

The Young Man of Atlasjam

By Nick Hayden

Atlasjam sat between the second and third toe of the left foot of the Titan that bore the weight of heaven upon his back. This, and the unique stench that permeated every fiber of every board of every house, were the only distinguishing marks of the town. It had no hero and no temple to boast of, no philosopher-king and no Zeus-disguised-as-some-bird-impregnated woman. The farmers planted their crops. The merchants sold their wares. The boys told their tales of Hercules and Perseus (who had not yet visited Atlas). The girls danced in the woods and cried over Orpheus.

Visitors were rare in Atlasjam. There were many reasons for this. First, the aforementioned stench. But second, while the sight of a Titan was a wondrous one, it was a far better view at a distance, say from the city of Titan's Gap, where between two mountains one could see the full towering immensity of Atlas, with the weight of the blue sky and the heavens above upon his shoulders. From Atlasjam, all one could see was the shadow of his form for two-thirds of the day and a colossal, unmoving vastness in the sunlight, no matter how far you craned your neck.

But visitors did come, because men go wherever they haven't been, and some venture where they are encouraged not to go.

The young man in this story arrived at some time, in some way, that no one remembers. In fact, very little is known of this young man – not from whence he came nor even by what name he was called. He spoke to no one in Atlasjam. At the inn, in the streets, at the market stalls, he never once opened his mouth. Those who encountered him thought him mute or slow. They discovered later that he was not mute; whether he was entirely sane is still debated.

There was a nice little park at the juncture of the second and third toe. There was

not much in the way of vegetation there, except for some thick moss, and the children preferred to play at the other end of town, where there was more sun and fresh air, but it was still a well-known, if seldom frequented, locale. The young man was noticed loitering in this place, craning his neck and staring at the incomprehensible size of Atlas straining silently above him. Demetrius, who had once been mayor of Atlasjam about thirty years earlier and was then still a fixture of the community, saw the young man. He tried to start a conversation. It went, apparently, something like this:

"Whatcha lookin' at?"

The young man glanced meaningfully at Demetrius, then pointed upward.

"If you want to look at him, you should try the view from Titan's Gap, back that way."

The young man shook his head. He pursed his lips, as if holding something in. This is where the idea of his having "words of power" began.

"Sometimes the kids worry he'll move and kill us all. I suppose it's possible. We don't tell them that, of course. They'd never sleep, then. But the fact is, he doesn't move. He's a fixture of the natural world now, like the shore of an ocean or the spring of a river, like the weather and the seasons."

Again, the young man met Demetrius's eyes.

"Sure, he has a choice, I guess. He could just let the sky crush us all. But is it really a choice? I don't suppose he suffers much. Can't think like that anyway. It's just something he does. Like breathing. It is what it is."

The young man continued to study the titanic mass.

Demetrius, feeling that the conversation had reached an impasse, excused himself and headed home.

It was the next day when residents noticed the young man clinging precariously to Atlas's ankle. Most of that day, the city waited for the young man to plummet to his death. It made for exciting conversation. The next day, the young man clung higher

up, looking very much like a dark freckle upon the sun-browned skin of the colossus.

The general result of the young man's continued ascent was bewilderment. "What's his angle?" the people asked one another. If he wanted to perform some death-defying act of danger, why didn't he announce himself? If he was a member of a religious cult, why didn't he leave a manifesto of some kind? It was not only irregular, but rude, to act in such an erratic manner without giving some hint to the public what it meant.

"It's unseasonably dry this time of year," the conversation in Atlasjam went as the weeks passed. "Did you see he made it to the knee? At this rate he might make the top by year's end."

If he doesn't die, they left unspoken.

He became a regular topic of conversation, and in cities where Atlas was just a smudge on the horizon, some traveler would add casually over dinner, "*He* spent a whole week hardly moving on the thigh. I wonder if there's much to eat up there?"

Atlasjam became wealthy from the influx of visitors. Guides led expeditions up to the ankle, where *his* old campsite was marked with a polished bronze plaque. Menelaus at the small, solitary city shrine led vigils and sacrifices for *him* with the religious tourists. Demetrius held daily orations entitled "Dialogues with Him," as well as philosophical explorations of the wisdom communicated in *his* silences.

Some distance outside of town, two scholars set up a lens on a tripod by which they watched *him* climb. They kept detailed records of distance climbed and hours spent in ascent, along with conjectures on his sleeping, eating, and relief habits. A man named Paulus, who was not a scholar, convinced the two to copy their notes for him. Soon, the entire civilized world had regular updates of his trek up the immensity of Atlas. This brought many more men and women to the scholars' location, and a town blossomed into existence. Situated where it was, the town was named, rather unfortunately, Titan's Backside.

It is hard to explain why, exactly, this one man's journey caused such a fuss. Usually, the world does not care what one man does, even though on any single day one can find all kinds of men doing all kinds of strange, inexplicable things. The world is not usually concerned with individuals at all, unless his name is *me*.

There is, in fact, a good chance that some other young man, or perhaps many, had tried to climb Atlas, but they had not been noticed. Or they had talked a lot about it and hadn't done it. Or they had died tragically and alone.

But this man, they noticed. Every day, for weeks, he did the same thing, which consisted in moving microscopically up the incredible height of a Titan who did nothing at all but stand there and bear the weight of the blue sky and the heavens above. Perhaps it was the strange combination of daring and dullness that so intrigued the people, for to be extraordinarily mundane (or monotonously marvelous) is a great and wonderful thing.

Though they were late, the fall rains came. For a week, the clouds hung low. They thundered and lashed the earth with rain. No lens could view the young man. In the mornings, parties searched the grasslands around Atlas for a broken body. They found none. Ravens or eagles could have eaten him, they considered. His bones might be picked clean somewhere along the bent back of Atlas. Grandmothers fretted over the young man, chiding him as they bustled in the kitchen. Children lay awake in bed, fearing a sudden thump on the roof.

Eventually, the rain stopped. The clouds cleared. In the fresh light of a rain-washed world, dozens of lenses searched the mountainous form of Atlas.

Yes! There he was! A flea upon the Titan's incredible back, still moving, still alive! Shouts rose from the city of Titan's Backside. Messengers ran in all directions. Everyone who heard the news felt sun in their souls. Life was joy, and all was well and would be well.

The wiser of the observers (or the more cynical) felt in this joy a foreshadowing of

coming sorrow. Soon, *he* would be beyond the reach of their instruments. Soon, *he* would be beyond the reach of any help of man or animal, except the gods – and for all their talk of gods, the people did not consider them much help.

Soon, his existence would be as much a matter of faith as the gods’.

It was not the wisest, but the simplest, who still asked the question that so many of them had forgotten, because it could not be answered. "Why?"

The winter solstice, upon which darkness has its strongest sway, was the day when all instruments lost sight of him. With the death of the old year and the birth of the new, the people buried their interest in him. Once out of their sight, once no longer tracked and talked of, the man who had brought them joy of life and investment in the world faded from their life and their world. They forgot him. He became a remark, a nostalgia, a thing two old acquaintances used to mark the time “back when.”

The town of Titan’s Backside shrank but remained a quaint village in the middle of nowhere, and the two scholars who founded it published several journals conjecturing the meteorological, biological, and even philosophical makeup of Atlas's upper back, neck, and head, dwelling extensively upon the ears, nose, eyes, and mouth. None of this was the least scientific.

The city of Atlasjam seemed, to its citizens, duller than before, though they could not express this in words. The fact that they dwelt between the very toes of an enormous entity beyond their full understanding somehow seemed tedious. If only they were a bustling city, full of theaters and apartments, then life would be grand!

And so went the world, much as it always had, in gentle fits and starts of interest and anticipation of this or that, and the subsequent pause or lull or sigh.

It was in spring that the earthquake happened. Just as the morning light filtered dully into the crevice of Atlasjam, the ground began to shake. Men and women staggered and leaned against a door frame or a piece of furniture. Pots and dishes shattered. Houses creaked, cracked, and fell.

It was later when everyone realized that Atlas had moved, however slightly, and that the movement had demolished the town. There had been no deaths, but plenty of broken bones and gashes. Breathless recounting circulated the land for weeks. Even as far as Athens the reverberations had been felt. The scholars at Titan's Backside calculated the shift in Atlas's position. It came to a hairbreadth, more or less.

A politician from a far-off city visited Atlasjam to investigate. He spoke to the residents, explored all the nooks and crannies, and listened to the drone of the priest. Why didn't they leave, he asked. The townsfolk shrugged and found the question preposterous. Atlas stood and he held up the blue sky and the weight of heaven. They were as safe here as anywhere. The weight of heaven, if it came, would crush them all, no matter where they lived.

It was almost fall when the young man returned to Atlasjam. No one had seen him descend. They had not even considered his descent. Demetrius, pottering around the park between the two toes, was the only one who saw him. Most believe Demetrius to be a reliable witness.

The young man had an unkempt beard now. His clothes were rags, and his limbs were wiry and strong. Demetrius recognized him mostly because he saw the man descend the last stretch of the third toe and it reminded him vividly of someone he didn't quite remember, until the young man knelt to the ground and put his cheek against it. Tears were in his eyes. (It was quite moving, according to Demetrius.) When the young man noticed Demetrius, he stood slowly, stared at him, and smiled.

"What have you done?" Demetrius asked.

"I spoke," he replied in a soft voice.

"What do you mean?"

"I spoke. For myself. For you. For us all." The young man's words were simple and direct.

"What did you say? What words?"

Here the young man's eyes shone, but he also looked away, like a young child too full of joy to meet his parent's face. He did not speak at first. He made a step as if to leave, glanced at Demetrius, opened his mouth, and finally said, "Words of worship." He shook his head suddenly. "Thank you. I told him thank you."

He hurried away. No one saw him again beneath the blue sky and the weight of heaven.