light through the dust I'd kicked up with my entrance, and the floor was decorated with a giant Maintainers Guild symbol in travertine.

It was one of the most spectacular spaces I'd ever seen. But the building groaned and shuddered again, reminding me of the damage I'd done -- I didn't have time for tourism.

I headed up the nearest staircase, figuring that the more important rooms would be toward the top of the building.



Two hours later I stood, panting and sweating and grimy, in front of a cylindrical display case. I held my breath and closed a switch.

With a hiss, the case unsealed, and the glass cylinder began to rise into the ceiling.

I should have been elated, but my primary emotions were exhaustion and nervousness. "Come on, come on," I whispered over and over, willing the glass to move faster.

Staring at me from the other side of the glass was something that looked like a monster -- a hulking, armored thing, seven feet tall and man-shaped, with prominent protective plates on its arms and legs. Its enormous head had huge round eyes and a circular protuberance on the forehead.

But it wasn't a monster, of course. It was a Maintainer environment suit.

When I'd spotted the suit, standing clean and pristine in its cylinder of unbreakable glass in a room on the very highest level, I had immediately realized what a treasure I'd found. The D'ni had sometimes Written links to Ages that were not hospitable to human life. Ages of ice and fire, vacuum and poison atmospheres. No one knew why, but there had to have been a reason, and the Maintainers Guild had used environment suits like this one, proof against any hazard, to explore them. Wearing this suit, I could travel to Ages unvisited by any human since the fall of D'ni. There was no telling what I might discover. Not to mention the prestige of being one of the very few -- perhaps the only one -- to possess an environment suit of my very own.

But in order to open the display case there was a control panel, with five switches and two pedals that had to be worked in the right order, and before any of them would activate I had to find the power generator, and...

Well, let's just say that, although the D'ni were amazing engineers, their user interface designs leave much to be desired. But, although it took hours, I eventually did figure it all out.

The building moaned and lurched, which, along with my fatigue, made me sway dizzily on my feet. Its motion had been getting more and more dramatic in the past hour; I felt as though I were on a sinking ship.

As soon as the glass cylinder rose above the Maintainer suit's knees I began pulling the suit from its display rack, sending boots and shin guards and other pieces clattering to the floor in my haste. There's no way to bring anything through a link other than to carry it -- or wear it -- and I wanted to get out of here, with the suit, before the whole building collapsed.

The suit was in immaculate condition. Even the padded inner lining and the flexible parts of the finger joints were still soft and supple, and indicator lights inside the helmet still glowed blue and green. And, though it was largely made of stone -- the jet-black stone called *deretheni* -- it didn't weigh as much as I'd feared.

A horrendous *bang* from somewhere far below was accompanied by a sick swaying lurch that

made hanging cables swing and brought an annoyed rattling noise from the cages nearby, which were filled with the dried husks of hand-sized ink beetles.

I put on the legs first, then the lower torso, front and back panels snapping together with a magnetic *snick*. With a low humming sound the suit adapted to my shape, the boots and leggings fitting themselves to my feet and legs with a firm but comfortable grip.

Then came another *bang*, this one even louder, which sent me crashing to the floor, scattering pieces of the armor into the corners of the room. I lost precious minutes gathering them all up, then suffered a moment of panic when I couldn't find the neck ring. But it soon came to light, having rolled off under a table.

I had slipped on both sleeves and was just figuring out how to get the chest plate closed with gauntleted fingers when a tremendous tearing, scraping sound echoed through the building's bones, together with a sickening earthquake sensation much worse than anything I'd experienced so far.

The whole room tilted to one side. Tables and chairs began to slide across the floor. And I saw the suit's helmet rolling away... heading straight for the door.

Beyond that door lay a narrow gallery overlooking a seven-story drop.

I dove for the helmet... and missed, sliding across the shuddering floor on the suit's smooth stone chest and belly. But the rolling helmet hit the door's edge and caromed off, coming right back at me as I slid toward it. It banged me painfully in the nose, but I grabbed it and held on.

Then the building, still moaning like a dying elephant, canted hard to the right, sending me sliding down the floor and crashing into the right-hand wall. Boxes, cages, and the husks of dead beetles fell down on top of me as I struggled to get the helmet on.

That was when the lights went out.

I tumbled in the darkness for a moment, trying to align the helmet with the neck ring by feel. Then the outer wall broke into pieces, letting in ragged beams of sunlight which swept crazily around the space.

A block of stone the size of a picnic hamper was falling from the collapsing wall right toward me.

With a sudden *snick* the helmet snapped into place.

And then the stone struck, and I knew what the Liberty Bell must have felt like at the moment it cracked.



An unknown amount of time later, somewhat to my surprise, I woke up.

I was lying on my back. I ached all over, especially my head, which was still ringing. My mouth was dry, and I tasted blood. But I could wiggle all my fingers and toes and I didn't feel any sharp pains anywhere.

Through the suit's two round eyepieces I could see upward through about five feet of cloudy, churning water. Sunlight shone bravely through the murk.

The suit had saved my life. All I needed to do now was stand up and wade to shore.

But when I tried, although motors in the suit's joints hummed and whined with the effort, I couldn't get up.

I could raise my upper torso, a little, and from that position I could see that the suit's legs were pinned beneath an enormous tumbled pile of broken stones. More stones splashed down from above the water's surface as I watched, some of them tumbling down the pile toward me. One landed on my chest with a ringing thud.

With the suit's help I was able to push the fallen stone off of myself. But more were falling every minute.

But not all was lost -- I still had my Relto book. All I needed to do was touch the book and I would immediately link back to my own personal Age, suit and all.

As soon as I reached for the book, though, I immediately realized that my situation was far worse than I'd thought.

The suit was equipped with an armored sleeve on the hip for a Linking Book. I had seen it in the display case; I had known that I would need to transfer my Relto book to it as I put the suit on. But in my haste, with the building collapsing around me, I had missed that critical step.

I could feel my Relto pressing against my hip beneath the armor. But I couldn't touch the book with my own fingers, and though I wiggled and wriggled as much as I could I was unable to extract my arm from the suit's sleeve.

The KI on my wrist, which I might have been able to use to call for help, was likewise inaccessible. The suit itself was probably equipped with some equivalent technology, but I had no idea where it was or how to activate it.

I fought down panic. There had to be some way out of this.

The Maintainer suit was incredibly tough and incredibly strong. Rocks the size of basketballs just bounced off of it, and I was able to lift and push even larger ones away with ease. But the pile of

stones heaped on my legs was more than five feet high -- too much weight for even the suit's great strength to lift -- and growing.

In just the few minutes since I had regained consciousness the edge of the stone pile had gone from my thighs up to my hips. Even as I watched, a rock the size of a steamer trunk tumbled slowly through the water down the slope, landing on my abdomen. Before I could push it away a second rock just as large landed on top of it.

I was losing the battle. But I would not give up the suit! I would take any chance, no matter how slim, to save the suit and all the opportunities it presented. To fight until the very last breath. What a story it would make if I succeeded!

I pushed and strained against the stones that were trying to bury me, wriggling and twisting my legs to extricate them from the pile. The suit's motors whined from the effort, but the weight refused to shift, even as more and more stones rained down from above.

Then, with a deep and sudden splash, a huge stone fell from somewhere above the water, landing with a ringing, echoing thud atop the pile growing on my chest.

And one of the suit's side seams opened.

Chill water squirted against my flank, making me gasp.

The water spread quickly, sending its biting cold across my back, my shoulders, my hips. Panicking, heart pounding, I thrashed ineffectually against the weight of the stones.

By the time I brought myself under control, the suit was half full of icy water.

I'm going to die, I thought. *I'm going to die... and no one will ever know what happened to me.*

That was when I realized I had no choice but to abandon the suit.

I shouted out a curse, one hard biting syllable that echoed in the helmet, then turned my thoughts to escape.

I hyperventilated for a minute -- it wasn't difficult -- and then I held my breath.

This wasn't going to be easy. So many things could go wrong. But I didn't have any alternative.

I pressed the release beneath the suit's collarbone.

The helmet came loose with a *snick* and a hiss. Cold water poured in through the neck ring, filling my ears and nose as I pushed the helmet up and away.

Rushing, gurgles, and thuds filled my hearing. I squirmed around, releasing the catches on the chest plate, then the arms, then the lower torso and the legs. The pieces of the suit came away unwillingly, the pressure of the water holding them in place, but I managed to wriggle out of the suit's

embrace.

A falling rock struck my forehead painfully as I extracted myself from the suit and half-swam, half-crawled away, dragging myself through the water with heavy, chilled limbs. Deep splashing noises filled my ears. My lungs ached for air.

Finally my head broke the surface and I gasped in a huge, welcome breath.

More rocks splashed into the water near me -- too near. I swam away as quickly as my exhausted body could manage.

At last I reached the sandy shore and hauled my aching body up onto the beach. There I lay gasping for a long, long while. Perhaps I even fell asleep for a bit.

Eventually I managed to lever myself up on my elbows.

I ached all over, I had a bad cut over my eye -- it stung like a bastard, but the bleeding had already slowed to a trickle -- and I still had my KI and my Relto book, which despite the soaking they had taken both seemed functional.

Then I looked around.

I was quite a ways upriver from where I had first arrived in this Age. From here I could see that the rotating building had collapsed completely, leaving a ragged-edged, broken cylinder of *nara* and a heap of shattered gray stones where it had been. Even worse, rubble now blocked the river, which was rising steadily behind the new dam.

Somewhere beneath those tons of stone and many feet of river water lay the suit -- the wonderful Maintainer environment suit that had saved my life, then nearly killed me.

Also lost beneath the wreckage, I realized, was the link point where I'd first entered the Age. I didn't know for sure that this would make it impossible to enter the Age again from the same book, but I was pretty sure it might.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, though I didn't know to whom.

If I told anybody about this I would be famous, all right. Famous as the guy who discovered a new Age, explored a major new structure, found one of the most sought-after D'ni artifacts... and wrecked them all, in a single day.

I decided right then that I would never, ever tell anyone how I got that scar over my eye.

