

WHERE THE OCEAN MEETS THE SKY

a novel by Mark Schreiber

Author's Note

I wrote *Where the Ocean Meets the Sky* when I was seventeen. The inspiration for it came when I was crossing a quiet neighborhood street and saw an ant on the curb. I realized even this small, quiet street would be, for an ant, an adventure fraught with peril. And if the ant were a philosopher-scientist the journey would spark his curiosity and imagination.

My own imagination carried me from: Why did the ant cross the street? to: Why did the centipedes cross the ocean? I chose centipedes because they have little interaction with humans, and because there are indeed centipedes who live on the beach.

I always loved the fantasy genre, but my literary aspirations, even at age seventeen, were higher. I therefore made my centipedes conversationalists and philosophers by nature. Being a small colony that didn't breed rapidly, and having a steady food source and no natural predators on the beach, meant they had plenty of time to wonder about the world they inhabited. Also, as the battle of good vs. evil is at the heart of nearly every fantasy ever written, I decided not to include even the concept of evil in their worldview.

It was one of those books everyone liked but no one wanted to publish. The success of *Watership Down* was an exception to the rule that fantasies about animals and insects were only popular as illustrated children's books. And the literary agents who sold my later books didn't handle fantasy. So it sat on the shelf for decades, hidden like a centipede within a piece of driftwood. I publish it now as I wrote it, with only minor edits.

Part 1

“We are going to try to cross the ocean,” Banner proudly proclaimed.

The two centipedes he was addressing stared at him coldly. “What on earth for?” one of them asked.

Banner was obviously caught off guard by their shortsightedness for he took the defensive. “Why not?” he shouted back.

“Because it’s a waste of time,” the same centipede answered. “And it’s an incredibly foolish thing to want to do.”

“It is not a waste of time!” Banner retorted, no longer feeling superior. “And it’s not an incredibly foolish thing to want to do!”

“Why not?” the other centipede wondered.

Banner was stumped for a moment. He was not exceedingly bright for a centipede, but he was friendly and a good conversationalist. He had not, however, expected an argument. When Renwin had asked him to go around and gather support for their expedition he had not hinted that they might encounter resistance. Indeed, Banner was so excited with the prospect of crossing the ocean that he took it for granted his enthusiasm would be shared by the other centipedes.

“Are you blind?” Banner asked. It was a favorite insult, for many species of centipede were totally blind, and so Banner and the others prided themselves on their ability to see.

The two centipedes across from Banner did not take the insult calmly. “Blind?” they exclaimed together. And then the first one said, “It is not that we are blind. It is just that your idea is darker than the empty mind from which it came!”

“It is not my idea, Lanson,” he replied, “but Renwin’s. I could never hope to conceive such a brilliant plan.”

“So this is another one of Renwin’s schemes,” Lanson realized. “I should have known!”

“If you had any intelligence yourself you would appreciate his genius!” Banner declared defensively.

“Too bad we’re not as smart as you, eh Banner?” And the two laughed.

But Banner was undaunted and decided to attack both their pride and their curiosity. “I see your imaginations are as black as this rotting piece of driftwood in which you live. Very well,” he continued, shuffling back toward the opening, “if you are so traditional and so dense that you will not even consider an innovative new idea then I must say goodbye and look elsewhere. There are others.” His thirty-four legs took another step toward the opening.

“Wait,” Lanson called. “I might not like your plan, or rather, Renwin’s plan, but that doesn’t mean I’m not interested in your motivations. Despite what you think I am neither a traditionalist nor am I dense. I’ll hear you out.”

“What about you, Yann?” Banner asked the other centipede.

“I agree with Lanson. Let’s hear the details.”

“So why does Renwin want to cross the ocean?” Lanson asked.

“To see how far it goes, of course,” Banner replied.

“I think he just wants to satisfy his perverted pride by leading us all on an idiotic journey.”

“The journey wouldn’t be idiotic!” Banner shouted, again defending his friend’s plan. “And it has nothing to do with pride. Renwin is a genius. He works hard night and day investigating ways to improve our lives!”

“Like the time he tried to find an alternate food source?” Yann countered. “If I remember correctly he had us eating excrement as part of his dangerous and nauseous experiment. Many of us got sick.”

“How was Renwin to know it wouldn’t work? Theoretically, if our waste was made from our food then it should be reusable, shouldn’t it?”

“In theory,” Yann agreed. “But we don’t know for a fact that excrement is made up of food, it’s only a speculation. For all we know it might be just plain garbage.”

“But food is garbage!”

“So is dried, peeled skin. So are lost legs. So are a hundred other things garbage. Besides, Renwin could have experimented on himself and left us alone.”

“He did experiment on himself but his results were inconclusive. He told me he needed a cross section.”

“Just a moment,” Lanson interrupted. “We’re getting off the subject here. The point is, Renwin has steered us wrong on a number of occasions. At times his ludicrous schemes have made us uncomfortable and put us in danger.”

“But other times he’s helped us,” Banner reminded them. “Or have you forgotten that it was Renwin who conceived the theory that some life forms, perhaps those lacking antennae, speak by low frequency sound instead of communicating telepathically? A theory that has yet to be contested.”

“So what?” Lanson wondered. “He can’t be wrong all the time.”

“But I’m sure he’s right this time. Renwin convinced me that crossing the ocean would benefit us all.”

Lanson was unimpressed. “An infant cockroach could convince you not to eat him, Banner. You’re a good friend but you happen to be the most gullible centipede I know.”

“At least I’m open-minded!” Banner retorted. “At least I don’t close my eyes to a new idea before learning about its details!”

“I think we’ve learned enough about this idea to draw an intelligent conclusion,” Yann said. “As for Renwin’s motives I think he deceives you, Banner, when he tells you he wants to cross the ocean to see how far it goes. I have the feeling Renwin has his own personal reasons for wanting to embark on such a journey.”

“Of course he has personal reasons. But it’s his curiosity, Yann, and not his pride he seeks to satisfy. I assure you that he labors to enrich our lives. If you knew Renwin as I do you would not doubt his integrity as a philosopher and scientist. He’s the most modest centipede there is.”

“Ridiculous!” Yann commented.

“Even if his motives were honorable,” Lanson said, “why should we want to accompany him?”

“For the adventure,” Banner replied. “Not only will it be a chance to satisfy your curiosity about the ocean but there would be great rewards as a result of our quest.”

“I have little curiosity about the ocean,” Lanson said, “and I doubt Yann has more. And I can see no benefits that would make this worth the trouble.”

“Yes,” Yann wondered. “What would be the rewards?”

“We can only guess,” Banner replied. “We might meet up with others of our kind, we might find better homes, better food. And we will obviously learn new things from our adventure, and that is the greatest possible reward.”

“You become more like Renwin every night,” Lanson observed. “You’re even beginning to sound like him!”

“I don’t see what we could learn on the ocean that we couldn’t learn here,” Yann said.

“Lots of things,” Banner responded.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been on the ocean.”

“Then how do you know there’s anything to be learned out there?”

“I don’t. But there’s only one way to find out. We’ve got to experience it.”

“Maybe you have to, but we sure don’t,” Lanson told him.

“You’re stubborn cowards,” Banner said. “Both of you.”

“We aren’t stubborn and we aren’t cowards. We just see no reason to want to cross the ocean with you. Unlike you, Banner, Yann and I are logical and realistic.”

“If you were logical you would be open to new ideas.”

“We are open to new ideas. New good ideas. The foolish ones we can do without.”

“But this isn’t foolish!” Banner was growing weary of the argument.

“From what you’ve said so far I must draw the conclusion that crossing the ocean is a foolish scheme. Don’t you agree, Yann?”

Yann nodded his antennae to show agreement.

“Then what must I do to convince you two that it isn’t a foolish plan? If you were more familiar—”

“For one thing the motive isn’t strong enough,” Lanson interrupted. “It may be a good motive for you and Renwin but it won’t do for me. Also, I believe this adventure carries with it a high risk factor.”

“That’s what makes it an adventure!”

“Maybe so, but I won’t lose my head just because I got suddenly curious about the ocean. I’m also skeptical of following any scheme in which Renwin is involved. And it would be suicidal to join an expedition in which he is the leader.”

“How can you say that?”

“I can say that because I know how incompetent Renwin can be. When it comes to philosophizing I’ll be the first to admit he has his moments of brilliance, but he is not a practical scientist. When it comes to leading, Renwin can’t lead his own feet properly!”

“But you’ve never seen him lead an expedition. You’re merely speculating.”

“When my head’s at stake speculation is enough. Besides, I know the kind of centipede Renwin is. You just can’t depend on him. I don’t even think he depends on himself. In a given situation he might worry about an insignificant complexity while overlooking the obvious. I always say that putting a philosopher and a scientist in the same body is like mixing a bad ant and a diseased worm. It may be considered food by definition but it sure is hard to swallow. In fact, I even think Renwin is dangerous!”

Banner felt as if they were attacking him as well as his friend. “Is this what you think too, Yann? Do you think Renwin’s dangerous?”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far.”

“How far would you go?”

“You’ve got to understand, Banner, that we don’t share your desire to cross the ocean. And if we agreed to go with you we would become dependent on Renwin. Naturally, we like to avoid being dependent upon anyone, but Renwin is worse than most because he won’t trouble himself over our safety. Instead he would be watching the waves or something. He would be philosophizing and we would be screaming from the jaws of some ocean monster.”

“You’re wrong,” Banner said in reply. “I know that Renwin wouldn’t want you dependent on him for he dislikes unnecessary responsibility as much as you dislike relinquishing responsibility on others. I cannot imagine why he would want you to join him on this adventure if he knew you wouldn’t be able to care for yourselves.”

Yann was curious. "Then exactly why does Renwin want us to join him?"

"I guess you'd have to ask Renwin that. I suppose he needs help with the execution of his plans. Or maybe it's just a courtesy. All I know is that he told me it was important to get your support."

"Ours specifically? Or does he want others to join him also?"

"I'm not sure how many he wishes to take on the voyage. All he told me was to go around and explain the idea to everyone and try to get as much support as possible."

"So why doesn't he do the explaining himself?" Lanson asked. "Why send you?"

"He was busy and couldn't spare the time tonight. He said that if any problems arose he would be free tomorrow night to discuss the situation."

"How good of him," Lanson said sarcastically.

"Don't set yourself against Renwin, Lanson, if you want my advice. You might be embarrassed later on if you do."

"I doubt that. However, I suppose we have been a bit rough on Renwin tonight. Not that he doesn't deserve it for conceiving such a ludicrous scheme; but since you two are such good friends it was rude of us to insult him so much and force you to defend him."

"I hope your decision not to join us is not a final one."

"You underestimate our intelligence, Banner," Lanson said. "We are not blind to logic. It is only that I perceive no logic in Renwin's scheme."

"Don't call Renwin irrational!" Banner interrupted. "He's as logical as any of us. Only at times his work is on such a high level that we are not able to grasp its significance."

"You're really passionate about this, Banner," Yann observed. "I know you greatly respect Renwin but why are you so anxious to support him in this matter?"

“Because I’m bored with our monotonous lives on the beach, sleeping in rotting driftwood or under stones, eating the same insects! Nothing ever changes. Each night is like the night before. I need an adventure.”

“Are you prepared to die?” Yann asked.

“Die?”

“What interests me is that any centipede, let alone two centipedes, would risk their heads to cross the ocean when you can’t even see the other side!”

“If we could see the other side we wouldn’t need to cross it, would we?”

“You’ve been saying Renwin means to cross the ocean,” Yann recalled. “Is that to be taken literally? I mean does he intends to travel on the surface and not below?”

“I don’t know. Renwin hasn’t explained all the details.”

“Obviously,” Lanson said.

“But I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. Just promise you’ll listen to him tomorrow night.”

“We’ll listen. It should be entertaining.”

“One other thing interests me,” Yann remarked. “What does Renwin intend to use to get him across the ocean?”

Banner hesitated. “I don’t know,” he confessed. “Actually, I don’t think Renwin knows, either.”

The night was quiet except for the sound of the waves, which Banner's antennae heard only faintly because of their frequency. The plank of driftwood in which many of his friends lived was dry and felt slightly cold to his legs as he walked across its surface. It was peaceful here, so Banner rested patiently for several moments. He had felt angry and apprehensive before and now he needed to relax. Despite the darkness, he could sense that dawn was not far off. Just as well, he figured. I'm tired and tense and can use the rest. Banner usually slept during the daytime, as did most of the centipedes.

Banner perceived no other living creature around him. Except the centipedes in the driftwood, whom he could not see, he saw no insects or birds or people on the beach. And that, he thought, was unusual. He looked up at the sky and saw few lights there. He was also aware that there were man-made lights in the area as there were near his and Renwin's home. Making such observations took his mind off the problem of getting support for Renwin's idea. And because Banner wanted to think of other things he nostalgically recalled the time they had discovered that certain lights were man-made.

Centipedes have known for a long time, even before Banner was born, that people were mainly daytime creatures. But since the centipedes usually slept during the day they didn't get many opportunities to observe people. But one morning Deni, a female friend of Banner's, followed a group of men beyond the sand to a harder surface the centipedes had never bothered to name and saw them erecting a post with a translucent globe at the apex. She told some of the others and for two nights they speculated as to what it might be. Then one night they all went out to have a look and concluded that lights, or at least certain types of lights like these, were man-made. The only one to argue this point was Kandis, who argued that people were not intelligent and must have merely repaired the lamppost for someone else.

But if Kandis was wrong, why did the men build the light? Mint thought that people wanted a perpetual daytime. Those opposing this theory, and opposition was strong in the beginning, pointed out that the light failed to reproduce the much brighter conditions in daytime. Mint argued that this was only a beginning phase and that people would keep building lights until there was no more night. Renwin, however, felt he needed to state a theory of his own. He said that what the people were building was only a light in the secondary sense and that its main function was something altogether different from the function of ordinary lights such as those that shone in the sky. Renwin proposed that the structure, or structures—for there were many beyond the beach—were communication devices. Kandis proposed that the objects were works of art and that man was not the creator but only the custodian.

None of these theories was accepted by more than a few of the centipedes and a great controversy started as a result, which was finally ended by Yann, who proposed his own reason for the light's construction. Yann had no way to prove his theory was correct but the others believed it was logical and probable and so it was accepted. Yann's theory, which was taken from Mint's original idea, stated that people were not seeking to do away with night but rather to find a compromise between the two parts of the day. That would explain why the lights weren't everywhere and why they weren't on the beach.

These memories were clear in Banner's mind, as well as memories of many other discussions and controversies. Sometimes the controversies were humorous, or became humorous when everyone conceived his own theory and the argument got out of hand. These controversies brought the colony closer together. There were a few times, however, when such conflicts created unwanted tension and split the centipedes into rival groups. Banner realized that Renwin's desire to cross the ocean might become such a conflict.

He looked up at the sky and again reminded himself that it would soon be dawn. His original plan, or rather Renwin's, was to go out and visit a number of the centipedes, explain the idea of crossing the ocean and try to gain support for a subsequent expedition. But Banner had not expected strong opposition and his argument with Yann and Lanson had shaken his confidence. It had also taken up more time than he had expected which meant meeting with the others would have to wait until tomorrow or the next night. Maybe Renwin will meet with the rest and I won't have to worry about it, Banner hoped. Besides, Renwin's better equipped to explain his own idea than I am. Perhaps he'll be able to convince them. But Banner doubted that even Renwin could convince Lanson and Yann that his plan had merit.

Banner climbed down from the driftwood and started for home. His legs shuffled quickly as he scurried across the beach, which stretched as far as he could see in both directions.

His home was not near the strip of driftwood where the others lived. Often it was an inconvenience having to go back and forth. Often he wanted to be around his other friends, but Renwin wanted to live away from the colony, where he wouldn't be bothered, where he could think. And Banner wanted to live with Renwin.

Their home was a large smooth gray stone near the outer edge of the beach, a short distance from the hard black narrow surface which Renwin had recently named the "black beach." Banner and Renwin had once lived closer to the ocean, but an unusually strong tide nearly drowned them one night, so they relocated to a safer distance.

Now Banner stopped and looked at the ocean. The waves were high and Banner noticed how they shook the ocean back and forth. He wondered what made the ocean move, why sometimes it was quiet, while other times it was violent. He looked in awe at the great expanse and realized that he was merely seeing the surface. How deep did it go? he wondered. Some of the centipedes had gone into the ocean to depths higher than the driftwood and there were different theories as to how far down it went. But he had never even gone close to the ocean. He had never cared to before, and now he was going to be part of an expedition that would cross it.

Banner had great respect for the ocean and, although he had never given it much thought before Renwin told him his plan, he had always considered it one of the most beautiful things in the world. Like the sky and the beach, the ocean was something beyond his comprehension. Something huge and strange and unreal. Something that always changed yet always stayed the same.

Banner crawled under his rock. His eyes were useless here so he used his antennae to feel his way around. He called Renwin, but received no answer.

Banner imagined his friend diligently working alone on the deserted beach, oblivious to time and space. Renwin always behaved like this, especially when he had undertaken an important project. He would come and go without warning, and sometimes he would stay away for days.

Banner made himself comfortable in the corner and started to relax. But his last thoughts before he lost consciousness were fearful ones about sea monsters and storms.

A voice came to him in a dream and said, "Banner, wake up! Banner, wake up you lazy-headed fool!"

Banner reluctantly roused himself but the voice didn't fade.

"Banner, wake up! Banner, wake up!"

Banner realized to his great relief that he was at home beneath his rock. He recognized the telepathic voice as Yann. He also sensed another presence.

"What are you doing here?" he asked irritably.

"We came to talk to Renwin," Lanson said.

"Isn't he back yet?" Banner asked in surprise.

"Where did he go?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"I should have known," Lanson said. "He's probably in hiding, waiting until he can figure out a way to defend his stupid scheme."

"I assure you he's not in hiding," Banner said. "In fact, I doubt he even knows his idea has yet to gain support from you two."

"Then where is he?" Yann blurted out impatiently.

"Probably trying to find a way to cross the ocean," Banner replied.

“Well, are we just going to stand here or are we going to go look for him?”

“He could be anywhere,” Banner stated. “Are you prepared for what might be a rather long search?”

“We’re prepared,” Lanson answered for the both of them. “Now let’s go get this thing over with. We have other matters to take care of, you know.”

Banner, who was quite aware of their leisurely lifestyle, decided not to ask them what was so important. “Where should we go first?” he asked instead.

It wasn’t as dark outside as it had been the night before. There were many points of faint light and a large crescent of not so faint light in the sky. The wind was calmer than it had been the night before and there were two people outlined in the distance.

“You know Renwin better than we do,” Yann said, scanning the beach and paying no attention to the people.

“He could be anywhere,” Banner repeated. “But there are a few places he likes to go when he needs to be by himself.”

He led them away from the stone and from the piece of driftwood beyond, where the others made their home. Soon they came to a small downward slope in the sand. Banner peered over the edge. No sign of Renwin.

“He might be by the water,” Banner then said, starting for the ocean. Shortly, they came to the high tidemark and Banner used this as a path which he followed back toward home.

Suddenly Yann called out, “There he is!”

Banner stopped, looked at Yann and then followed his gaze out to the ocean, where a long, slender figure was relaxing at water’s edge, eating a beetle.

“You’re welcome to join me,” Renwin stated casually.

“Have you gone another day without sleeping?” Banner asked.

Renwin sent a telepathic laugh. "You're almost like a mother, Banner. In fact, I believe you're worse. Actually, though, I did get some sleep. I came home just after dawn and left again while you were still sleeping."

"What have you been doing?"

"Watching the ocean," he replied, shifting his stance so that he could look at the great body of water. "Watching the ocean and formulating my plans."

"I wasn't aware you had any plans," Lanson remarked,

"Yet you come here tonight to show your confidence in my idea. How good of you."

"You're wrong there, Renwin."

Renwin ignored Lanson's last remark and looked with awe at the ocean. "Isn't it wonderful?" he exclaimed. "There is nothing like it, nothing at all. There are no hills to obstruct our view but it stretches so far that we cannot see across it! It dances and it moves and it fills itself from time to time with the water from the sky as if it were a living creature! As if it were an intelligent, majestic being living an eternal life, beating to an incomprehensible rhythm! Just try to imagine! A centipede could spend a frustrated lifetime just trying to imagine!"

"You're a dreamer, Renwin."

"Of course. But then dreams are part of reality, are they not?"

"We think your idea is foolish," Yann said firmly.

"I see. Then you have not come tonight to lavish praise."

"What a quick mind he has!" Lanson said sardonically.

"I'm sorry," Banner broke in. "I did my best to defend you, but I confess I failed because I didn't know the details. So I made a compromise of sorts and they agreed to meet with you personally and hear your arguments before making a final decision."

But Renwin was calm and betrayed no fear of disapproval. “No need to apologize, Banner. It’s my fault. I should have realized that my friends would be tempted to base their opinions on ancient prejudices. I had confidence that they would understand, but I should have prepared you just the same. Nevertheless, there is hope for them yet.”

“We came with open minds,” Yann said. “But it is going to take quite a bit of persuading to get me and the others to expend effort and perhaps even risk our heads working on a project in which I can see no merit.”

“No merit?” Renwin asked in disbelief. “You’ve been living in the sand too long, Yann. Don’t you ever look at the ocean? Doesn’t it even interest you?”

“Of course it interests me. I watch it all the time. But that doesn’t mean I want to interrupt my life on the beach for a foolish adventure!”

“Are you afraid?”

“Of course we’re afraid!” Lanson admitted before Yann could respond. “Afraid because we’ll be going blind. Afraid because you’d be our leader!”

“I have no intention of being the leader,” Renwin declared. “We won’t need a leader on this expedition. Anyone who needs to be led can stay home.”

“You make it sound as if joining were an honor.”

“I am of that opinion.”

“Then you are even more of a fool than I had thought before. Where is your perspective on the world, Renwin? Is it lost in that ocean you plan to cross?”

“Just because you can’t understand his point of view,” Banner defended.

“I don’t believe he has a point of view!” Lanson broke in.

“The horizon is my point of view,” Renwin calmly explained. The ocean is an enormous mystery, and mysteries must be solved. By crossing the ocean we shall find out something about it.

“We may find out it holds creatures that like the taste of centipedes!” Lanson remarked.

“We may!”

“Even if we could do it—and I don’t imagine we can—it isn’t worth the risk,” Yann concluded.

“Isn’t it? The ocean is a thing of beauty. It bounces and glistens...”

He paused and looked back at the centipedes. “We lead a rather uneventful existence. What do we do? Sleep, eat, meditate, philosophize. There must be more to life.”

“There’s more to *our* lives!” Yann argued.

“Oh sure,” Renwin said in a sarcastic tone. “You play games, you draw clever impressions in the sand with your legs. Each of us has his own little hobby. Mine is philosophy and science while Lanson is interested in starting arguments and Yann likes to study the different forms of injury and disease. But doesn’t it get boring? We all do our share of theorizing, perhaps too much. What we should be doing is discovering what this world is all about! And a great deal of the world seems to be the ocean. But we can’t learn about the ocean just by looking at it. We’ve got to live on it for a while and see where it takes us!”

“But why should I share your interest in the ocean when, as you say, disease interests me much more?” Yann asked.

Renwin paused before replying. “Let me ask you this,” he finally said. “If you didn’t cross the ocean with me what would you be doing instead? Are you planning your own expedition?”

“You know I’m not.”

“And why not?”

“You know the answer to that. Where am I going to go?”

“Won’t you admit that you can study disease just as well on the ocean as you can on the beach?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“We might even encounter strange diseases on the ocean, which would require your healing expertise.”

“Is that why you want me to come, Renwin?”

“You have knowledge that might be of use to us. And I suspect such a journey could be beneficial to you. Unfortunately, you see things differently.”

“I see what I am shown,” Yann replied. “And so far I have been shown very little. The bare outline of a dream.”

“You underestimate me, Yann.”

“Do I? From what I’ve been told you aren’t very sure about the details of this supposed voyage. Banner couldn’t give us specifics. Are there any details, Renwin?”

“There are,” the philosopher-scientist replied vaguely. “But naturally I haven’t come to final decisions on every matter.”

“Such as how to cross the ocean?” Lanson challenged.

“Yes,” Renwin reluctantly admitted.

“The bare outline of a dream,” Yann repeated.

Renwin rose to his own defense. “Every voyage has to start somewhere,” he said. “And I may need your help to progress beyond the dreaming stage. That is why I cannot come to you later when everything is ready and ask for your support. I may need your support now.”

“May need our support? Don’t you even know that much, Renwin?”

“No, I don’t. Actually, I don’t need any help just yet, but when I finally do there might not be time for these arguments. I must know I will have your support when I need it. Besides, you can review my theories. They might not all be accurate.”

“That’s the most sensible thing you’ve ever said,” Lanson joked.

“But seriously, Renwin,” Yann put in, “are there any details at all?”

“There are some aspects I’d rather not discuss at this moment. I’ll tell you this, however: I plan to travel along the surface of the ocean. If things go the way I envisage we should be able to make the voyage without getting wet.”

“You’re mad!” Lanson screamed. “I’m not going to support you.”

“I won’t join you either,” Yann added.

Renwin chose not to argue further at this point. “Do me at least one favor,” he asked instead. “Don’t tell the others. Knowing you you’ll deceive them all into standing against me.”

“We won’t tell anyone,” Yann replied reluctantly. He was thinking of the laughter and the cold stares the tale would bring. “We owe you that much, Renwin.”

“Well, I suppose that’s all then,” Renwin said. “I have work to do so I’ll appreciate it if you went back home. You too, Banner,” he added when his friend didn’t move.

Banner didn’t argue but wished Renwin luck and departed with Lanson and Yann. When they were a short distance away, Banner halted and looked back to the spot where Renwin had been standing. He was standing there no longer.

Banner walked behind Lanson and Yann and lowered his antennae so he could not hear what they were saying. He knew they were discussing Renwin's plan and preferred to ignore them rather than argue.

So he occupied himself with his own thoughts. He was not going home. He was going back to the piece of driftwood with the other two because he didn't feel like being alone. His other friends lived there and he could visit with them for a while.

I can also help Renwin, he thought, by trying to get support from the others. I meant to meet with them last night but I was tired and it was getting close to dawn. So I'll see them tonight. I don't trust Lanson, he'll probably shake his antennae off to someone and disclose Renwin's plan. And if that happens everybody's going to find out and become biased against Renwin. I might prevent that if I explain the situation first. I'll tell them the truth and, hopefully, they'll see Renwin's point of view and support him. If not, then I should at least be able to persuade them not to make any final decisions before Renwin explains the details.

Ten centipedes lived in the driftwood. Lanson, Yann, the eccentric Kandis, who lived there on and off, taking leave at times to contemplate existence alone at some unfamiliar, temporary residence, and seven others. The males were Mint, Sanor and Hunt. The females were Deni, Wenter, Jenn and Ennel.

As he approached the driftwood, Banner was considering whether he should meet with the others alone or in groups. It would be easier, he decided, to meet in a group, but he also realized a group would intimidate him the way Lanson and Yann had. As for whom to visit first, Banner didn't think that was important. He decided to take things as they came and meet with whomever he saw first.

The three finally reached the driftwood and casually crawled to its top. There were many holes and spaces in the wood; these were where the centipedes lived. Lanson and Yann said goodbye to Banner and headed toward their respective holes, where they would do whatever it was they did at night. Banner knew they searched for food, socialized, played games and relaxed like the other centipedes, but he didn't know what they were going to do tonight.

He didn't really care.

Atop the driftwood, alone, Banner was scanning the surface in both directions, when a head popped out from one of the holes. The body followed.

"Why, hello Banner," the male centipede said. "You look lonely enough."

Banner communicated indifference. "Hello Mint. I was just trying to decide whom to visit first. You see, Renwin has a great new idea and I'm in the process of informing everyone."

"Oh really?" Mint asked, genuinely interested. "I was just on my way to find a juicy beetle. Why don't you join me. As we walk you can explain Renwin's idea."

Banner was beginning to grow hungry and finding food was in his opinion not a bad idea, so he agreed. Also, he liked Mint. He knew Mint was not the insolent type and he looked forward to their discussion.

They walked in the direction opposite Banner's stone, through a part of the beach which was more flat and void of debris than the other nearby areas. "Any particular spot in mind?" Banner asked. "Or are we just wandering?"

"The last few nights I have found insects around the base of one of those lampposts at the edge of that harder area. You know, we really should have a name for that strip."

"Renwin calls it the 'black beach.'"

"Then so will I. So, as I was saying, I've been going to the far edge of the black beach where one of those lampposts is erected. The same lamppost, in fact, that Deni observed being repaired by people. Originally, I had gone there to study the structure at close range and, to my surprise, I found a good meal there. It takes some doing to go near the light because it is painfully bright, despite its distance from the ground."

"Do the insects have nests in the lamppost?" Banner asked.

"No."

"Then is it merely by chance that you continue to find food there?"

"You know how I feel about chance! No, I suspect the insects are attracted to the light, or the post on which it rests, however strange that may seem."

"Have you told the others of your discovery?"

Mint smiled. "And spoil my quiet feasts? Oh, I won't keep it a secret much longer. Just until I can figure out why the insects go there and if there is always a supply. I don't want to come off a fool."

"And you want to make sure there's enough to go around," Banner added.

Again Mint smiled. "But I'm taking you into my confidence. Just let me break the news when the time comes."

"Sure." But Banner considered telling Renwin, who always seemed undernourished. But he wouldn't tell anyone else. Besides, he realized, there might not even be any insects at the light.

But there were. Banner could see them from the edge of the beach, flying, crawling, scurrying, climbing. He turned to Mint, who seemed quite pleased.

"This is the best night yet!" Mint said. "Does the light bother you?"

Banner, so delighted by all the insects, answered no.

They quickly crossed the black beach and came to the base of the post. Both then went their own way in pursuit of insects. Banner had his eyes on a fat spotted beetle which he had never seen before, and was surprised that it gave him such a good chase, for it didn't appear to be fast or agile. The victim-to-be darted up the post and Banner followed close behind, finally catching it about a quarter of the way up. Banner paralyzed the bug with his poisonous claws, and, using his accessory claws, dragged it back to the ground to eat. He was still holding the insect when Mint called him.

"Come over here, where the light isn't so bright."

Banner pushed the insect into the shade, where Mint was feeding on a victim of his own. "Some of these insects here might be dangerous to us," Mint pointed out, "so be particularly careful here."

But Banner was too busy feasting to concern himself with hypothetical hazards. He began to eat using still another pair of claws designed for just that purpose. "This is a paradise!" he exclaimed. "You must tell the others soon."

"I will." There was a pause, during which they concerned themselves with eating. Finally, Mint said, "Now what is this idea Renwin has?"

“He wants to cross the ocean,” Banner casually replied. He had decided to try a less forceful approach this time.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Rather, I should say, is he serious?”

“Of course he is.”

“Hmmm.” Mint took another bite and thought for a moment. “Not a bad idea.”

“You mean you like it?” Banner said, overjoyed.

“I think it’s an interesting idea—that is, if he knows a way to cross the ocean. He does know a way, doesn’t he?”

Banner answered by remaining silent.

“Let me get this straight,” Mint said, engulfing what remained of his insect. “Renwin wants you to inform everyone of his great idea, yet he doesn’t know how to make the idea work. Does he want us to figure out a way to cross the ocean?”

“No, I don’t think so. He’s in the process of devising a way, and I believe he knows more than he’s telling us. You know how Renwin loves surprises. What he wants is our support.”

“You mean our approval?”

“I think he wants our active help with his experiments or preparations. I don’t think this is a project he can accomplish alone. He may also want companions for the voyage.”

“He wants us to go with him?” Mint asked uneasily.

“I don’t know. It might be that he’ll see who wants to go and then make a selection.”

“There might not be many of us to choose from.”

“I know.” Banner paused to finish his meal. “Will you be one of them?”

“Yes,” Mint answered without hesitation. “Provided Renwin’s plan is a feasible one.”

Banner was thrilled. “You don’t know what this means!” he exclaimed. “Renwin will be so happy to have your support! Thanks so much. I knew you would understand.”

Mint, who was of another opinion, modestly replied, “I’m not so sure I do.”

