

# GOOD MOUNTAIN

Robert Reed

Robert Reed sold his first story in 1986 and quickly established himself as a frequent contributor to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Asimov's Science Fiction*, as well as selling many stories to *Isaac's Science Fiction Age*, *Universe*, *New Destinies*, *Tomorrow*, *Synergy*, *Starlight*, and elsewhere. Reed may be one of the most prolific of today's young writers, particularly at short fiction lengths, seriously rivaled for that position only by authors such as Stephen Baxter and Brian Stableford. And—also like Baxter and Stableford—he manages to keep up a very high standard of quality, something that is not at all easy to do. Reed stories such as “Sister Alice.” “Brother Paul.” “Decency.” “Savior.” “The Remoras.” “Chrysalis.” “Whiptail.” “The Utility Man.” “Marrow.” “Birth Day.” “Blind.” “The Toad of Heaven.” “Stride.” “The Shape of Everything.” “Guest Honor.” “Waging Good,” and “Killing the Morrow,” among at least a half dozen others as strong, count as among some of the best short work produced by anyone in the eighties and nineties. Many of his best stories were assembled in his first collection, *The Dragon of Springplace*. Nor is he nonprolific as a novelist, having turned out eight novels since the late eighties, including *The Leeshore*, *The Hormone Jungle*, *Black Milk*, *The Remarkables*, *Down the Bright Way*, *Beyond the Veil of Stars*, *An Exaltation of Larks*, *Beneath the Gated Sky*, *Marrow*, and *Sister Alice*. His most recent books include two chapbook novellas, *There* and *Flavors of My Genius*, a collection, *The Cuckoo's Boys*, and a novel, *The Well of Stars*. Reed lives with his family in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Reed has visited the far future in his Sister Alice stories and in his sequence of stories about the Great Ship, as well as in stories such as “Whiptail” and “Marrow,” but he takes us deeper into the future than he ever has before, to a world whose origin is in the labyrinth of time, a world where, as a group of randomly thrown together travelers is about to learn, everything is about to change—and not for the better.

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## A DOT ON OLD PAPER

“World's edge. Approaching now... World's Edge!”

The worm's caretaker was an elderly fellow named Brace. Standing in the middle

the long intestinal tract, he wore a dark gray uniform, patched but scrupulously clean, soft-soled boots and a breathing mask that rode on his hip. Strong hands held an angelwood bucket filled with a thick, sour-smelling white salve. His name was embossed above his shirt pocket, preceded by his rank, which was Master. Calling out with a deep voice, Master Brace explained to the several dozen passengers, "From this station, you find your connecting trails to Hammer and Mister Low and Green Island. If World's Edge happens to be your destination, good luck to you, and please, collect your belongings following the signs to the security checkpoints. And if you intend to stay with this splendid worm, that means Left-of-Left will be our next stop. And Port of Krauss will be our last."

The caretaker had a convincing smile and a calm, steady manner. In his presence, the innocent observer might believe that nothing was seriously wrong in the world.

"But if you do plan to stay with me," Brace continued, "you will still disembark at World's Edge, if only for the time being. My baby needs her rest and a good dinner, and she's got a few little sores that want cleaning." Then he winked at the passengers and began to walk again, totting his heavy bucket toward the stomach—up where the mockers were quartered. "Or perhaps we'll linger here for two little whiles," the old man joked. "I don't expect significant delays, and you shouldn't let yourselves worry."

Jopale sighed and sat back against the warm pink wall. He wasn't worried. Not through any innate bravery, but because he had been scared for so long now, there was no room left for new concerns. Or so it seemed at that particular moment. Indeed, since his long sleep, Jopale had enjoyed a renewed sense of confidence. A guarded optimism was taking root. Calculating how far he had come, he saw that most of the world lay behind him now, while it wasn't too much of a lie to tell himself that Port of Krauss was waiting just beyond the horizon.

Jopale even managed his own convincing smile, and watching his fellow passengers, he found one other face that appeared equally optimistic.

A young woman, built small and just a little short of pretty, was sitting directly across from him. She must have come onboard during his last sleep. Maybe at Which-Way, he reasoned. There was a fine university in that ancient city. Perhaps she was a student heading home, now that every school was officially closed. Her bags were few and small, a heavy book filled her tiny lap. Her breathing mask looked as if it had never been used, a powerful torch rode on her other hip. Her clothes were comfortable if somewhat heavy—wool dyed green with thick leather pads on the knees and elbows. Bare black hair wiggled against a traveling blanket. Her leather boots had tough rubber soles, which was why she didn't wear them inside the worm. She looked ready for a long journey into cold darkness. But where could a young woman be going, and smiling about her prospects?

There was one logical conclusion: Jopale caught the woman's gaze, nodded and offered a friendly wink. "Are you like me, miss?" he inquired. "Are you traveling to Port of Krauss?"

Krauss?”

She hesitated, glancing at the other passengers. Then she shook her head. “I’m no,” she told him.

Jopale thought he understood.

“But you’re traveling through Krauss,” he persisted. “On your way to some other destination, perhaps?”

He was thinking about the New Isles.

But she shook her head, a little embarrassed perhaps, but also taking some pleasure from his confusion.

No one else was speaking just then, and the intestine of a worm was a very quiet place. It was easy to eavesdrop and to be heard whenever you spoke. In quick succession three young men offered possible destinations, picking little cities set on the auxiliary trails—each man plainly wishing that this woman’s destination was his own.

“No,” she told them. “No. And I’m sorry, but no.”

Other passengers began to play the silly game, and to her credit, the woman remained cheerful and patient, responding immediately to each erroneous guess. The great worm began to shake around them, its muscular body twisting as it pulled off one of the side trails. Suddenly there was good reason to hurry the game along. The young men were leaving here; didn’t they deserve a useful hint or two?

“All right,” she said reasonably. “I’ll remain on this trail until I’m done.” Then she closed her book with a heavy thump, grinning as she imagined her final destination.

“Left-of-Left?” somebody shouted.

“We’ve already guessed that,” another passenger complained.

“Where else is there?”

“Does anybody have a map?”

Jopale stood up. When their worm was young and quite small, holes had been cut through its fleshy sides, avoiding the major muscle groups. Each hole was fitted with progressively larger rubber plugs, and finally a small plastic window that looked as if it had been carved from a cold fog. Through one of those windows, Jopale could see the tall buildings of the city and their long shadows, plus the high clear sky that was as close to night as any

he had ever known. What a journey this had been, and it wasn't even finished yet. Not for the first time, Jopale wished he had kept a journal. Then when there was time—once he was living on the New Isles, perhaps—he would write a thorough account of every awful thing that had happened, as well as his final triumphs.

A dozen travelers were now examining their maps, calling out the names of tiny places and abandoned cities. There was a time when people lived in the Tanglelands and points beyond, but that had been years ago. Only the oldest maps bothered to show those one-time destinations. A young man, very tall and shockingly thin, was standing close to the woman—too close, in Jopale's mind—and he carefully listed a string of places that existed nowhere but on a sheet of yellowed paper and faded ink that he held up to the window light.

"Yes," said the woman, just once.

But the tall man didn't notice. He kept reading off names, pushing his finger along the black worm trail, and the woman was saying, "No, no, no," again, smiling pleasantly at his foolishness.

But Jopale had noticed.

"Go back," he said.

The tall man looked at him, bothered by the interruption.

Then a stocky old woman reached up high, hitting the fellow between the shoulder blades. "The girl said, 'Yes.' Didn't you hear?"

Another woman said, "Read backwards."

The tall man was too flustered to do anything now.

So Jopale took the map for himself, and in the dim light, he made his best guess. "What about Good Mountain?"

Once more, the girl said, "Yes."

"What kind of name is that?" the tall man asked, reclaiming his map, taking the trouble to fold it up neatly. "What does that word mean? 'Mountain'? I've never heard it before."

But the game was finished. Suddenly the old caretaker had returned, carrying an empty bucket with one bony hand. "This is the station at World's Edge," Master Brace said out.

The worm had come to a stop.

“My baby needs to breathe and to eat her fill,” he reminded everyone. “So please you must disembark. With your luggage, and with your tickets.” Then a look of mischief came into the weathered face, and he added, “But if you will, please leave your hopes behind. I’d like to claim a few of them for myself.”

A few passengers laughed at his bleak humor. But most just shook their heads and growled to themselves, or they quietly spat on the smooth pink floor.

The young woman was picking up her book and bags and her heavy boots, a joyful smile setting her apart from everyone else.

About her destination—the enigmatic Good Mountain—she said nothing at all.

\* \* \* \*

## **A MOUTHFUL OF HISTORY**

Every homeland was once new land, small and thin, pushed about by the willful winds. The ground where Jopale grew up was still relatively young, and for much of its life, it had been a free-drifting body.

Jopale felt an easy pride toward his native wood—dense and fine-grained and very dark, almost black in its deep reaches, with a thick cuticle and the pleasant odor of sin-spice when sliced apart with steel saws. The wood’s appearance and its telltale genetics made it the offspring of Graytell and Sweetsap lineages. According to the oldest nautical maps, an island matching that description first collided with the Continent near what was today Port of Krauss. But it didn’t linger for long. In those ancient times, the Continent turned like a gigantic if extraordinarily slow wheel, deep-water roots helping to hold its face under the eternal sunshine. This tiny unnamed body clung to the wheel’s outer edge until it passed into the polar waters, and then it vanished from every record, probably drifting off into the cold gloom.

Unable to grow, the island shrank. Hungry, it drank dry its sap reservoirs. It could have brushed up against the Continent again, perhaps several more times, but some day or chance storm always pushed it away again. Then it wandered, lost on the dark face of the world. The evidence remained today inside its body. Its oldest wood was full of scars and purple-black knots—a catalog of relentless abuse brought on by miserly times. Not even a flicker of sunlight fell on its bleached surface. Starving, the island digested its deep-water roots and every vein of starch. Saprophytes thrived on its surface and giant worms gnawed their way through its depths. But each of those enemies was a blessing, too. The tallest branches of the saprophytes caught the occasional breeze, helping the increasingly fr-

island drift across the quiet water. And the worms ate so much of the island that it floated easily, buoyed up by the air-filled caverns.

Finally the near-corpse was pushed into the storm belt, and the storms blew just carrying it out under the motionless sun. There the island turned a dark vibrant green and dropping new roots that pulled minerals out of the nearly bottomless ocean—roots that flexed and rippled to help hold the island in the bright sunshine. And that's when new wood was built, and rivers of sugary sap, and a multitude of colonists began to find their way to the shores, including Jopale's distant ancestors.

Twelve hundred years ago, the island again collided with the Continent. But this time it struck the eastern shore, as far from Port of Krauss as possible. Its leeward edge pinned into the Plain of Perfect Deeds while another free-drifting island barged in behind, pinning it in place. Two more islands arrived over the next several years. Small bodies like those splintered between shifting masses, or they were tilted up on end, shattering when the wood couldn't absorb the strain. Or sometimes they were shoved beneath the ancient Continent, rotting to form black muck and anaerobic gases. But Jopale's homeland proved both durable and extremely fortunate. Its wood was twisted into a series of fantastic ridges and deep valleys, but it outlasted each of the islands that came after it, its body finding a permanent nook where it could sit inside the world's Great Mother.

By the time Jopale was born, his land was far from open water. The sun wobbled in the sky but never climbed too high overhead or dropped near any horizon. By then, mountains, islands and two lesser continents had coalesced with the Continent, and the once-elegant wheel had become an ungainly oval. Most of the world's dayside face was covered with a single unbroken lid too cumbersome to be turned. Competing wood had pushed the weakest lands deep beneath the Ocean, and like the keel of a great boat, those corpses held the Continent in one stubborn alignment, only the strongest currents and the most persistent winds were able to force the oval toward the east or the west.

When Jopale was a young boy, disaster struck. The trade winds strengthened abruptly, and in a single year the Continent drifted west almost one thousand kilometers. Cities and entire homelands were plunged into darkness. Millions of free citizens saw their crops die and their homelands starve. The only rational response was to move away, like immigrants on other lands, or as refugees, or in a few cases—like Port of Krauss—remaining where they were, in the darkness, making the very best of the tragedy.

To a young boy, the disaster seemed like enormous good fun. There was excitement in the air, a delicious sense of danger walking on the world. Strange new children arrived with their peculiar families, living in tiny homes given to them by charities and charitable guilds. Jopale got to know a few of those people, at least well enough to hear their stories about endless night and the flickering of nameless stars. But he still couldn't appreciate the fact that his own life was precarious now. Jopale was a bright child, but conventional. He had a conventional family who promised him that the trade winds would soon weaken and

the Continent would push its way back to its natural location. What was dead now would grow again, those trusted voices argued. The dark lands would grow again. And because he was young and naturally optimistic, Jopale convinced himself that he would live to enjoy the glorious rebirth.

But the boy grew into a rather less optimistic young man, and the young man became a respectable and ordinary teacher of literature. During the average cycle, between one quiet sleep and the next, Jopale wouldn't once imagine that anything important about his world could ever change.

He was in his house, sleeping unaware, when a moderate quake split the land beneath him.

Early-warning sensors recorded the event, and Jopale happened to read about the quake in the morning newsbook. But no expert mentioned any special danger. The Continent was always shifting and cracking. Drowned islands would shatter, and bubbled compressed gas were constantly pushing toward the surface. There was no compelling reason for worry, and so he ate his normal first-meal and rode his two-wheel over the road to work—a small landowners' school set on softer, paler ground just beyond his homeland—and there he taught the classics to his indifferent students, sat through a literature department meeting, and then returned home again. Alone in his quiet house, he ate his last-meal and read until drowsy, and then he slipped his sleep-hood over his head and curled up in bed.

His house was small and relatively new, set in a corner of his parents' original farm. Jopale's property was part of a long prosperous valley. But since he was no farmer, he had rented most of the ground to neighbors who raised crops and kept four-footed—milking varieties that were made into stew meat and bone meal once they grew old. The neighbors also kept scramblers for their sweet meat, and they used teams of mockmen to work the land and its animals, lending every waking moment a busy, industrious quality.

Jopale rose with the next cycle and went to work, as he did with the cycle after that and the cycles that followed.

His homeland was blackish-green beneath its transparent cuticle of hard wax. The rough walls of the valley were covered with parasites and epiphytes that sprang from crevices and wormholes. There were even a few wild animals, though not as many as when he was a boy. With each passing year, people were more common, the forests more carefully tended, and like every inhabited part in the world, his home was becoming domesticated, efficient and ordinary.

For twenty cycles, Jopale went about his life without worry, unaware that the first quake was followed by a series of little events—rumbles and slow, undetectable shifts that let gas and black seawater intrude into the gap between his one-time island and the bu

coastline. Nobody knew the danger; there was nobody to blame afterwards. Indeed, only a few dozen people were killed in the incident, which meant that it was barely noticed beyond Jopale's horizon.

He woke early that last morning and slipped quietly from his house. A neighborly woman was still sleeping in his bed. She had arrived at his doorstep at the end of the last cycle, a little drunk and in the mood for sex. Jopale enjoyed her companionship, on occasion, but he felt no obligation to be with her when she woke. That's why he dressed in a hurry and rode off to school. Nobody knew that the seawater and its poisons had traveled so close to the surface. But in the time it takes a lover's heart to beat twice, the pressurized water found itself inside a sap well, nothing above but an open shaft and the sky.

The resulting geyser was a spectacle; every survivor said so. Presumably the doomed were even more impressed, watching the tower of saltwater and foam soar high overhead, dislodged chunks of wood falling around them, and an endless thunder shaking the world as huge quantities of gas—methane laced with hydrogen sulfide—bubbled from the

Suffocation was the standard death, for people and everything else.

The entire valley was killed within minutes. But the high ridges trapped the poison, keeping the carnage contained. Even before Jopale heard the news, the disaster was almost finished. By the time he rode home again, crews of mockmen dressed in diving suits had already capped the geyser. Engineers were busy drawing up plans for permanent repairs. And it was safe enough that a grieving survivor could walk to the ridge above, holding a perfumed rag against his face as he stared down at the fate of the world.

Water covered the valley floor—a stagnant gray lake already growing warm in the brilliant sunlight. The forested slopes had either drowned or been bleached by the suffocating gases. From his vantage point, Jopale couldn't see his house. But the land beneath the sea was still alive—still a vibrant blackish-green. Pumps would have to be installed up, and osmotic filters, and then everything else could be saved. But if the work happened too slowly, too much salt would seep through the cuticle, causing the land to sicken and die. Then the valley would become a single enormous sore, attacked by fungi and giant worms. If nature was allowed its freedom, this tiny portion of the Continent would rot through, and the sea would come up again, spreading along the ancient fault lines, untold volumes of gas bubbling up into the rapidly sickening air.

People had to save the valley.

Why shouldn't they? A rational part of Jopale knew what was at stake—what almost every long-term prediction said was inevitable. But he couldn't shake his selfish need to enjoy the next cycle and the rest of his life. This ground had always been a part of him; wouldn't he want it saved? Let other people lose their little places. Let the Continent die everywhere but here. That's what he told himself as he walked down the path, the perfumed



rag pressed against his nose and mouth, a self-possessed optimism flourishing for the next few steps.

Where the gases hadn't reached, epiphytes still flourished. Each tree stood apart from its neighbors, like the hair on the head of an elderly mockman. That made for a tall open forest, which in turn allowed the land to receive its share of sunlight. A flock of day-yabbers watched him from the high branches, leathery wings folded close, bright eyes alarmed by nothing except his presence. Giant forest roaches danced from crevice to crevice. Wild scramblers hid in nests of hair and woven branches, calling out at him with mournful voices. Then the path bent and dropped, and everything changed. More yabbers lay dead beneath their perches, and countless silverfish and juvenile worms had crawled out of their holes before dying. A giant golden gyretree—one of Jopale's favorite specimens—was already turning black at its base. But the air was breathable again, the wind having blown away the highest poisons. Jopale wished he had his breathing mask; he had left it inside his house, floating in a cupboard somewhere close to his dead lover. The woman had always been good company. But in death, she had grown unreal, abstract and distant. Walking around a next turn in the trail, Jopale found himself imagining her funeral and what delicate role he might play. And that was when he saw the wild scramblers that had fled the rising gas, but not fast enough. They belonged to one of the ground-dwelling species; he wasn't sure which. They had short hairy bodies and long limbs and little hands that reached out for nothing. Crests of bright blue fur topped the otherwise naked faces. The gases had stolen away their oxygen, then their lives. Already they were beginning to swell and turn black, lending them a strange, unfamiliar appearance; and when Jopale looked at their miserable little faces, he felt a sharp, unbearable fear.

In death more than life, those scramblers resembled human beings.

Here was the moment when everything changed for this scholarly gentleman—the creature of tradition and habit, of optimism and indifference. Gazing into those smoky eyes and the wide mouths choked by their fat purple tongues, he saw his own future. The woman he didn't love the dead woman was important: If they were married and had children, and his family had died today, Jopale would have felt an unrelenting attachment to this tiny corner of the world. In their honor, he would have ignored the urge to run away, remaining even as the land splintered and bled poisons and turned to dust and dead water.

But escape was what he wanted. The urge was sudden and irresistible. And later, when he examined what was possible, Jopale discovered only one solution that gave him any confidence.

If he sold his parents' land to his surviving neighbors and relatives, and if he bleached his savings blue... then he could abandon the only home he had ever known, and forsake the sun, as well as abandoning all of those foolish little scramblers who couldn't see past the next little while...

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## WORLD'S EDGE

The great worm had come to a stop, but its muscles continued to shiver, long ripples traveling the length of the body, its misery made all the more obvious by a deep low moan that Jopale didn't hear so much as he felt it in his bones.

World's Edge: In some past eon, the city stood on the Continent's shoreline, not far beyond but darkening skies and bottomless water. For generations, this great port had served as a home for fishermen, and more importantly, for the brave souls who journeyed onto the trackless sea-hunting giant rust-fins and the copper eels and vicious many-mouthed beasts. Fortunes were made from every carcass brought home—great masses of inedible meat and iron-rich bone pushed into furnaces and burned away, leaving nothing behind but a dozen kilos of precious metal. But new islands were always being born, oftentimes half a world away, and they grew as they wandered, eventually slamming into this coastline and sticking fast. Removed from its livelihood, the once great city fell into hard times. Most neighboring towns vanished completely. But World's Edge managed to survive, clinging to its outmoded name, and when times and the world's growing population demanded it, the city blossomed again, new industries and a relentless sense of commerce producing a metropolis where two million people could live out their busy, unexceptional lives.

Birth and growth, followed by death and rebirth—no story told by Man was as important as this.

Then the Continent suddenly drifted west, and again, World's Edge wore the previous name.

Jopale considered the ironies as he carried his bags to the front of the intestine, out through an artificial sphincter fitted into the worm's side. From there, it was a short walk to the station's high wooden platform. A bright sign flashed from the top of the greeting, displaying the present atmospheric readings, followed by the cheery promise, "No hazards none foreseen." The sun hovered just above the eastern horizon, stratospheric clouds low pollution obscuring only a portion of its fierce glare. Squinting, Jopale faced the sun. At least two large balloons were visible in the sky, suspended on long ropes, spotters busily watching the land for geysers or more subtle ruptures. Behind him, long shadows stretched toward lands rendered unfit for normal life. Not that nothing and no one could live out there but still, Jopale felt as if he was standing on the brink of a profound desolation, and that image struck him in some innate, profoundly emotional fashion...

The caretakers walked on top of their friend and along the concave, heavily greased trail, examining the worm's gray skin and poking its long tired muscles, sometimes using electric wands but mostly employing nothing but their bare hands. The worm's reflexes were slow. The old caretaker said as much to the younger workers. "She's gone too far with

many in her empty bellies,” Master Brace complained, gesturing at the milling passengers. “She needs half a cycle at least, and all she can eat.”

Jopale realized their delay would be longer than he had anticipated. Pulling two tickets from his traveler’s belt, he carefully read the deeply legal language. If he didn’t get to the Port of Krauss within another fifteen cycles, the worm’s owners would refund half of the cost of the first ticket. But that was an inconsequential gesture, all things considered. Because the second ticket promised him a small cabin onboard a methane-fueled ship that would leave for the New Isles two cycles later. Punctuality was his responsibility. If he was late, the first ticket was worthless. And Jopale would be trapped in the Port with every other refugee, slowly shepherding the last of his money while absorbing news from around the world, hoping the coming nightmare would take its time and he could eventually purchase a new berth on some later, unpromised vessel.

What good would fear do him now? Or rage?

“No good at all,” he said with a stiff voice, turning his back to the sun.

The station was a strangely quiet place. The only other worms were small or plain, and even those specimens were pointed west, aimed at the darkness, as if waiting for the order to flee. Besides caretakers, the only human workers were soldiers. Older men, more disciplined and probably without families—exactly the sort of people to be trusted in the worst of times. Two soldiers stood farther up the worm, guarding the sphincter leading to the stomach. Mockmen waited in the darkness. Each creature had its owner’s name tattooed on its forearms and back. Humans had to come forward to claim what was theirs, and even then, the soldiers questioned them with suspicious voices—as if somebody would try to steal one of these creatures now.

The mysterious young woman was standing with the other passengers, her book tucked under one arm, eyes pointed in the general direction of the unloading.

“Which is yours?” Jopale asked.

She didn’t seem to hear the question. Then he realized that her gaze reached past the mockmen, bright tan eyes staring at the night lands, her mind probably traveling on to her destination.

“Good Mountain, is it?” Jopale asked.

“I’m sorry, no.” She was answering his first question, smiling in his general direction. “I don’t own any of these creatures.”

Jopale had brought a mockman from home, to help with his bags and his life, as well as giving him this ready excuse to stand where he was, chatting with this young woman.

With a quiet, gentlemanly voice, he offered his name.

She nodded and said, "Yes. Good Mountain."

They had found a pattern. He would ask some little question, and she would answer his former question.

"The word 'mountain,' " he said. "Do you know what it means?"

She smiled now, glancing at his face. "Do you?"

He allowed himself the pleasure of a wise nod. "It is an ancient word," he answered. "The oldest texts employ it. But even by then, the word had fallen into a rotten disuse."

"Really?"

"We have words for ridges and hills. With great clarity, we can describe the color and quality of any ground. But from what we can determine, using our oldest sources, 'mountain' implies a titanic uplifting of something much harder than any wood. Harder and more durable, and a true mountain rises high enough to puncture the sky. At least according to some expert interpretations."

She laughed, very softly. "I know."

"Do you?"

"That's why they picked the name," she explained.

Jopale didn't understand, and his expression must have said as much.

"Of course, there's no actual mountain there," she admitted. "It's just a flat plain shoved high by a set of faults and buoyant substrates. But there was a time, long ago, the Continent pushed in from every side, and an entire island was buried. Buried and carried a long ways under the sea."

The woman liked to explain things. Was she a teacher?

"Interesting," Jopale offered, though he wasn't convinced that it was.

"That island is like a mountain in reverse, you see. It extends a long ways below waterline. Like a fist sticking out from the bottom of the Continent, reaching deeper into the ocean than any other feature we know of."

"I see," he muttered.

But why would she call it, "Our ocean"? How many oceans were there?

"That's why the science station was built there," she explained. " 'A good mountain do research.' That what my colleagues used to joke."

"What kind of research?" he asked.

"Land distortions and water cycles, mostly. And various experts who work with the submerged ground."

He said, "Really?" with a false enthusiasm.

The woman nodded, returning to her distant stare.

"Is that your specialty?" he asked, trying to read the binding of her book. "Prehistoricislands?"

"Oh, no." She passed the heavy book to her other arm.

"Then what do you do?"

It was an exceptionally reasonable question, but she was a peculiar creature. Smiling as if nothing had ever been funnier, she said, "Do-ane." She wasn't quite looking at him when telling him, "That is my name."

He didn't have a ready response.

"You told me yours. I assumed you wanted to know mine."

"Thank you," Jopale muttered.

"I'm sorry, but I can't say anything else."

He nodded and shrugged. And then his mockman emerged from the stomach: A mature female with big blue eyes riding high on her broad stoic face. Jopale had recently purchased her from a cousin, replacing the mockmen he had lost when the valley flooded. For her species, she was smart and adaptable. By any standard, she was loyal, and in countless domestic tasks, she was helpful. And like every passenger from the worm's stomach, she smelled of acid and other unpleasant secretions. But at least this creature didn't want to play word games, or dance silly secrets before his eyes.

Jopale spoke to one of the soldiers, proving his ownership to everyone's satisfaction.

“My bags,” he ordered.

The creature snatched each by its rope handle.

“This way,” he said. Then with a minimal nod, he excused himself from Do-ane, pushing through the station, searching for some place where the noble refugee might fit meal.

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## PARANOIA

Dining halls next to worm stations were rarely elegant. World’s Edge was an exception. Using the local wood, artisans had carved long blocks into a series of omega-shaped beams, each a little different from the others, all linked like ribs to form a single long roof. Woven gyre-tree branches created a porous roof. Heavy planks had been bleached white and laid out for a floor, each fastened to the foundation with solid pins made of dense knot-wood. The tables and chairs were brightly colored, orange and gold predominating. Everything made from slick new plastics—one of those expensive programs underwritten by some well-meaning government agency, public moneys helping lock away a few breathers of methane into this more permanent form. The usual indoor epiphytes clung to the overhead beams—vigorous plants with dark leaves that thrived in the artificial light, their fingerlike roots drinking nothing but the travelers’ nervous breathing. Jopale noticed a familiar figure planted at one end of a busy table, accompanied by two mockmen that sat backwards on turned-around chairs, eating their rations off their laps—a common custom in many places.

“May I join you?” asked Jopale.

“Please.” The man was tall even when he was sitting, and unlike practically everyone else in the place, he wasn’t eating. His old map was opened up before him, and with long fingers and sharpened nails, he measured and remeasured the distances between here and Port of Krauss.

Jopale set down his platter and handed his mockman two fresh rations of syrup-and-roach. The big female settled on the floor, legs crossed, hands and mind focused on the screw-style lids on both wooden jars.

Unsure what to say, Jopale said nothing. But silence proved uncomfortable, which was why he eventually picked the most obvious topic. “So why are you going to Port of Krauss?”

The thin man glanced up for a moment, apparently startled.

“You are going there, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry then,” said Jopale. “I just assumed—“

“My trip doesn’t end there,” the thin man continued. “I have business, of a kind... business in another place...”

“The New Isles?”

Surprise turned to pleasure. “Are you going there too?”

Jopale nodded.

“Well, good. I knew there had to be others. Wonderful!”

Somehow that revelation didn’t bring comfort. Jopale had the impression that his companion was difficult, and the idea of traveling with him across the rest of the Continent and then out over the Ocean felt daunting, if not out and out unpleasant.

“I need somebody to keep my confidence up,” the tall man proclaimed.

What did confidence have to do with anything?

“My name is Rit.”

“Jopale.”

Rit didn’t seem to hear him. Glancing over his shoulder, he observed, “There are no any people working in the kitchen. Did you notice?”

Only mockmen were cooking and washing dishes. There wasn’t even an overseer walking among them, keeping order.

“I don’t know if I could make myself go to work,” Jopale admitted. “All that’s happening, even if it’s far from here—“

“Not that far away,” Rit interrupted.

“What? Has the news changed?”

“Aren’t things awful enough as they are?” The tall man shuddered, then steered away from that dangerous subject. He licked his lips and stared down at the big map, fingers

stretched wide. Then with a tight voice, he asked the lines and tiny dots, “You do believe the Isles, don’t you?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

The narrow face twisted. “But have you ever seen the Isles? Or do you know anyone who’s actually visited them?”

Jopale had never considered the possibility. “What do you mean? How could they exist?” He immediately reached for the only book in his personal satchel—a leather-bound professionally printed volume full of photographs and exhaustive explanations. With his voice rising, he said, “I haven’t heard anything like that. Not even the rumor of a rumor.”

Rit shook his head and began to fold up his map, saying to no one in particular, “I’m sorry. I have these panics. Always have.”

The man was insane, or nearly so.

“It’s just that in times like these...” Rit took a moment to compose himself. “When a disaster reigns, deceitful souls prosper. Have you noticed? Criminals rise up like worms inside dead wood. They come from below to hurt good people, for profit and for fun.”

There was an obvious, ominous counter to that logic. “We’ve never seen times as bad as these,” Jopale said.

That observation earned a terrified but respectful look from his companion. “I suppose that’s so.”

“Why go to so much trouble to mislead us? With the worst happening, in far-off places now and maybe here soon... even a despicable thief knows he wouldn’t have enough time to enjoy his money...”

“Unless he doesn’t believe he will die.” Rit leaned across the table, putting his face close to Jopale’s face. “Most people still don’t appreciate their mortality. They react about the deaths of strangers. Places they don’t know are poisoned or burning. But until their lungs are sick and their skin is cooking, they think their chances are exceptionally good.”

There were stubborn souls in the world, yes. Jopale knew a history teacher—a brilliant man by any measure—who had openly mocked him. “Nothing ever changes in this world,” the colleague had claimed. “The Continent will shatter here and there, and some islands will be destroyed. But other islands will survive, along with the people riding them. That is the irrefutable lesson of our past, Jopale. Our world is tough, our species is lucky, and both will survive every onslaught.”



Jopale nodded for a moment, as if accepting that remembered lecture. Then with honest conviction, he reminded Rit, “There are easier and much cheaper ways to fool people. And steal a fortune in the process, I might add.”

His companion gave a grudging nod.

“I am like you,” Jopale continued, knowing that he wasn’t anything like this crazy fellow. “I’ve had some suspicions, yes. I wanted to know: Were the New Isles really as and smartly designed as their builders claim them to be? So I made inquiries before committing my money. And yes, the New Isles do exist. They were built at the Port of at the main shipyard. The last Isle was launched just a year ago, and it’s still being towed to its final destination. I even spoke to workers at the Port, using a radiophone. And while I couldn’t promise that the Isles were located in safe places, or that I had an open berth waiting for me and my mockman, they were definite about one issue: They had done their best work, fabricating the largest, strongest ships humans had ever known.”

Jopale glanced at the cover of his book. From the bluffs overlooking the unlit ocean, someone had taken a photograph showing a wide vessel built from tough old wood. So one of the strongest, most enduring land in the world had been cut free of the Continent and floated into position, then carved into a cumbersome but durable ensemble of hulls and empty chambers. And to make the Isle even stronger, a fortune in refined metals had been fashioned into cables and struts and long nails that were fixed throughout the Isle’s bones. Metal was what Port of Krauss was famous for—the rare elements that could be filtered from the cold dark seawater. With the best alloys in the world, insulated tanks were built, they were filled with methane and dangled far beneath each Isle, using the sea’s own pressure and cold to help keep the gas liquefied. That gas would eventually power lights, hydroponics, with enough energy in reserve to tear the seawater apart... to carve hydrogen from the precious oxygen, allowing everyone to breathe without any cumbersome masks.

With the surety of a good teacher, Jopale dismissed Rit’s concerns. “These are genuine sanctuaries, and my new home is waiting for me. I just have to get there now. I feel quite sure that I will.”

Saying those words, he believed them.

Rit seemed to take it all to heart. He put away his map and found his own copy of the member’s handbook, opening it to one of his favorite pages.

Finally, Jopale began to eat his meal. He had purchased two scrambler hands, fatty but not too greasy, and a whitish lump of sweetcake and cultured algae in a salty soup washed down with a tall bottle of fermented sap imported from the Earlands. The drink was the most expensive item on the limited menu, and it was the most appreciated. The hard kick of the liquor was already working on his mood when his companion spoke again, and

a sorry little voice to ask, “But what if?”

“What if what?” Jopale responded testily.

“What if these thieves and con artists did believe this world was coming to an end? And by promising berths to us and maybe a million others like us, they earned enough money to finance their own salvation.”

Jopale grimaced, breathing through his teeth.

“What if a New Isle is waiting, but not for us?” Rit persisted.

Jopale felt a smile emerge on its own. Then with a bitter laugh, he told lüs traveling companion, “Well then. Then we aren’t in any worse shape than the rest of the world. No, are we?”

\* \* \* \*

## ON AGAIN

Jopale had always excelled at school, including respectable grades earned in each of the three sciences. But he never achieved a profound understanding of genetics or selection forces. He learned what was absolutely necessary, relying on his clear memory when it came to the standard exams. Introductory classes demanded little else, while the higher courses—those rarefied environments where professors wanted more than disgorged and holy equations—had never been in his future.

But one lesson Jopale took from science was this: Mockmen were wondrous creatures, pliable and creative by every genetic measure.

A glance around the station proved that truism. Most of the mockmen were big creatures, two or three times larger than a grown human. They had been bred for compliance and power when necessary and a minimal metabolism to help reduce the bills. Yet some of these creatures were small and slender as a child. And a few of the kitchen workers were quicker than any human being—a blessing in this hurlyburly business. What’s more, no two of them could be confused for each other, even though they might be siblings or a parent and grown child. All had an oval face and a protruding chin beneath a small, seemingly inadequate mouth. Yet each face was unique. Jopale’s own girl had descended from giants that lived for generations on his family farm—a generalist by design and by training, her head topped with beastly red hair, a dramatic chin hanging from the parabolic jaw, and blue inhuman eyes gazing out at a world full of motion and incomprehensible purpose. If the creature had a voice, she would have commanded a vocabulary of several hundred easy words. But of course the larynx was pierced when she was a baby, leaving her able to communicate only with simple gestures and vaguely h

expressions. A creature of habit and duty, his mockman was too simple to understand dire state of the world—an ignorance that Jopale couldn't help but envy, at least now again.

"Everything with a spine arose from a common ancestor," he had learned long ago. His biology professor—an ancient woman blessed with her own sturdy backbone—explained to the class, "A single creature must have been the originator of all. On some ancient continent, long dead and rotted away, this precursor to humans ran about on two legs, climbing up into the saprophytes and epiphytes, grabbing what food it could with its primitive hands."

"Like a scrambler?" a student had asked.

Jopale didn't ask the question, thankfully. The professor reacted with a click of the tongue and a sorry shake of her head. "Hardly," she replied. "Scramblers are as far removed from our founding species as we are. As the mockmen are. Flying yabbers, copper eels, plus everything else you can name... all of these species would look at that vanished organism as being its very distant ancestor. That is, if simple beasts could ever think in abstract terms."

"But where did the first vertebrates come from?" another student inquired. "From the sea? Or from some earlier continent?"

"Nobody knows," the professor replied. Then with the surety of age, she added, "nobody will ever discover that unnecessary answer. Since there's no way to study the matter any further than it has been studied by now."

\* \* \* \*

Jopale had been sitting in the station for several hours, changing position as the plastic chair pushed against his rump. At that moment, he happened to be thinking about his biology teacher, long dead, and about the nature of surety. And to stave off boredom, he was studying the astonishing diversity of false humans who sat and walked among those who were real.

Suddenly a short, homely mockman entered the dining hall. It was female, dressed in the stiff uniform of a station worker. And like with a few of her species, some quirk of genetics had swollen her skull, giving her a genuine forehead under a cap of thick black hair. That forehead was remarkable enough. But then the newcomer opened her mouth, revealing a clear and exceptionally strong voice.

"The westbound worm is rested and ready," she sang out, the clarity of each word taking travelers by surprise. "Leave by way of the door behind me, sirs and madams. I have a ticket. You must have a ticket. The westbound worm is fed and eager. She will

leaving shortly, my friends.”

Most of the room stood up.

“That wasn’t as long as I feared.” An elderly woman wearing elegant clothes and amber gems was smiling at her good fortune. “I was ready to sit for quite a while longer,” she admitted to her companion.

A handsome man, perhaps half her age, muttered, “I wonder why this is.”

The rich woman had to laugh at him. “It’s because we are special, darling. What reason do you need?”

Jopale was among the last to reach the open doorway. Soldiers were waiting, carefully examining each ticket and every piece of identification. Meanwhile, the uniformed mockman stood beside the long line, smiling happily. Why did that creature make him so uneasy? Was it her face? Her voice? No, what bothered Jopale was the way she scanned at the other faces, black eyes settling only on those who were human.

“Good journey,” she said to Jopale.

Then to Rit, who was directly behind him, she said, “You are in trustworthy hands. No need to worry.”

She could read the man’s fear.

A one-in-a-million creature, thought Jopale. Or there was another explanation, and it was more sordid, too. Glancing over his shoulder, he wondered if she could be a hybrid—a mix of biology that wasn’t destroyed at birth, but instead was fed and trained for this halfworld’s demanding task. Nothing like her would ever happen in his homeland. It wasn’t allowed. World’s Edge was a different part of the world, and Jopale’s long journey had taught him many lessons, including that every place had its own culture, and cultures were defined by their odd little customs understandable only to themselves.

“This way, this way!” the old caretaker cried out.

Jopale showed the soldiers what they wanted to see, his own mockman standing silently to his right.

Master Brace was at the end of the long platform, shouting for the passengers and waving both arms. Even at a distance, his face betrayed a look of genuine concern. Something bad must have happened. But their giant worm lay motionless on the great trail, apparently sleeping. Its intestine was still jammed full of half-digested food. The very bloated shape said as much, and looking through the plastic windows, Jopale saw a riot

dark mixture of masticated wood pulp and sweet knuckle-roots, happy muscles pressing feast into new positions, the elastic walls working on the stubborn chunks and bubbles

The passengers were being led up toward the stomach.

Jopale was disgusted, but compliant. The wealthy woman who talked about being special was now first to complain. Shaking an accusing finger at the caretaker, she said, "I did not pay for an acid bath."

The caretaker had discarded his charm. He looked tired and perhaps a little scared, not to mention short of patience. "Her stomach isn't hungry anymore," he said with a low, slow voice. "And it's thoroughly buffered, madam. You'll be comfortable enough inside. I promise."

"But my mockmen—"

"Will ride above, in the open air." Brace gestured impatiently. The pilothouse was fixed on top of the long blind head, and behind it were ropes and straps and simple chairs. With a loud voice, Brace told every passenger, "If we waited for my baby to empty her bowels, we'd remain here until the next cycle. Which might be just as well. But word just came up from One-Time—"

An earlier stop, two cycles to the east.

"A new fissure has broken open there. The situation is dicey. And since there's not enough inside the stomach, I'm sure you can see... this is the best answer to our many problems... !"

The passengers turned together, gazing toward the east. While everyone was busy filling his own belly, the bright face of the sun had been covered over. Distant clouds seemed thicker than natural and blacker, and the clouds were rising up like a great angry wall, towering over the green land that these people had only recently journeyed across.

A purposeful panic took hold of the crowd.

Jopale claimed his belongings from his mockman and ordered her to climb on top of the worm. Then he passed through the cramped sphincter and into the stomach, sniffing the air as an afterthought, pleased to find it fresh enough and even a little scented. The smooth pink floor was a little damp but not truly wet. Worm stomachs were shorter than the duodenum, and most of the floor had been claimed. A simple latrine stood in back. Do sat alone in the middle of the remaining space, hiking boots beside her. She showed Jopale a polite smile, nothing more. Where else could he go? Nowhere. Claiming the right side of the stomach to her right, he threw open his traveling blanket and inflated his pillow. Setting his pillow on the highest portion of his floor, he tried to ignore her. Then Rit knelt on the other

side of the young woman, carefully laying out his blanket, preparing his fragile nerves for the next leg of this very long journey.

Jopale was terrified, genuinely terrified, right up until the moment when the alarms were sounded.

The sharp wailing of sirens began in the distance, diluted and distorted by the worm's body. Then the station's sirens joined in, and the floor rolled ominously. Was it a quake, or was the worm waking? Probably both reasons, he decided. Then the stomach sphincter closed, choking off the worst of the noise, and the giant creature gulped air into its long lungs and into its empty belly, needing little prompting to begin squirming against the trail's slick surface. Rolling muscle and the long powerful tail created a sound unlike anything other in nature. Jopale was reminded of a thick fluid being forced down a very narrow channel. Slowly, slowly, the creature built its momentum, the trail's oils eliminating most of the friction, allowing its bulk to gradually become something swift and relentless.

Passengers held their air masks in their hands, waiting for instructions or the telltale stink of a gas cloud. Because there had to be gas somewhere close. A quake wasn't a reason enough to sound the city's alarms. Yet curiously, in the midst of this obvious emergency, Jopale felt much calmer. He knew he had to remain vigilant and clearheaded. And gas was only an inconvenience to a man with the proper equipment. Standing beside one of the few stomach windows, he watched the station vanish behind them, replaced by broad government buildings and assorted shops, and then suddenly, by countless homes stacked three deep and set beside narrow, shade-drenched streets. A few mockmen were walking with purposeful shuffles; otherwise no one appeared in the open. Most of the windows were shuttered and sealed. If poisons were boiling up from below, private detectors would smell them, and people would huddle inside their little safe rooms, breathing filtered oxygen from bottles, or breathing nothing but the increasingly stale air. An awful experience Jopale knew. There was no more helpless feeling in the world. Yet his overriding emotion now was a tremendous, almost giddy relief.

He had escaped again, just in time.

Do-ane joined him. The window was quite tiny, not designed for looking outside, but instead to let in sunlight and allow the caretakers to monitor the mockmen who normally worked here. Do-ane stood on her toes to look outside. She seemed prettier when she was nervous, and rather more appealing. In her hand was the most sophisticated gas-gauge Jopale had ever seen. In a whisper, she said, "Hydrogen sulfide."

His own confidence fell to pieces. Methane was awful—suffocating and flammable—but the putrid hydrogen sulfide gas was far worse. There were places beneath the Continent where the dissolved oxygen had been exhausted. The living wood and ocean currents couldn't freshen that water any more. And different types of rot took hold there, anaerobic bacteria creating a sour poison that could kill within minutes.

The city kept sliding past.

“Is that a body?” she asked suddenly.

What might be a mockman was lying on its side, tucked against the foundation of a long house. Or was it just trash dressed in a blanket? Jopale wasn't sure, and then they passed both the body and the street. With his own quiet voice, he said, “It was nothing.”

“It was human,” Do-ane said.

“A sleeping mockman,” he offered. “Or a dead one, maybe. But that means nothing. Disease or age, or boys out damaging property, maybe.”

“Do you think so?” Do-ane asked hopefully.

“Oh, yes,” he said. And because it felt good, he again said that word. “Yes.” Then he added with his most reasonable tone, “If the gas was that terrible, the streets would be jammed with suffocating bodies.”

She looked at him, desperate to believe those sordid words.

Suddenly Jopale couldn't remember why the young woman had bothered him. He smiled and she did the same, and with that, they leaned against the living wall, watching the city fall away and the countryside reemerge. Tall epiphytes spread their leaves to the vertical light. Rain showers were soaking the land to the south. Maybe those clouds would drift that way that would lessen the chances of a fire, at least for a little while. Right? Meanwhile, Do-ane's sensor continued to record the fluctuating levels of sulfides, plus the usual methane and ethane that were pulled inside whenever the worm belched and swallowed more air. But none of the toxins reached a suffocating level, and except for a foul taste in the back of his mouth, they remained unnoticed by the other passengers.

Finally the sun merged with the horizon and the numbers began to fall again, working their way back toward levels that were normal enough, at least over the last few years.

Jopale sat on his blanket, enjoying his good fortune.

Then for no clear reason, he thought about the hybrid woman back at the station—the black-haired creature with the big lovely voice—and it occurred to him that unlike the human soldiers, she'd had no air mask riding upon her hip.

Had she survived?

And why, in the face of everything, did he seem to care?

\* \* \* \*

## PLANS OF ESCAPE

At the school where Jopale taught, the conclusion of each term meant a party thrown for the faculty and staff. Liquor was involved, and school politics, and during that final gathering some extraordinarily raw emotions. Radiophone broadcasts had just reported a cluster of villages in the distant north destroyed by an eruption of poisons. Sober voices were repeating rumors—false rumors, as it happened—that the local engineers and mockm crews couldn't stop the enormous jets of methane. The party soon divided itself into two camps: Some wanted to embrace their doom, while others clung to any excuse for hope. Jopale found himself on the fringes of the argument, unsure which stance to take. The next colleague wandered past, his cup drained and his mind intoxicated. Listening to a few declarations of terror, the normally timid fellow found a buoyant courage. "The situation is that dangerous," he declared. "Believe me, we can seal up holes ten times worse than I've heard described in these stories!"

The optimists happily embraced those defiant words.

But the teacher shrugged off their praise. "You're as silly as the rest of them," he declared. "And at least as ignorant, too."

"What do you know?" someone asked.

"More than anybody else here, I can tell you that." Then the drunken man scanned the room. Searching for an escape route? No, he wanted the big bowl set on the central table—a leather bowl where sweet punch and fermented gig-berries created a small pond. "Look here," he called out. "I'll show you exactly what I mean."

His audience gathered at the table, maintaining a skeptical silence.

Using the thick decorative leaves of a hush-wood, the teacher began covering the pond's surface. And while he worked, he lectured about the wooden Continent and the bottomless Ocean and how things like rot and methane were the inevitable end products of a very ancient cycle.

Jopale understood it all, or he thought he did.

Then a third teacher—the most accomplished science instructor on their staff—cleared his throat before mentioning, "This isn't your professional area, you know."

"My area?" The lecturer with the leaves asked, "What is my area? Remind me now."



"Maps," the scientist said, that single word wrapped inside a smug and blatantly dismissive tone.

Anger showed on the colleague's face. But he didn't lose his temper. He just shook his head for a moment and set another layer of leaves on the pond. Then with a quiet, voice, he said, "Jopale."

"Yes?"

"What do you know about the Man-and-Sky texts?"

Jopale had read excerpts in college. But even in these modest academic circles it was best to appear well trained. "I studied them for a semester," he replied with a careful tone. "What about them?"

"How old are they?"

"No one knows."

"But judging by the different dead languages, we can assume they're probably several different ages... a mishmash of writings from a series of unnamed authors. Yes."

Jopale offered a nod.

His colleague took a deep breath. "Scholars believe the Man-and-Sky offers at least three descriptions of the world, possibly four. Or five. Or even six. What's certain is that the description is not that much different from our world. There is a large continent and a motionless sun. Only the names of every location have been changed, and the people speak different languages, and sometimes the animals and vegetation are not quite recognizable."

Like bored students, the teachers began to mutter among themselves.

The lecturer placed a hand upon the floating leaves. "My area... my intellectual passion... is too complicated for ordinary minds. I'll grant you that. Thousands upon thousands of islands coalesce into a single body, each island fighting with its stubborn neighbors to remain on the Ocean's surface, basking in the brightest possible sunshine. It makes for a grand, glorious puzzle that would baffle most of you..."

Feeling the insult, his audience fell silent.

"The Man-and-Sky texts give us the best maps of those earlier continents. And they offer some of the most compelling accounts of how the old continents fell to pieces." The geographer picked a pale yellow straw off the table, his mouth pressed into a wide, pale smile. "You probably don't know this. Those lost continents were barely half the size of our world."

There is no evidence—none—that the islands in the past have ever managed to cover the entire day-face of our world. Which makes what is happening now into a singular event, an elaborate collision of random events, and perhaps selective forces too.”

“What about selective forces?” the scientist grumbled.

“Which islands prosper?” their colleague asked. “The strong ones, of course. And those that remain on the surface for the longest time. Those that can resist the poison in bad times, and those that will endure the longest, darkest famines.” Then he shrugged, adding, “In earlier cycles, the wood beneath us would have been dead long ago. The collapses would have come sooner; the tragedies would have been smaller. But this time—in our time—the islands have descended from a few durable lineages. And what’s more, every other force at play in the world has pushed us to the worst stage imaginable.”

Even in his blackest moods, Jopale didn’t want to believe that.

“We don’t know how much methane is under our toes,” the lecturer admitted. “But even the median guesses are awful.”

A small, sorry voice said, “The entire world could suffocate.”

Jopale had offered those words.

“Oh, but it’s far worse than that!” His colleague stuck the long straw into his mouth, then slipped the other end into a small wooden flask hidden in his coat pocket. He sucked up the liquid and covered the straw’s upper end with his thumb, lifting the leaves until he could see the open punch, then he set the bottom of the straw against the sweet drink. “Of course I mean this as an illustration,” he mentioned. Then he winked at the scientist, saying, “I know, I know. There’s no genuine consensus among the experts. Or should I say specialists? Since there is, if you think about it, an important difference between those words...”

“Don’t,” Jopale cautioned.

But the man struck a long match, making a yellow flame. Then winking at his audience, he said, “Of course, the Continent might collapse slowly, over many generations. A little gas here, a lot of gas there. People die, but not too many of us. And maybe we can marshal the necessary resources. Cut holes to the Ocean below and let out the bubbly, manageable little breaths. Or pump pure oxygen down under our feet, freshening the dead water.” He waved the flame in front of his eyes. “Perhaps humans can do whatever it takes, and our atmosphere isn’t destroyed when the hydrocarbons eat up our precious oxygen.”

“You’re drunk,” the scientist complained.

“Wonderfully drunk, yes.” Then the teacher of city names and island positions laughed, and he lowered the flame.

Everyone stared at the leaf-covered punch.

Jopale assumed that the liquid from the vial was pure alcohol. But his colleague decided to make a more effective demonstration of his argument, which was why he used a collection of long-chain hydrocarbons purchased from an industrial source—a highly flammable concoction that made a soft but impressive wooshing sound as it set the leaf on fire, and then the drunken man’s hand, and a moment later, his astonished, pain-wracked face.

\* \* \* \*

## THE EVENING AIR

Left-of-Left was the next official stop—a safe station where the hard-pressed worm could catch its breath and empty its swollen bowels. Most of the passengers had fallen asleep then. The only light inside the crowded stomach came from a bioluminescent culture held by an acid-etched brass hook. Do-ane hadn’t bothered with a sleeping hood, curled up on a blanket, hands sweetly tucked between her pillow and face. Rit didn’t seem able to relax, sitting up occasionally to adjust his hood or take another white melatonin pill. Only Jopale didn’t feel tired—an illusion brought on by too much nervous energy—and that was why he stepped outdoors, using this brief pause to check on his mockman’s health, breathe the open air, and absorb the depressing sights.

The station was empty and dark. Information displays had been turned off, while offices and cafeteria had their doors locked. Master Brace was standing alone on the platform, watching his colleagues use electric wands to stimulate the worm’s anus. Jopale approached, then hesitated. Was the old caretaker crying? But Brace sensed his audience. Suddenly wiping his eyes with a sleeve, he turned to the lone passenger, habit or perhaps some unflagging sense of duty helping him create a magnificent, heartening smile.

“A gloomy darkness, but a very pleasant climate,” he remarked. “Don’t you think so, sir?”

Jopale nodded.

“I’ve stood here at least a hundred times, sir.”

“With our worm?”

“Oh, yes.” Men like Brace often spent their professional lives caring for the same

worm, learning its talents and peculiarities; and since worms were creatures of relentless habit, they were rarely asked to change routes or schedules.

“Pleasant,” the old man said again.

Tall clouds stood on the eastern horizon, obscuring the last hints of sunlight. From a distance, the clouds resembled a thick purplish-red lower that was either extraordinarily lovely or extraordinarily terrible.

Jopale asked if the clouds were made from smoke or water.

Master Brace shrugged his shoulders. “We won’t be staying long, sir,” was all he said.

Left-of-Left was a small city, and judging by the spacious warehouses standing beside the various worm trails, it had been exceptionally prosperous. Great slabs of fine-cut wood waited beside the widest worm trails, mounted on sleds ready to be towed by giant freight worms. But there was only one other worm in the station besides theirs, and it had dragged itself between two buildings and died, its pale carcass beginning to swell and rot from within.

“This wood—?” Jopale began.

“The finest in the world,” the caretaker offered. “This ground is dense and durable with a sweet grain, and almost perfectly free of knots. It has been in demand, for centuries now. And when the Continent shifted east, the local miners adapted quickly.” Brace gestured toward the south. “They poisoned the best of their wood with arsenic salts. Even if the worms starved, they weren’t going to allow any worm infestations. Beautiful planks were still cut out of this place... but you certainly don’t want to breathe the sawdust, I can tell you.”

Sprawling homes stood north of the station, yards sprinkled with tall poles. Gas-jar lights were strung high overhead—a cheat to bring light to a place without sunshine. But one of the torches was burning now, and none of the windows on any house showed the barest hint of life.

Even the lowliest mockmen were missing.

“Because everybody left,” the caretaker explained. “They went off... I don’t quite know... maybe forty cycles ago? They were still here on my last trip through. Nobody bothered me. But they were quiet while I was here, which was unusual for them. Very chatty folks of the time. Which makes me believe that they’d come to their decision already.”

Their worm began to shake now. Intestines contracted and the long body grew longer, the creature beginning to clear its bowels. The stink of the process was horrific.

bothered no one but the lone passenger.

Jopale turned his face away. “What decision was that?” he asked, one hand thrown across his mouth and nose.

“These people had their escape prepared,” the caretaker replied. “Probably years ago. A lot of these little communities... out here in the dark... they have schemes. Sanctuaries, special ground.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh, yes,” Brace replied, as if this was common knowledge. “People living in the night know what disaster means. They have experience and common sense. Like Left-of-Left here. One lady told me, with a confidential voice, that her family had built themselves a fireproof shelter and surrounded it with a deep moat. When the air source they would breathe bottled oxygen. And if the fires came, they’d flood the moat with water and spray it over their heads.”

Jopale almost responded.

But the caretaker saw doubt in his face. “Oh, I know, sir. I realize. That doesn’t sound workable. This would be no ordinary fire, and this dense ground is sure to burn hot and long. If that miserable time should come.” He laughed amiably for a moment, then added, “I was definitely lying to me. I know that now, and maybe I knew it then. You see... I would normally remain here for a cycle or two. We like to give this worm a long sleep and a chance to fatten up, and that local woman would let me share her bed. A wonderful lady, and a friend, and she wanted me to know that she had arrangements made. But she didn’t tell me enough so that I could find her. Which is reasonable, and I shouldn’t be hurt. Wherever people have gone, they don’t have extra room for their occasional lovers.”

Jopale didn’t know what to say, so he remained silent.

Then the caretaker turned back to his colleagues, and with a sharp, accusing tone he called out, “Leave those turds on the trail. You hear me?”

A young woman was standing in the worm-greased trail. Spiked boots kept her from falling, and she held a special stick used to shove the foul wastes to the side. “But the regulations—” she began.

“Regulations?” the old man interrupted. Forgetting about Jopale, he stepped to the edge of the platform, throwing out a few curses before reminding his crew, “Our first concern is our own worm. Our second concern is our passengers. And we are not wasting any time rolling crap out of the way of worms and people who are not going to be coming. “Do you hear what I’m saying to you?”

\* \* \* \*

## A LAST MOMENT PLEA

Friends and colleagues were remarkably supportive of Jopale's decision to leave home. Most offered polite words, while a few posed the most obvious questions. "Where did you learn about the New Isles?" they asked. He had come across an article in a small journal that catered to the wealthy. For a fee, he was able to purchase an introductory book filled with photographs and useful descriptions. "And they had space available?" people wondered. "At this late date?" But a New Isle was being built every few years—the process guaranteed to continue until the disaster came or the danger passed. So yes, there was space enough for him. "But how does a teacher afford it?" they pressed. "How could you afford it?" Jopale offered a shrug and shy smile, mentioning his substantial inheritance. He always made such a confession warily, expecting others to be openly jealous or envious or even noticeably so. But people absorbed the news with surprise and resignation. Which was a little disappointing, curiously enough. It would have made Jopale feel more secure about his solution—more optimistic by a long measure—if what he was doing caused pointed hostility in the people that he was prepared to leave behind.

Acquaintances and fellow teachers always seemed to have their own escape routes planned—hopeful schemes wrapped around the local civil protection service or private bunkers. And there was some good reason for hope: Throughout the district, old warehouses were being sealed and stocked with provisions. If the fires came, locals would hunker down in the dark, sipping bottled air, while the ground above was saturated with pure water and cooling foams guaranteed to shoulder all but the most catastrophic heat.

The problem was that if the fires came, the heat would turn catastrophic. The worst fires to date were in the south, not far from the polar zone. Epiphyte forests were being consumed in an instant. The normally inflammable cuticle boiled away soon after that. When the deep living wood caught fire and burned off, allowing drowned, half-rotted islands to spring to the surface, bringing up fresh methane that only caused the fires to grow larger. After that, the soggiest, most rotten wood was soon baked to a crisp and set on fire, and despite an army of mockmen and brave firefighters, that circular zone of total destruction was spreading outwards, eating a kilometer with every cycle, engulfing abandoned villages and useless farms in a roaring, irresistible maelstrom.

Yet Jopale's friends put on hopeful, brave faces. "We'll get the upper hand soon," they claimed, sounding as if they were fighting on the front lines. "And we'll beat the next twenty blazes, too. You just wait and see."

But nothing happened quickly in the world. Cycle after cycle, the southern fire continued to spread, and new ones exploded to life in other distant places. The steady, irresistible disaster gave everyone time enough to doubt his most cherished beliefs. T

when people found themselves admitting to their very lousy prospects, particularly in conversation with their oldest friends.

“I keep telling people that I’m staying,” announced one of Jopale’s neighbors. A bachelor like Jopale, bright and well read, he admitted, “I’m always saying that the fires be put out, or they’ll miss us. But when it comes down to it, do you know what I’ll do? Run east to the Ocean, just like you’re running west. If I can slip past the provincial guard and disappear into the chaos...”

“Maybe,” Jopale replied, unsure what that would accomplish.

But the fellow had written himself into an interesting story. “All those last islands that merged with the Continent? Well, I’ve heard their citizens are burying explosives inside old fault lines. And when the time comes, they’ll set off the biggest blasts in history.”

Again, Jopale said, “Maybe.”

He didn’t want to attack the man’s dream. But doubt must have crept into his face because his friend bristled, asking, “What’s wrong?”

Jopale was no expert. But in every account he had read, those giant fires were accompanied by fabulously strong winds. The winds blew toward the flames, feeding the oxygen critical to their survival. You could shatter the old fractures from end to end, chiseling the islands free of the doomed Continent; but those enormous masses of water and scared humanity would still have to move into the open water, pressing against the roaring gale.

“Well then,” the friend responded. “They’ll think of that. Probably they’ll blow their way free long before the fire comes.”

And release any methane trapped under their feet, starting their own deadly blaze. But this time, Jopale found the tact to say, “That’s reasonable, sure.” Then he added, “I know much about technical matters.”

“Keep that in mind, Jopale.” Shaking a finger, the old friend said, “You don’t know much about anything.”

True enough.

Jopale’s relatives surprised him with their calm, stubborn dismissal of his New Island plan. Uncles and older cousins thought he was a fool for surrendering to popular despair. Poisons and fires would kill distant strangers and burn up portions of the world. But no good ground, no. They couldn’t imagine their lucky island being changed in any lasting fashion. At the very worst, forests and farms would burn up, which would bring a famine.

would quickly silence the extra mouths in the world. But that would be a blessing and an opportunity, they maintained. To his considerable astonishment, Jopale learned that his family had been preparing for years: Secret lockers were stuffed full of dried scrambled eggs, wooden tubs jammed with pickled fruit, plus enough roach cakes and syrup to keep the most useful mockmen alive. There would be a few hard years, they agreed. Only the best prepared would survive to the end. But that's what they intended to do. Survive at all costs. Then life would settle back into its comfortable, profitable, and entirely natural routine.

"Stay with us," they pleaded, but not too hard. Perhaps they'd decided that Jopale was one of those extra mouths.

One old aunt assured him, "You will go insane in the darkness. Starlight has that effect on people, you know."

That wasn't true. Humans were adaptable, and besides, the New Isles were lit up with blue-white lights very much like sunshine. Yet his response was deflected with a cold pleasure. "You *will* go insane," his aunt repeated. "Don't for two moments think otherwise, my boy."

Then a pair of young cousins—a twin brother and sister—explained what was plain and obvious to them. "When the time comes," they said, "the Spirit of Man will rise from the Ocean's center to save all of the good people."

It was an old faith, half-remembered and twisted to fit the times.

"Only true believers will be spared," they promised. "How about you, Jopale? Will you join us with the reborn?"

"Never," he responded, amazed by his sudden anger. His cousins were probably more mistaken about the future than those with well-stocked bunkers. But he found himself panting, telling them, "That's a stupid creed, and you can't make me buy into it."

"Then you will die horribly," they told him, speaking with one voice. "And that's precisely what you deserve, Jopale."

But people rarely got what they deserved; wasn't that the central lesson of the modern world?

With his critical possessions packed and his precious tickets and papers in easy reach, Jopale walked to the nearest worm station, accompanied by his only remaining mockman. No well-wishers were waiting to send him off. Thank goodness. He and a few other travelers stood on the open platform, looking off to the east. The huge gray worm appeared on schedule, sliding in on the side trail and stopping before them, deep wet breaths making the entire station shake. Travelers formed a line, ready to prove themselves



to the waiting soldiers. Then a single voice called out, “Jopale.” It was a woman’s voice vaguely familiar. Jopale looked over his shoulder. He had grown up with this woman—natural beauty who hadn’t spoken ten words to him in the last ten years—but there she stood, dressed to travel and smiling only at him.

Jopale assumed she was heading west, perhaps even to the New Isles.

But no, she explained that she didn’t have any ticket. She’d heard about his plans and simply come here to speak with him now.

“Please,” she implored, touching her wide mouth, then running a hand across her long, elegant scalp.

He stepped out of line.

“This is difficult,” she admitted. Then with a deep, soul-wrenching sigh, she added, “I wish I’d done what you’ve done.”

But she hadn’t, of course.

“If I stay here, I’ll die here,” she told him and every other person in earshot. “But you, Jopale: Is there any way I could travel with you?”

There wasn’t. No. “All the berths on the New Isles are taken by now. I’m quite sure. And I’m bringing only what I’m allowed to bring. Even with these little bags here, I’m pushing against my limits.”

The woman wrapped her arms around her perfect chest, shivering as if chilled. Then, quietly, through a clenched mouth, she said, “But there is away.”

“What?”

Standing beside Jopale was his red-haired mockman. The beautiful woman glanced up at the gigantic creature. Then with a stiff, somewhat angry voice, she said, “Leave it behind. Take me instead.”

Did Jopale hear that correctly?

“I’ll ride inside the worm’s stomach with the mockmen,” she promised. “And I’ll carry your luggage for you, too.”

“No,” he said.

“I’ll even eat mockman rations—“

“No.”

The woman began to cry, tears rolling down her lovely, pain-wracked face. “I’ll do whatever you wish, Jopale. I’ll even relinquish my legal rights, and you can beat me if I slow—“

“Stop it,” he cried out.

“Please, Jopale! Please?”

Then a soldier stepped up, asking to see their papers. What could Jopale do? He was startled, off-balance. This unexpected idea hadn’t had time enough to take root in his head. The woman could never survive the life she was begging for. Besides, he had never lived without a mockman on his right side. And if he ever needed new money, this was a valuable creature on any market.

Jopale’s only rational choice was to turn away from the woman, saying nothing else. He silently handed his identification to the armed man and then his precious ticket to an elderly fellow wearing the gray uniform of a worm caretaker.

“Master Brace” was written over the chest pocket.

“All the way to the Port of Krauss, sir?” asked the old fellow.

“Yes, I am.”

Offering a wink and jolly laugh, Brace said, “Well, sir. You and I should get to know each other by the end of the line, sir. I should think.”

\* \* \* \*

## “IT IS COMING”

The sky was cloudless and absolutely dark, save for a single point of soft yellow light—of the Four Sisters slowly dancing about the hidden sun. The distant stars were too faint to be seen through the thick window—a few hundred specks that only scientists had both the names to name and map. Stars meant very little to Jopale. What captured his mind was soft and warm beneath: The Tanglelands. Relentless pressures had crumbled this wood, exposing an old seam and any line of weakness. Long ridges and single hills had been erected through a series of unending quakes. As a result, the trail was far from a straight line, and the climb, as well as fatigue kept slowing the worm’s progress. But there were no fresh breaks or blockages on the trail, at least so far. The waking passengers seemed thrilled to be alive, at least they pretended to share a renewed confidence. And of course everyone wanted at least a glimpse of the tall saprophytes that grew beside the trail, watching the exotic forest

passing by for a moment or two, then returning to their blankets and more familiar distractions.

Jopale had never seen country like this, save in picture books.

He mentioned his interest to Do-ane, and she responded as he hoped. "I've seen Tanglelands," she admitted. "Several times now. But I still think they're lovely. Just wonderful."

The girl had a buoyant, joyful attitude when she wanted to.

Jopale stood beside her, watching the pale, many-hued light pouring out of the foliage. Sometimes he asked about a particularly bright or massive tree. Do-ane would warn that she didn't know her fungi as well as she would like. But every time, she named a species. Then when the rest of the passengers had settled on the stomach's floor, leaving them alone, she quietly asked her new student, "Do you know why this country is so rich?"

"The old islands are broken into hundreds of pieces," he offered. "Plenty of fresh surfaces ready to rot away."

"That's part of it," she allowed. "But as much as anything, it's because of the moisture. Three large islands were compressed and splintered to make the Tanglelands, and each one had tremendous reserves of fresh water underground. Which the saprobes need as much as they need food, of course."

He nodded amiably.

"And besides, rain likes hilly country," she continued. "Given its choice, a storm will drop its wealth on broken ground."

"How about your Good Mountain? Is it very wet...?"

She shook her head. "Not particularly. That country is very flat and very boring. And beneath the surface, the wood is exceptionally dry."

"Why?"

"Because the island on the surface can't reach the Ocean any more." Do-ane pushed her tiny hand beneath the other, as an illustration. "I think I mentioned: There's a second island resting under it, thick and solid, blocking almost every root."

"That's your Mountain? The underneath island?"

She hesitated, making some kind of delicate calculation. Then she looked out the

window again, saying, “No,” in the tone people use when they want to say a good deal

Jopale waited. Then he said, “Tell me more.”

She squinted, saying nothing.

“About your undersea mountain,” he coaxed. “What do you do down there?”

“Research,” she allowed.

“In biology?” he asked. And when she didn’t respond, he offered a mild lie. “I was once an avid biology student. Some years ago now.”

Do-ane glanced at the passengers. Rit was sleeping. None of the others were paying attention to the two of them. Yet the young woman whispered so softly that Jopale could barely hear her words. “No,” she said. “It’s not really biology that I’m studying, no.”

“Not really?” he pushed.

She wasn’t supposed to speak, but she also wanted to explain herself. With a slender smile, she said, “I can’t.”

“I don’t mean to interrogate,” he lied.

The young woman’s life was wrapped around her work. It showed in her face, her manners. In her anxious, joyful silence.

“Forget it,” he muttered. An enormous fungus stood beside the trail—a pillar topped with fruiting bodies that bled a bright purple light. It was a common species whose name he had already forgotten. Staring at that apparition of rot and death, Jopale remarked with the coldest possible voice, “It’s not as if the world is going to end soon.”

“But it won’t end,” Do-ane said.

He gave a little sniff, and that’s when he discovered that he was crying. It was the most honest of manipulative gesture Jopale might have attempted and would have failed at. But his tears were as honest as anything he had ever done, a fabulous pain hiding inside him, any emotion good enough to make it surge into public view.

“This disaster has happened before,” the young woman promised.

“So I’ve heard.”

“But it’s true. A new continent always grows on the sunlit face of the world. The w

below is always choked of its free oxygen. Old wood compresses and shatters, and the methane rises up through the fissures and holes.”

“What about wildfires?” he asked.

“There have been big fires before.” She smiled to herself, betraying a deep fascination, as if describing an enjoyable novel full of fictional tragedies. Then she added, “These world-consuming fires have come seventeen other times.”

Not sixteen times, or fifty thousand.

Jopale invested several long minutes contemplating her precision. Then he asked, “How do you know that? An exact number?”

“I can’t,” she said.

“You can’t tell me?”

“No.”

He stared at her face, letting his own anger bubble up. “This place where you’re going,” he started to ask. “This peculiar mountain... ?”

“Yes?”

“Your colleagues, those scientists who discovered the feature... I don’t think they used the old word ‘mountain’ because it reaches in any particular direction. Toward the center or toward the world’s core, either.”

Do-ane avoided his weepy eyes.

“My guess? The object was named for its composition. That’s another quality inherent in the word. The mythical mountain is supposed to be harder and far more enduring than any wood. Am I right?”

The young woman was standing on her stocking feet, staring through the window again. The Tanglelands were beginning to thin out and turn flat, stretches of empty dead ground between the occasional giant fungi. Now the brightest stars were visible through the window, twinkling and jumping as the worm slid along. Do-ane was standing close enough to Jopale to touch him, and she was taking quick shallow breaths, her face growing brighter even as the empty land around them turned blacker.

Jopale held his breath.

Then very quietly, his companion said, “The great fire,” and touched the plastic of the window with the tips of two fingers.

Do-ane announced, “It is coming...!”

\* \* \* \*

## THE HEART OF THINGS

When a worm like theirs was a baby, it was abused in the most awful ways—or so it might seem to somebody who didn’t concern himself with the rough necessities of the world. Stolen from its mother, the newborn creature was cut through in several places and the wounds were kept open until they became permanent holes, ready for the first in a series of increasingly large sphincters. Then its diet was strictly controlled while professional handlers assessed its tendencies and potential uses. Intelligent and mild-tempered worms were given over to passenger duties. Many of the candidates didn’t survive the conditioning of their digestive tracts or the additional surgeries. Among the alterations, inflatable bladders were inserted into the region directly behind the head, producing a series of permanent cavities where individual caretakers could live, each fitting with a rubber doorway leading into a narrow, astonishingly dry esophagus.

Jopale stood beneath a glow-light, shouting Brace’s name. A voice called back to him. A few moments later, the old caretaker stepped from inside one of the little rooms, wiping his sleepy face while asking what was wrong.

With words and manic gestures, Jopale explained the situation.

For an instant, the caretaker didn’t believe him. The weathered face looked doubtful and the pursed lips seemed ready to downplay what he was being told. But then one of the worm’s drivers ran down the narrow esophagus, shouting the same essential news.

“Where are we now?” the caretaker asked her.

The woman offered a number and letter designation that might as well have been another language.

But the old man instantly absorbed the knowledge. “We’ll stop at Kings Crossing,” he ordered. “The station’s gone, but the ground is up on the last ridge. We’ll be able to see what bad things are. And any good news too.”

Jopale couldn’t imagine anything good.

Then the caretaker turned to him, saying, “Sir,” with a firm tone. “I need to know. Did the other passengers noticed?”

“Just one. The girl—“

The caretaker hesitated for a moment. Then he said, “Say nothing. I’ll see if I can raise some voices on the radiophone, get the latest news... and then I’ll walk through the belly and offer a few words...”

Brace’s voice fell away. What kind of encouragement could he offer anyone now?

There was tense silence, then a deep slow rumbling. The sound that came and then came again, making the great throat shiver.

“What is that?” Jopale had to ask.

“That would be the worm’s heart,” the caretaker offered. He tilted his head and held his breath, listening carefully. “And you can hear her lungs working too. Which is why we’re up here, sir. So we can keep tabs on our baby.”

Jopale nodded.

Then the caretaker touched the rough pink wall, and the driver did the same, both using that pause to fight back their own tears.

\* \* \* \*

Do-ane had abandoned the window, sitting alone on her blanket, using her electric torch to read her book. Everyone else was sitting too, including Rit. The old map was unfolded before him. Glancing up, he said nothing to Jopale. Then he looked down again, asking the map, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Jopale lied, as a reflex.

The tall man glanced at Do-ane, and with the heightened senses of a paranoid, he announced, “Something is wrong.”

She started to look at the window, then stopped herself.

But Rit noticed. He decided to take his own look, pulling his long legs under his body, taking a deep breath, and another. But there wasn’t enough courage inside him to start. His legs stretched out again, and a long hand wiped his mouth dry, and then he carefully fixed his eyes on the old map, nourishing his own faltering sense of ignorance.

“Did you tell?” Do-ane whispered, closing the book on her thumb.

Jopale nodded.

She stared at his face, his eyes. Something about her expression was new—a h stare meant to reach down to his soul, seemingly. Then she made her decision, whate that might be. Opening the book again, she flipped through pages until she found wha wanted. Placing her back to Rit, she pushed the book toward Jopale and handed him torch, giving his face one last study, just to convince herself that her feelings were righ

The page was blank.

No, it unfolded. Jopale found a corner bent up by use, and he lifted the slick pap and gave the book a quarter turn, an elaborate drawing showing what looked to be the configuration for some type of worm.

“Is it—?” he began.

“The mountain,” she interrupted, fingers held to her mouth.

Rit seemed to notice nothing. No one was paying attention to the two of them. Th wealthy old woman who had complained at World’s End was making her male compar look out the window. But she only wanted to know what was approaching, and he only looked ahead, reporting with a matter-of-fact voice, “There’s some long slope. And tha I can tell.”

Was the mountain a worm? Jopale wondered.

He returned to the diagram, finding a scale that gave him a sense of size. But su there was a mistake here. Even if the scale were wrong by a factor of ten, this worm w be larger than a dozen rust-fins set in a row. And if the scale were right, then the moun would dwarf a hundred and twenty full-grown rust-fins... making it larger than most citie wouldn’t it... ?

He looked up. “Is it alive?” he whispered.

Do-ane had no simple answer for that. She shrugged and said, “It isn’t now,” in a voice. And then even softer, she said, “Look again.”

He was no expert about worms. But he knew enough to tell that the mountain sha little with the creatures he had grown up with. Its mouth was enormous but without true forming a perfect circle from which every tooth had been removed. The throat was stra and wide, and then like a funnel, it collapsed on itself, becoming too tiny to show on th diagram. The anus was equally tiny, opening at the very tip of the tail. And between mo and anus was a digestive tract that filled only a portion of the worm’s enormous body.



“What are these?” he asked.

She touched the lines and the spaces within them, saying, “Chambers. Cavities. Rooms, of a kind.”

He didn’t understand. “How could a creature survive this much surgery?” he asked. And when she didn’t answer, he looked up, realizing, “But this isn’t any species of worm, is it?”

She mouthed the word, “No.”

“It is a machine,” he muttered.

She tilted her head, as if to say, “Maybe.”

“Or is it alive?”

“Not now, no. Not anymore. We think.”

The worm carrying them was attacking the last long slope, slowing as it crawled higher. Another person stood to look outside. But he was on the north side of the worm, from that angle, nothing was visible behind them.

“The tail and some of the midsection cavities are flooded,” Do-ane told him.

Those were drawn with blue ink.

He asked, “Is the tail the deepest part?”

She nodded.

“And the mouth?”

“Buried inside a fossil island,” she reported.

“Choked while eating its lunch?” He meant it as a joke, forcing himself to laugh.

But Do-ane just shook her head. “We don’t know what it ate in life,” she reported. “This organism, this machine... whatever it was... it probably required more energy than could ever pull out of wood pulp and stolen sap.”

Jopale closed the book and turned it in his hands, examining the binding. But there was nothing to read except a cryptic “Notes” followed by a date from several years earlier.

“What I am,” Do-ane began.

He reopened the book and unfolded the diagram again. “What are you?”

“In the sciences, I have no specialty.” She smiled, proud to say it. “I belong to a special project. A confidential research project, you see. My colleagues and I are training every discipline. The hope is... was... that we could piece together what this thing might be...”

“It’s metal,” Jopale guessed.

“Within its body,” she said, “we have found more iron and copper and zinc than all the peoples of the world have gathered. Plus there’s gold and silver, and elements too unusual to have common names.”

Jopale wanted to turn through the pages, but he still couldn’t make sense of this.

“Yet the body is composed mostly of other substances,” she continued. “Plastic compounds that look plastic. Ceramic materials. And lining the mouth and what seems like the power plant... well, there are things too strong to cut samples from, which means we can’t even test them in any useful fashion...”

“And what are you?” he asked again.

“One member of a large, secret team trying to make sense of this.” She showed a grim smile, adding, “I’m just a novice still. Some of us have worked forty years on this project.”

“And have you learned anything?”

A hopeful expression passed across her face. But again, they had reached a juncture where Do-ane didn’t want to say anything more. Jopale sensed that she’d already told too much. That they were pushing into codes and laws that had to be obeyed, even when Catastrophe walked across their world.

Again, their worm was slowing.

Passengers noticed, and in a moment, they grew uneasy.

“Where?” Jopale asked.

Do-ane ran a finger over the giant mouth. “What are you asking?”

“Its origin,” he said. “Do you know that much?”

“Guess,” she whispered.

He could see only two possibilities. “It comes from the world’s center,” he offered. “There are metals down there. I remember that much from school. Deep inside the world, temperatures and chemistries are too strange for us to even imagine.”

“What’s the second possibility?”

He remembered what she had said earlier. “Our Ocean,” she mentioned, as if there could be more than one. Then he pointed at the sky.

“In my little profession,” she sighed, “those are the two islands of opinion. I’m on one, and the other-world people, and I believe that this object is a kind of ship meant to cross from star to star.”

Jopale closed the book and pushed it back to her.

By then, their worm had pulled to a stop, and the passengers were looking at each other, plainly wondering what was happening. But Master Brace was absent, probably listening to the radiophone. Which was why Jopale took it upon himself to stand and speak to the others, “This is Kings Crossing.”

Rit pulled the map to his face, asking, “Why here?”

Like any good caretaker, Jopale managed to smile. But he couldn’t maintain the smile past that point. Shaking his head and looking at the warm damp floor, he reminded everyone, “We’re alive still.” And then he started marching toward the still-closed sphincter.

\* \* \* \*

## **FIRE**

The night air was cool and dry, and it blew softly toward the east—a breeze at this moment but gaining strength and urgency with the passage of time. Years ago, a tidy little city had grown up on this ridge, but then the sun vanished, and the city had died. Homes and streets quickly became piles of anonymous rubble. But the worm station must have survived for many more years. The facility was only recently stripped of its metal, but otherwise it had been intact. Only a few saprophytic weeds were rooted in the softest planks, while the damp walls of the main building were painted with a rough fungus. Regardless of color, every surface glowed with a steady red light. Jopale read **KINGS CROSSING** on the greeting arch, painted in a flowing script that was popular back when he was a child. Behind him, the passengers were slowly stepping onto the platform, talking in breathless whispers. He could not hear their words so much as he listened to the terror in their voices, and Jopale did not

for the moment but stare at the planks beneath his feet and at his own trembling hands when he felt ready—when no other choice seemed left for him—he forced himself to turn and turn around, staring wide-eyed at the burning world.

Jopale once toured a factory where precious iron was melted inside furnaces built from equally precious ceramic bricks. He remembered watching the red-hot liquid being poured into thin syrupy ribbons that were quickly attacked by the artisans in charge. He decided that this wildfire possessed the same fierce, unworldly glow. It was crimson and brilliant enough to make eyes tear up, and it seemed as if some wickedly powerful artisan inspired by his malevolent urges, must have pulled molten metal across the entire eastern horizon.

Every passenger had left the confines of the worm. Most of the caretakers were breaking into a nearby warehouse, presumably under orders to claim any useful supplies. “How far away is that?” a young fellow asked. Jopale couldn’t gauge distances, but others gladly threw out numbers. Optimists claimed the fire was just a few kilometers behind them and it was really quite small. While Rit admitted that the flames were enormous, but trying to be positive, he thought they might be as far away as World’s Edge.

“Oh, it’s closer than that,” the old caretaker called out. “As we stand here, Left-o is being incinerated.”

With a haughty tone, Rit asked, “And you know that how?”

Swollen eyes studied the horizon. Master Brace had been crying again. But he had dried his face before joining the others, and he managed to keep his voice steady and clear. “I was listening to broadcasts, where I could find them. From spotters near the fault lines, mostly.”

Every face was sorry and scared.

“That quake we felt? As we were crawling out of World’s Edge?” Brace shook his head, telling them, “That was an old seam south and east of the city. It split wide, along a hundred kilometer line. I didn’t know this till now... but so much gas came from that rupture emergency crews didn’t have time to dress. They were killed, mostly. And the methane was bubbling out. For a full cycle, it was mixing with the air. Then something... a person, or maybe lightning from a thunderstorm... made the spark that set the whole damn mess on fire.”

“What happened to the city?” Jopale asked.

Brace glanced at him for a moment, then stared at the planks. “I talked to a spotter. She’s riding her balloon east of World’s Edge. The city’s gone now, she says. Including the ground it was sitting on. From where she is, she sees open water where millions of people

should be..."

"Open water?" Rit asked. "Does that mean the fire is going out?"

Brace hesitated.

Do-ane said, "No." The woman looked tiny and exceptionally young, her boots b on her feet but still needing to be buttoned. Clearing her throat, she explained, "If too methane saturates the atmosphere, Good Mountain and the local oxygen is exhausted pushed aside... there can't be any fire..."

Jopale closed his eyes, seeing the beautiful station and the black-haired woman that lovely, lost voice.

Brace nodded, saying, "There's two fire lines now. One's racing east, the other v In the middle, the water's bubbling up so hard, huge chunks of rotten wood are being t up in the air. So the methane... it's still coming, yes sir. And the spotter told me that ou fire... the one that's chasing us... it just now reached to the fringes of the Tanglelands then I lost her signal..."

Some people wept; others appeared too numb or tired to react at all.

Two drivers were standing near the worm's head. One of them suddenly called o few words, her voice barely legible.

The other caretakers had vanished inside an unlit warehouse.

Master Brace turned to the drivers. "The full dose, yes," he shouted. "Under the vestigial arm."

"But the flames don't look that tall," said the wealthy woman. She shook her head refusing to accept their awful prospects. To her companion, she said, "Perhaps the fire burning off the forests."

Her young man muttered a few agreeable words.

But Do-ane said, "No, you're confused. It's the smoke that fools you."

"Pardon me, miss?"

"That land is definitely burning," she said. "Huge volumes of green wood are bei turned to smoke and ash, which help hide the tops of the flames. And of course that scorching heat will lift everything." She pointed at the sky, asking, "Can you see what I

Jopale hadn't noticed. But the eastern half of the sky had no stars, a dense black set over the dying world. Flood this landscape with daylight, and half of the heavens would be choked beneath a foul mass of boiling, poisonous clouds.

"Are you certain?" the old woman asked doubtfully. "What do you know about all this?"

Do-ane hesitated.

"The girl's a scientist," Rit interjected. "She understands everything that's happened to us."

"Is that so, miss?"

Do-ane glanced at Jopale, eyes narrowed, as if blaming him for making public what she had told him in the strictest confidence.

But he hadn't said one word.

"She and her friend here thought that I was napping," Rit confessed. "But I wasn't. I heard every word they said."

Do-ane looked embarrassed, shrinking a little bit, and her tiny hands nervously wrestled with one another.

Jopale tried to find a reply—gentle words to help deflate the palpable tension. But then a hard prolonged shock came through the ground, everybody's legs bending, and the land beneath them fell several meters in one steady, terrifying moment.

When the falling sensation ended, the old woman asked Do-ane, "Would you explain that, dear? What just happened?"

"This ridge," Do-ane began, opening her hands again. "We're standing on the largest slab of the Tanglelands. It's the largest slab, and it reaches back to the east, deep underwater, ending up under Left-of-Left." Like a teacher, she used hands to help explain. "As the ground above is burned away, and as methane rushes to the open surface, the land's foundation is being torn loose."

As if to prove her words, the ridge shook again.

Jopale looked over his shoulder, but Master Brace had slipped away. He was standing beside the worm, he and the two drivers busily manipulating a leather sack filled with some kind of dense liquid. The sack was connected to a hose, and the hose fitted with a needle large enough to push through two grown men. The trio was having trouble with

work, and noticing Jopale, the caretaker cried out, “Sir, would you help us? Just for a moment. She knows we’re up to something, and she isn’t cooperating.”

The others glanced at Jopale, surprised he would be called, and perhaps a little impressed.

The worm had stopped against the trail’s closer edge. But there were still a few feet of greased ground to cross. Generations of worms had laid down this thick impermeable oil—the same white gunk that its wild counterparts used to lubricate their enormous tunnels. On soft-soled shoes, Jopale let himself slide down to the creature. He hadn’t touched a worm since he was a boy, and he didn’t relish touching one now. He could smell oil and worm sweat—a rich mingling of distinct odors—and he looked up at the vestigial limb, crooked and thin and held flat against the huge gray body.

“Take this extra wand, sir,” said Brace. “Like I’m doing. Just stroke her belly, if you will.”

The rubber wand ended with a metal electrode, batteries strapped to a spicewood handle. The drivers had set a tall ladder beside the worm, spikes driven through the oil into the ground. The woman driver climbed quickly and her colleague followed—a boy and a fellow carrying the enormous needle as if it was a spear. The ladder was topped by a narrow platform. The woman grabbed the limb and pulled hard, and Brace ran his wand back and forth against the worm’s slick belly, small blue flashes producing what must be a pleasurable tingle.

The woman forced the limb to extend.

“Why there?” Jopale asked, mimicking the old man’s motions.

“It’s a good blood-rich site,” he said quickly, as if speaking one long word. “And besides, there’s no time to open the usual veins.”

The other passengers had come to watch and listen. Except for Do-ane, who drove to the far end of the platform, studying her magnificent fire.

“Is this a drug?” Jopale wanted to know.

“I like the word ‘medicine,’ “ the caretaker admitted. Patting the sack, he said, “We keep this stuff for drivers more than for the worm. Of course, there’s enough in this sack to kill a thousand people. But what it is—“

Somebody cursed, and a second voice shouted, “Watch out!”

The long needle fell between Jopale and Brace, landing flat on the oil.

“It’s a stimulant, sir.” The caretaker picked up the needle, and with a quick voice explained, “It will make our girl faster, and she won’t need sleep, and it may well kill her of course, we don’t have any choice now.”

“I suppose—“

“Two more favors, sir. Please?”

“Yes.”

“Take the needle up. All right?” Then he asked for a second favor; promising, “It should help quite a lot.”

Jopale had never enjoyed heights, but he didn’t hesitate. There were twenty rungs to manage, and the breeze seemed to grow stronger as he climbed higher. Over his shoulder he saw the rest of the crew returning from the warehouse, nothing worth stealing in their hands. Then Jopale was standing on the narrow platform, and the driver had the vestigial limb extended as far as she could, and her assistant took the needle with both hands, starting to jab its tip into the exposed flesh while shouting, “Now!”

A tiny pump began to sing.

“The hand, sir,” Brace called out. “Please, sir.”

The worm’s arm was tiny compared to its enormous body, but it was far longer than any human limb. Perched on the end of it were three fingers fused into a knobby extrusion and a stiff little finger beside it. And there was a thumb, too. Not every worm possessed thumbs; Jopale had read that odd fact once or twice. And more unusual, this particular thumb could move, at least well enough to curl around his hands as he clasped hold of the worm. Then he squeezed its hand as tight as he could, trying to make certain that his grip was noticed, letting the great beast feel a little more ease, at least until the medicine found its home.

\* \* \* \*

## WORMS

Then they were moving again. The pace felt swift, but the worm was sliding down a considerable slope. Without landmarks, the casual eye had trouble discerning their true speed. But later, when they were crossing a flat empty plain, Jopale was sure they were making swift progress. Wandering up into the throat again, he listened to the hard swift beating of the heart, and he was sure that, whatever else, the creature’s body was expending a fabulous amount of energy.



Returning to the stomach, he found every passenger gathered around Do-ane. “Show us that book of yours,” Rit was saying. “Show us your machine.”

“We’re very interested,” said the rich woman’s companion. Then with a wink, he asked, “What harm would it do?”

People were scared and miserable and desperate for any distraction.

Jopale sat next to Do-ane.

She seemed to consider the possibilities. Then she said, “Here,” and opened the book to a fresh page—a page showing photographs of giant chambers and smooth-walled tunnels. Holding her torch above, she explained what she had already told Jopale, and a little more. “We think these were living quarters. It’s hard to realize how big everything is. This is a colleague of mine, here, standing in the background...”

The scientist was little more than a dot on the grayish landscape.

“If this machine was a ship that traveled between the stars, as some believe... a few believe... then its engines would have produced an acceleration, and this would have tilted the floor.” She pulled a fond finger over the image. “This was taken ten years ago. Do you see the dirt in the corner?”

Some people nodded, but those in the back could see nothing.

Do-ane turned the page. The next image was a large black-and-white photograph showing a skull and ribs and a very long backbone that had curled up in death. The earthling colleague was present again, standing on the giant skull. And again, he was still little more than a dot on this bizarre landscape.

“That’s a dead worm,” Jopale whispered.

Do-ane glanced at him, then at the others.

“This machine came from another star,” Rit said, repeating her verdict.

“Yes,” she said.

“A spaceship, you’re saying?”

“It seems obvious—“

“And that’s where our worms came from, too?” The tall man was kneeling on the

other side of her, his expression doubtful but focused. "They came from this spacesh  
yours?"

Do-ane said, "Yes."

Then she said, "No."

"Which is it?" Rit demanded.

The young woman sighed. And then a second time, she sighed. Finally she look  
up, telling everyone, "Suppose that we built a starship, and we went out hunting for a n  
home. Even a machine as powerful as this needs a great deal of time to cross from o  
to the next. And if that new sun didn't happen to have an inviting world, we'd have to tra  
farther. And if that next sun didn't offer a home, then we would have to travel farther sti  
if we could never find a planet like our old home, at some point, wouldn't we have to m  
do with the best world that was in reach?"

Jopale tried to study the worm's skeleton.

"I don't know any of this as fact," she said. "But we've learned this much. This  
starship's crew was nothing like us. Not like people, or anything simply organic." She ra  
finger along the edge of the fossil skull. "What looks like bone is not. It's ceramic and  
tough, ancient beyond anything we can measure. And what organs we find aren't livers  
hearts or lungs. They're machines, and we can't even begin to decipher how they migh  
functioned when they were slipped inside a living body."

Rit started to make a comment, then thought better of it.

"These creatures were built from metals and ceramics, plus rare earth elements  
exist to us only in the tiniest amounts. Scarce beyond measure. But if you look deeper  
the galaxy, into the spiral arms, you see suns with more metals than our sun has. And  
presumably, the worlds circling them are built from similar bones."

She breathed, breathed again.

"Our sun, you see... it is very large and bright, and it is metal poor and rather you  
By many measures, it won't live long at all. Less than a billion years, which is a short tim  
the universe." She lifted her torch higher, allowing more people to see the bizarre ske  
don't know any of this for sure. I'm telling you a story, and maybe it's all wrong. But wh  
think happened... what many of my colleagues, the true geniuses in this endeavor, fee  
self-evident... is that this starship journeyed all the way to our world and could go no fa  
It landed on the Ocean and tasted the water, tasted the air, and its crew took what they  
in reach. Metals were scarce, as were silicon and all the other heavy elements. But at l  
they could borrow the oldest genetics inside their own bodies. To build a full functionin

ecosystem, they wove a thousand new species. Humans. Mockmen. Copper-eels and many-mouths. Plus all the little scramblers. And they used the other species that were brought with them. We've found spores and dead seeds on the ship, so we're sure that ancestors brought plants with them. They devised giant plants that could thrive on the Ocean's surface, roots reaching deep to bring up the scarce minerals. And think of our forest roaches, too. We have found little versions of them dead in the ship's darkest corners, hiding in the cracks. Incredible as it sounds, perhaps they rode here as pests."

"But where are the human bones?" Jopale asked.

She looked at him, her face sad for a brief moment, but then drifting into a cautious amusement.

"I mean the crew that piloted this starship," Jopale continued. "What finally happened to them?"

Judging by the murmurs, others had made the same obvious assumption.

Do-ane shook her head. Then she said, "No," with a grim finality. "Think if you can in these terms: You fly from star to star. Your body is as much a machine as it is flesh. And everything you need comes to you with the help of your loyal machinery. With that kind of freedom, you can acquire any shape that you wish. Which is why you might allow yourself to grow smaller with the eons, and why you perhaps would decide, finally, to let yourself become a worm.

"Assuming that we began as human beings, of course. Or something that resembled humans, back on that other world of ours. "This lost, unnamable home."

\* \* \* \*

## **GOOD MOUNTAIN**

Caretakers began to hurry through the stomach, in twos and threes, carrying buckets of salve and sacks of buffering agents back into the now-empty intestines. Jopale guessed what this meant, and he felt sure when another pair of caretakers arrived, hurriedly dismantling the latrine and its privacy curtain. But where would the worm's next meal come from, and how much time would they spend waiting for her to eat her fill?

Capping the nearly filled latrine, the caretakers began wrestling it towards the esophagus. That was when Jopale decided to confront them, and that was when Master Brace finally reappeared.

The old caretaker wore a grimacing smile. He tried to wink at Jopale, and then he noticed Do-ane sitting among the passengers, flipping from page to page in her enormous

book.

“Are we stopping now?” Jopale asked.

Brace nodded. With a distracted voice, he said, “There’s an emergency locker up ahead. Always stocked with knuckle-roots and barrels of sap. Or at least it’s supposed to be stocked.”

His voice fell away.

“How long will this take?” Jopale wanted to know.

Brace heard something in his tone. Speaking with absolute surety, he admitted, “The girl needs food. Badly. If we don’t give her sugar, we won’t make it off this wasteland. Not.”

Jopale nodded. “All right. I see.”

“Good Mountain,” said the caretaker. “That’s where we’re stopping.”

A dozen faces looked up.

Realizing that he had been noticed, Brace straightened his back and took a deep breath. Then without hesitation, he said, “Everyone will disembark. The feeding will begin as fast as possible. And from this point, everyone rides on top of the worm. Up where the mockmen are sitting now.”

The old woman bristled. “But where will my mockmen ride?”

“They will not, madam.” With squared shoulders, the caretaker faced the spoiled creature, explaining to her and to everyone, “This is an emergency situation, if ever there was. And I’m using the powers of my office, madam. Do not try to stop me.”

The woman shrank a little bit.

But her companion, smelling his duty, climbed to his feet. “We can’t just leave the creatures behind,” he argued.

Brace smiled. Then he laughed, quietly and with considerable relish. And he opened his arms while gesturing at the surrounding stomach, admitting, “Oh, I don’t intend to let them. Not at all.”

\* \* \* \*

There was no station at Good Mountain, abandoned or otherwise. There wasn't even an auxiliary trail for a worm to pull to one side. But the foundations for homes were visible markings lain out to define a network of streets. The only signs of recent habitation were a promised locker—an underground facility little bigger than a worm's stomach—and standing to the north, a beacon tower built of wood and capped with an enormous bone-lined bowl. A reservoir of fats and cured sap was burning slowly, yellow flames swirling with the wind. Other times, this would have been the brightest light for a hundred kilometers—a navigational point to help any lost souls. But the firestorm to the east made the fire seem quite weak. Against that rushing, sizzling wall of scorching fire and vaporized wood, everything about the world seemed small and feeble.

The wind was blowing harder now, and with it came a chill from the west, causing Jopale to shiver.

Caretakers worked frantically, breaking open the locker, rolling barrel after barrel onto the trail directly in front of the worm. And other caretakers ordered the mockmen off the worm's back, gathering them together on the dusty, dry ground, loud voices warning them not to take another step.

Jopale thought he could hear the firestorm, even though it was still ten or twenty kilometers behind them.

It sounded like water, oddly enough. Like a strong current flowing over a brink, the water falling fast.

Do-ane appeared suddenly, almost close enough to touch him. Her boots were buttoned. Her book was cradled under one arm. She studied his face for a moment. Then she regarded the firestorm with the same speculative intensity. And finally, she said to Jopale, "Come with me."

He wasn't surprised. For a long while now, he had imagined this invitation and his response. But what startled him was his own reaction, feeling decidedly unsure about what to do.

"My colleagues are there now," she continued, pointing at the still-distant tower. "Behind the beacon is a little hut, and there's a shaft and elevator that will drop us all the way to the starship—"

"What about me?" Rit interrupted.

Do-ane gave him a moment's glance. She seemed unprepared for his entirely natural question.

"Your starship is huge," Rit reminded her. "Huge and empty. Don't you think your

friends would welcome me, too?”

She tried to speak.

Then the old wealthy woman stepped forward. “There isn’t much time, miss. Why this sanctuary of yours—?”

“Beyond that tower,” Rit offered.

“Thank you.” Then to her companion, she said, “Help me, will you dear? I’m not can manage such a long walk.”

Her young man was holding their essential bags, a faint smile showing as he started off to the north. With an agreeable tone, he said, “I’m sure you’ll do fine.” Then he winked, adding, “Start right away. As fast as you can.” And with the strength of youth, he ran off into the ruddy gloom, dropping his bags and hers in his wake.

Other passengers began to follow him.

“Well,” the old woman muttered. Then with a shuffling gait, she tried to keep up.

Rit glared at Do-ane. Appalled by the circumstances, he asked, “So just how big is this elevator? And how fast? And will it take all of us at once?”

She tried to answer, but her voice kept failing her.

Rit looked back at the worm, then focused on the tower.

“Where are you going?” Master Brace hollered. He was still up near the worm’s mouth, but moving toward them as fast as he could manage. “What are you people doing? What in the hell are you thinking?”

Do-ane saw him coming. Then she threw down everything but her precious book. Glancing at Jopale one last time, she turned and sprinted across the empty plain.

Rit considered Jopale, plainly doubting his good sense and sanity. Then he was gone, too, his long stride letting him catch up to Do-ane, then the old woman, leaving him behind.

“Sir,” said Brace, staggering up next to Jopale.

He would say his good-byes; then he would run too. Jopale had made up his mind, so he believed.

“Don’t,” was the caretaker’s advice.

“Don’t what?” Jopale asked.

Brace took him by the shoulder. Panting from his run, he said, “I like you, sir. And I honestly meant to warn you before now.”

“Warn me?”

“And then... then I saw the girl talking to everybody, and I didn’t think... I couldn’t imagine... that all of you would actually believe her-”

“What is this?” Jopale cried out.

“She’s ridden my worm in the past, sir.” Brace looked across the plain. The fire to the east was tall enough and bright enough to illuminate each of the fleeing passengers. The night was now. Frantic little shapes soon to be lost against that great expanse of dead dry wood.

“I know she’s ridden this way,” Jopale said. “Of course she has. She comes here to study the secret mountain.”

Brace shook his head.

“No, sir,” he said.

Then he looked Jopale in the eye, saying, “She does this. She has that book of secrets and she befriends a man... usually an older man... convincing him that everything she says is real. Then she steps off at this place and invites him to join her adventure, and of course any man would happily walk off with a pretty young thing like that.

“But she is insane, sir. I am sure.

“On my worm, she has ridden west at least five times now. And three times, she has set off a flare to make us stop here and pick her up on our eastbound leg.” He gulped a breath of cool air. “That’s what people do in this country when there is no station, sir.” Offering a nervous smile, he added, “But sometimes we haven’t brought her, and it’s her men who set off the flares. We’ve rescued several gentlemen of your age and bearing, and they’re always saying, ‘She showed me this big book,’ they’ll say. They’ll say, ‘I was going to explore an ancient starship and look at the bones of gods.’”

Jopale wrapped his arms around his chest, moaning softly.

“That girl is quite crazy, sir. And that’s all she is.” Brace placed a comforting hand upon Jopale’s shoulder. “She takes her men walking in the darkness. She keeps telling

them that their destination is just a little further now. But there's nothing to find out there. Even the most foolish man figures that out. And do you know what she does? At some point she'll turn and tell him, 'You are the problem. You don't believe, so of course we can't

"Then those fellows return here and continue their journey west. And she wanders a little while, then comes and waits here for the next eastbound worm. Somehow she always has money. Her life is spent riding worms and reading her book, and when she forgets that nothing on those pages is real, she comes back this way again. And that's all that she does in her life, from what I can tell."

Jopale was confused, and he had never been so angry. But somehow none of that was a perfect surprise.

"I should have said something," Brace admitted. "In my baby's stomach, when I started her talking to everybody..."

"Should we chase after them?" Jopale asked.

But the caretaker could only shake his head, telling him, "There isn't time, sir. And honestly, I don't think we could make those people listen to reason now. They're chasing us. We only hope they've got left."

"But we should try to do what's right," Jopale maintained. "Perhaps we can convince one or two of them to turn back—"

"Sir," Brace interrupted.

Then the old fellow laughed at him.

"I don't know if you've noticed this, sir. But there is an exceptionally good chance that we ourselves won't be alive for much longer."

Again, Jopale heard the soft watery rumbling of the fire.

"Yes. Of course..."

\* \* \* \*

## **TOWARD PORT OF KRAUSS**

Brace began walking toward the worm's head.

The worm was slowly crawling forward, gulping down the big sweet barrels as she moved. Farther ahead, several dozen mockmen were being coaxed down onto the tra



distance, they looked entirely human. They seemed small and plainly scared, clinging to each other while their bare feet slipped on the white grease.

Jopale caught Brace, and before he lost his own scarce courage, he made an enormous request.

“I know it’s asking a lot,” he admitted.

“That won’t make much difference,” the old man said, offering a dark little laugh. He paused and cupped his hands around his mouth, shouting new orders into the wind.

The red-haired female was separated from the other mockmen.

Jopale rejoined his companion, and the two of them grabbed his bags and then the rope ladder, climbing onto the worm’s wide back.

Without prompting, the mockman claimed one of the low chairs, facing forward, her long legs stretched out before her. If the creature was grateful, it didn’t show on her stony face. Either she was too stupid to understand what he had done, or she was perceptive enough to despise him for saving only her, leaving her friends to their gruesome fate.

The worm’s bare flesh was warm to the touch. Jopale sat directly behind his mockman, letting her bulk block the wind. He could feel the great spine shifting beneath her rump. Facing backwards, he didn’t watch the rest of the feeding, and save for a few muddled screams, he heard nothing. Then the worm began to accelerate, drawing her to one meal lending her phenomenal energy. And after a little while, when they were racing across the empty landscape, Master Brace came and sat beside him.

“But the book,” Jopale began.

“It certainly looks real enough,” the old man replied, guessing his mind. “And maybe it is genuine. Maybe she stole it from a true scientist who actually knows where the stars are buried. Or maybe it’s an ancient manuscript, and there was once a starship... but the ship sank to the core ages ago, and some curious fluke has placed it in her strange hands.”

“Or she invented everything,” Jopale allowed.

“Perhaps.” Watching the firestorm, Brace nodded. “Perhaps the girl heard a story about space flight and lost worlds, and she has a talent that lets her draw elaborate diagrams and play games with cameras. And these times are what made her insane. The terrors and wild hopes tell her that everything she can dream up is real. Perhaps.”

Or she was perfectly rational, Jopale thought, and the starship really was waiting there. Somewhere. While Brace was the creature whose sanity had been discarded a

the way, his mind lying to both of them, forcing them to stay onboard his treasured worm

Good Mountain

“But the name,” Jopale muttered.

“Sir?”

“‘Good Mountain.’ She told me why the scientists used that old word. And honest as I am, I can’t think of another reason for placing that noble name on this ridiculous place.”

“First of all, sir—”

“Call me Jopale, please.”

“Jopale. Yes.” Brace held both of his hands against the worm’s skin, listening to the great body. “First of all, I know this country well. If there were a project here, a research station of any size, it would not be a secret from me. And I can tell you frankly, Jopale, except for that one strange girl and her misguided men, nobody comes to this wasted space...”

A small quake rolled beneath them.

When it passed, Brace suggested, “We might be in luck here, sir. Do-ane may have told you: There’s a dead island under this ground. There’s a lot of wood sitting between the methane and the ground. So when the fire gets off the Tanglelands, it should slow down. At least for a little while. This wood’s going to burn, sure, but not as fast as that damned gas does.”

Jopale tried to feel encouraged. Then he repeated the words, “‘First of all.’ “

“Sir?”

“You said, ‘First of all.’ What’s second of all?”

Master Brace nodded in a thoughtful fashion, then said, “You know, my mother was a caretaker on a worm exactly like this one. And her father was a driver on a freighter worm that crawled along this same trail, bringing the new iron back from Port of Krauss. It was my grandfather who told me that even when there was sunlight here, this was an awful place to live. Flat like this. Sapless. Hard to farm, and hard on the soul. But some greedy fellow bought this land for nothing, then sold pieces of it to people in more crowded parts of the world. He named his ground ‘Good Mountain’ because he thought the old word sounded strong and lasting. But of course, all he wanted was to lure fools into his trap...”

Jopale reached back over his head, burying one of his hands into the mockman’s

thick hair. Then he pushed with his legs, feeling a consuming need to be closer to her grinding his spine hard up against her spine.

“It’s just one old word,” Brace was saying. With his face lit up by the endless fire said, “And I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, sir. But words... what they are... they’re just sounds and scribbles, ~~people~~ people who give them meaning. Without us, the poor things wouldn’t have any life at all.”

And they pressed on, rushing toward the promised Ocean, with the End of the World following close behind.

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