

CHAPTER VII

“Well, Jeff, we were beginning to get worried. What’s happening?”

He opened his eyes, with infinite trouble, breathed in deeply, and recognized the tormented face of Mary, who was leaning over him.

Warren and Manzini were already busy outside the rocket, and the Sun was shining cheerfully in the pure sky of Rhea.

Mary smiled at him when he sat up on his bunk, recovering all his normal faculties. “I couldn’t tell them anything,” she said, “but I’m frightened...very frightened...”

“Don’t worry—there’s nothing to fear.” He wanted to tell her the truth, tell her what he had just learned millions of kilometers away, to confess his own fear and terror, and all the difficulty he had had in transplanting himself into Landry’s body, but it was as if an invisible force were obstinately watching over him and preventing him from doing so.

Warren arrived in his turn, and exclaimed on seeing him: “You were greatly in need of rest, and you’ve taken advantage of it—so much the better! For our part, we haven’t been idle. Manzini has already succeeded in assembling several pieces of the exploration apparatus. It will be useful for us to make a tour of the region. We’ll be ready tomorrow, in all probability.”

He had resumed his habitual manner, but he had been pierced by fatalism, and when Jeff asked: “What do you expect to find elsewhere that we don’t have here?” he winced and replied: “Someone already asked me that question when I told him I was leaving for Rhea—and the answer I’d be able to give him now is very different from the one I gave then.” He sighed, and added in a different tone: “Look!”

He opened his hand and displayed a stone ravaged by time, which he said that he had found in the vicinity, while helping Manzini lay in supplies of drinkable water. On one of the faces of the stone a little drawing was engraved, undoubtedly not due to a caprice of Nature.

“It’s the work of an intelligent creature,” he said. “The work has been done with a chisel, and reveals a highly advanced level of artistry.”

Manzini, who had joined his companions, intervened in his turn. “That’s indisputable. It’s evidence of cleverly-improved tools and a second degree technology. I’m certain that, if we press on with our research, we’ll discover more important and revealing vestiges.”

Jeff examined the piece of engraved stone attentively, and shook his head uncomprehendingly. “Ought we to assume that we’re dealing with vestiges pertaining to our own ancestors?”

Manzini scratched his head in an embarrassed manner, and opined, without any great conviction: “My God...until we have proof to the contrary, yes.” Then, studying the stone attentively and anxiously, he added: “Unless it comes from a much more ancient civilization, which seems to me to be more probable.” He shrugged his shoulders, tried to smile, and, in order to avoid the host of questions that he divined on his companions’ lips, he hastened to conclude: “The geology that I profess is purely theoretical. Here, everything is different and I’m obliged to start from scratch. As for archeological questions, it’s best to abstain for the moment—so I propose a tour of the surroundings, in order to penetrate this mystery...which rather intrigues me, I confess. What do you think?”

Everyone accepted Aldo Manzini’s proposal right away. Preparations were immediately made by the little group, inasmuch as the exploratory vehicle, of reduced dimensions, was quickly put in working order.

The motors obeyed the first solicitation, and everything seemed to be working perfectly. They took their places within it, and after studying the steering mechanism with Manzini, Jeff sat down at the controls and launched the machine straight ahead into the sunlit countryside.

It did not take them long to discover a few mammals roaming free, which fled at their approach—an entire animal kingdom with the most various forms, some of which species had nothing in common with those prevalent on Rhea before the catastrophe. That, of course, could only add to the interest and anxiety that continued to increase in the hearts of the castaways.

The machine followed a course directly toward the hills, made a brief halt for the midday meal, which they swallowed hastily, and got under way again a few minutes later.

The landscape around them was still the same: bright, colorful, welcoming and hospitable. It was when Jeff was getting ready to go around the first of the hills that Mary pointed to something to his right. “There! There, look!” she demanded

They did indeed look. Emerging from a curtain of foliage, the ruins of ancient buildings loomed up, bristling with columns and frontons, invaded by vegetation.

With the aid of a rapid and skilful maneuver, Jeff steered the vehicle toward the indicated spot, and they soon emerged into the middle of a vast esplanade, on which stood several dilapidated edifices, worn away by time, in the midst of debris of every sort, swept by the wind.

They got out and, following Manzini, advanced into the midst of the ruins, not daring as yet to exchange their impressions.

In the center of a grand plaza stood the ruins of a temple, somewhat reminiscent of the monuments of ancient Greece, with numerous massive colonnades of red granite. Inscriptions, of which they obviously could not understand a single word, were visible on a large fronton.

Further away, other half-collapsed buildings offered their gazes the sad spectacle of their degradation, with their gaping orifices and dismantled walls.

Manzini set to work immediately, and soon began to make discoveries.

On a magnificent edifice of pink sandstone, black streaks altered the appearance of certain bas-reliefs in places, probably due to a migration of manganese salts oxidizing on contact with the air.

Other maladies of the stones betrayed themselves elsewhere by the action of a familiar bacterium, *thiobacillus*, whose life-cycle was effectuated in the very bosom of the sandstone, and which eventually ended up causing the disintegration of the stone, effacing the bas-reliefs and threatening the entire edifice at its base.

For a few more hours, Manzini busied himself among the ruins, studying numerous specimens, and finally, it was in a voice imprinted with lassitude that he decided to declare to his companions: "It's quite incomprehensible. These vestiges go back several centuries, if not millennia." As everyone paid his the utmost attention, he went on: "Theoretically, of course. In this case, it's difficult to admit that their origin could be anterior to the cataclysm, for nothing of that world survived. As for saying that these vestiges have a more recent origin, that's absolutely impossible and unthinkable. We must admit that we're confronted by a very curious paradox."

Jeff was on the point of replying when a slight exclamation uttered by Mary caused them all to turn round. She pointed at the ground in front of them. In the fine dust, they all saw footprints: neatly cut-out tracks; the perfectly-designed tracks of human feet.

Warren, overwhelmed by amazement, exclaimed: "Well, I'm damned!"

"Those tracks are fresh," Manzini said. "Someone has been here ahead of us."

A long, dolorous silence fell upon the little group, in the course of which each of them strove to understand the new mystery that had been set before them.

Jeff was the first to collect himself. "Follow me," he said.

With Jeff in the lead, they followed the tracks as far as the edge of the dead city, where they were able to ascertain that they faded away in the direction of the hills. There was no hesitation; they needed to be determined.

They all went back to the little exploration vehicle and, at a modest speed, they took the direction of the footprints in their turn. They soon reached the first slopes of the verdant hills, where it became increasingly difficult to guide themselves, because the tracks became less clear and less apparent in that terrain.

Scarcely had they reached the summit of a small hillock, however, when the most unexpected spectacle appeared before their eyes.

In the hollow of a little valley dotted with multicolored flowers, they distinguished an assemblage of perfectly-aligned buildings, low single-story houses bordered with flourishing lawns and dwarf trees bearing bright fruits.

Smoke was coming out of the bright red roofs and riding slowly into the calm, pure sky. Then, they finally perceived human silhouettes coming and going through the streets and across the open spaces. There were both men and men, dressed with the same simplicity as everything concerning the environment of which they seemed to be a part.

Warren was the most bewildered of all, and could not help murmuring: "Unbelievable! Absolutely incredible!" Then he turned to the others, and it was toward Jeff that his face leaned, as he murmured: "What do we do?"

Jeff shook his head, in synchrony with a deep involuntary sigh, and then took the necessary decision. "Let's go," he murmured. And he launched the vehicle straight ahead.

There was no sign of panic or amazement in the village when they arrived. All that happened was that a few of the women turned their heads on the thresholds of their dwellings, some of the men interrupted their work in the gardens or the open-air workshops, and the children briefly interrupted the games they were playing with strange little animals that seemed quite harmless. It was as if their minds had already been prepared and alerted to their coming. That, at least, was the impression Jeff had at the moment when the machine drew to a halt on the edge of the agglomeration, while a group of individuals in gaudy costumes advanced to meet them.

A tall fellow detached himself from the group; his clothing differed sufficiently from that of his peers for the idea that he must be a very important person to cross the minds of all the space travelers.

There was a long moment of silence; then the unknown man bowed ceremoniously to the visitors, who had leapt out of the vehicle, and said: "Be welcome, friends from the sky! The most generous hospitality will be offered to you in our community."

Manzini had gripped Warren's arm, murmuring in a blank voice: "He speaks our language. My God, it's enough to drive one mad!"

The gaudily-dressed individual bowed again; a faint smile was inscribed on his thin lips. "The Sage Munk awaits you in his humble dwelling. Permit me to take you to him, friends from the sky."

They could not do other than accept this strange invitation, and followed in the footsteps of their guide without hesitation, cutting through the silent crowd that pressed around them, which did not seem to be animated by any hostile intent.

They traversed a large open space and soon found themselves in front of a neat villa, perfectly constructed, whose red brick roof was surmounted by a multicolored flag. They were humbly implored to go in, and found themselves in a large room, furnished in a rudimentary fashion, but with an esthetic sensitivity and taste quite surprising in a race that did not seem very advanced.

Propriety and simplicity were the rule here, as everywhere, and the old man who stood up in front of them as they came in had a welcoming expression imprinted with an ineffable generosity. He offered them low, soft seats disposed around his carved chair, and said in a soft, slightly accented voice: "Sit down, friends from the sky—we've been expecting you."

At the sound of that voice, although it was pleasant and placid, Jeff felt a malaise that was difficult to suppress, and when he sounded her thoughts, almost involuntarily, he realized that Mary felt the same sentiment.

Then Warren's voice murmured "Who are you?"

That question seemed inappropriate, and to betray a certain egotism in the present circumstances, but the old sage did not appear to be in the least offended. Nor did he have any hesitation in replying: "Earthmen, as your ancestors once were, on this same world."

"That's impossible," said Warren, stubbornly. "Impossible. No one survived the cataclysm—and this world isn't Earth. It has nothing in common with our mother planet."

A new smile illuminated the face of the old man. "Evidently, you can't understand, and your stubbornness is quite excusable."

"Please tell us," said Manzini, who was becoming restless in his seat. "Where are we?"

The old man shook his head and replied, almost in a single breath: "On one of the numerous rings that comprise this planet. We once lived in the interior of the globe. Only yours, being exterior, found itself, by virtue of that fact, in special and entirely exceptional conditions by comparison with the others, because it placed your human race in direct contact with all the rest of the Universe. For us, it was different, for space was limited by the rocky and impenetrable barrier of your solid crust. It was necessary that the Great Cataclysm overtake the outermost ring in order to place us abruptly in the same natural conditions that had been yours. Don't believe, though, that so far as we were concerned, what happened did no damage. The new atmospheric conditions to which our people were subjected gave rise to many illnesses and many disturbances in the bosom of our humankind, and it took a long time before our readaptation was finally accomplished."

While listening to these revelations, the astronauts exchanged rapid glances, and it was obvious that they were hesitant to accept the fantastic element in that story, which they had been far from expecting.

Manzini decided to ask: "You claim, then, that the terrestrial globe is comprised of several rings, independent of one another?"

"I don't claim it; I affirm it."

"Amazing," breathed Warren. "That explains the reduced dimensions of the world, which we were able to determine during our recent observations. What do you estimate to be the thickness of the solid crust of each ring?"

"About 50 kilometers, no more—and the spatial gap separating the rings is about 300 kilometers."

Jeff suddenly recalled certain ancient terrestrial legends still maintained on New Earth, and certain old traditions linked to religious literature, which situated the dwellings of the dead and of spirits beneath the terrestrial crust: the legend of Orpheus running through the entrails of the globe after Eurydice; those of Germanic mythology exiling heroes into the depths of the Earth; Dante's frightful vision of a central Inferno; and all the crazy theories of the Hollow Earth imagined by insane visionaries.

Yes, all of that now took on the sense of an extraordinary and stupefying reality—but they had not, alas, reached the end of their surprises, for when Mary wanted to know by what strange coincidence this human race, which had no connection with theirs, expressed itself in their own language, the explanation given by the old sage completed their prostration.

At first, the earnest individual seemed to hesitate over the reply to that question; then his features creased in numerous wrinkles, and his gaze seemed to be momentarily veiled, as if he were prey to contrary impulses assailing his mind. "That goes back to very distant times," he said, finally, "when the Masters of the World decided to undertake its conquest."

"To whom are you alluding in speaking of the Masters of the World?" Jeff put in, abruptly.

"To those who reign at the very center of our globe. No one knows them, at least in their veritable aspect, for they are not human. Legends say that they are beings intermediate between man and the Powers from

Outside, and that they have an inexhaustible central energy at their disposal, with which to obtain the mastery of the entire Universe. A day will come when that conquest will be realized, when they have succeeded in annihilating everything that still poses an obstacle to their project. At the beginning of Time, it is said, they landed on Earth and occupied its entrails. At the heart of the globe, they split into two groups. One followed the way of benevolence, the other that of violence, the forces of which commanded the elements and human races. It was, alas, the latter who prevailed, thus taking the destiny of the planet in hand. It is, therefore, those dark powers that currently reign over all the Rings of Earth.”

“All that is quite incoherent,” said Warren, nervously.

A wan smile appeared on the old man’s lips. “The desire for coherence is a mortal vice, and these beings are not mortal. They’re capable of changing the very nature of reality.”

“It’s merely a matter of popular beliefs, ordinary legends of the sort that all peoples possess. You can’t say anything for sure.” Warren was trying with all his might to give weight to his words, but the terrible apprehension that was buried deep within him was evident, for he was in the process of battling his own convictions. Then, admitting defeat, he broke the heavy silence that had followed his words to ask in a dull voice: “What are they?”

“What your eyes see them to be, and your minds accept them to be. But that’s still only a false image; the truth is imperceptible to our human senses. All that we know is that they possess a psyche much more evolved than ours, that they unleash their powers upon one another, upon others and upon things, and that they’re purely spiritual in essence.”

“You imagine them as godlike, then?” exclaimed Manzini.

“Don’t forget that the Devil himself is also spiritual in essence,” the old man riposted.

“What relationship is there between you and these beings?” Jeff asked.

“No one can say. They have the ability to go from any point in the interior to any other, as well as the exterior; they know the secret openings that serve to communicate between the spheres placed inside one another. They know everything and are ignorant of nothing. It was they who informed us of your impending catastrophe and told us of your intention to emigrate to Venus. They told us many things about your civilization, your languages, your mores, customs and history. They dream of unifying all the humans living on this globe and throughout the universe, so as to create a single race entirely devoted to their cause, promising everyone immortality and power beyond Time and Space. Those are the sacred principles of the Black Order.”

The old man fell silent, in order to give the astronauts time to assimilate the fantastic news that he had just communicated to them. It was obvious that what had been said had had a very considerable effect on the little group, and a certain malaise was evident in the glances they exchanged, without saying a word, along with a visible anxiety.

After a brief interval, however, Mary could not help exclaiming: “In sum, what do they want from you? My companions and I are under the impression that you’re living a happy and peaceful existence here.”

A slight nod of the Sage’s head approved these words, and once again, the old man hesitated before replying. As if to give himself time for reflection and decision, he clapped his hands twice. A somberly-dressed woman immediately came in, carrying a tray laden with bottles and goblets, which she deposited on a low table in front of the Sage.

Everyone understood that it would certainly be impolite to refuse the invitation, and, at a sign from the old man, they all tasted the delicious refreshing drink that the newcomer served to them.

Jeff examined her more attentively when she arrived next to him, pouring the amber liquid into his goblet. She was young and beautiful—extraordinarily beautiful, surpassing in beauty everything that a feminine creature could receive as a gift of nature. She was slender, with a fine bone-structure beneath her well-proportioned flesh. For an instant Jeff regretted that over-attentive examination—but it was more powerful than him, more powerful than anything.

CHAPTER VIII

The young woman looked at him in her turn, and in her large limpid eyes, in which an entire harmony of unknown colors were reflected, something was born: something like a supplication, or a distant appeal, emanating from a fabulous past in which good and evil were differently defined. It was like a powerful sentiment of unlimited confidence, which she seemed to want him to share—and Jeff, for the first time in his life, felt the strange fascination of an almost-unreal gaze that he would never be able to forget.

He came back to himself slowly when she turned away, as if he were falling from a great height.

The old Sage spoke again: “We are the only ones privileged in this world, friends from the sky,” he said, with a hint of bitterness in his voice. “You’re in a land where evil has no purchase, and which has partially escaped the control of the black powers—but we pay very dearly for our peace and happiness.”

“How is that?” asked Manzini, frowning.

“It goes back to the first decades following your catastrophe, when our sphere finally found itself in contact with infinite space. We then had a strange revelation. Malevolent waves originating in the cosmos reached the Earth and followed it in its blind course. We identified a close relationship between that and the black powers that reigned at the very center of our globe, and understood that we could, by means of fully-consenting sacrifices, polarize our sphere, creating identical poles, as in magnetic fields. Our intention was to obtain by that means a positive pole and a negative pole, equally charged with opposite forces. We thus succeeded in creating this paradisiac place, in exchange for a country destined to become a sort of collector of the malevolent waves, whose origin escapes us.”

Jeff took advantage of a pause to ask, feverishly: “Should I infer that every happy individual in this country corresponds to an unhappy one at the opposite pole?”

“Yes. The balance must not be broken at any time, or grave repercussions would ensue for our race. Volunteers offer themselves every day to perpetuate this equilibrium and accept suffering in order that others may live in peace in this beneficent land.”

The old man fell silent, allowing his visitors to assimilate the strange words that he had just spoken. The astronauts looked at one another, profoundly moved by what they had just learned, which surpassed their human understanding.

The old man, who seemed increasingly troubled and embarrassed, was about to resume speaking when the young creature who had just sat down next to him spoke in her turn: “It’s as well to admit the truth now,” she said, “although it will cost me personally to inform you.”

The old man’s hand clenched on hers. “Wait, Marka...”

“No, it’s impossible—you know that.” She turned to Jeff and his companions. “You understand that it’s impossible for you to stay here. You’re strangers, and no one will sacrifice themselves for you. No one will accept it, for the risk is too great. If you prolong your sojourn among us, the equilibrium is at risk of being broken, and we cannot go against our principles.”

Jeff thought he could read pain and infinite suffering in her eyes, and internally he admired the courage of the beautiful Marka, which cut straight to the heart of that embarrassing question.

They got up with a single movement, understanding that it would be futile and impolite to persist, completely disorientated by what they had just heard.

The old man told them that he knew about their difficulties, for they had obviously been aware of the accident that had occurred when the ship landed, but the planet was vast and the continents numerous. They could leave their country for other lands—above all, never to return. That was the promise that he obtained from Warren, whom he considered to be the leader of the little crew.

As they said their goodbyes, however, Jeff decided to ask the question that gripped his heart, and which had not ceased to haunt him since the beginning of the conversation. “Do you know the secret passage that will permit us to reach the interior spheres?”

A shake of the Sage’s head left the question unanswered. He did not know; no one in this world knew.

Jeff did not press the point, and took his leave, while Marka joined the escort that conducted him and his companions back to their vehicle. Once again, Jeff turned round before climbing into the apparatus, and contemplated her lovingly. He suddenly divined that it was her who had provoked the imperious thought demanding that he turn round one last time.

He saw her come forward to stand in front of him, almost touching him. Then she spoke, very rapidly: “Go to the accursed continent; there you will find someone who will help you to find the secret passage, since that is your desire. Good-bye.”

He wanted to ask other questions, but Marka had already vanished into the crowd, and he abandoned any thought of following her. He took his place in the vehicle and started the engines.

It was only when the township had disappeared over the horizon that Warren decided to open the discussion.

“Great gods, all this is terrible! What are we going to do now?”

Manzini ignored the question to ask Jeff: “What did that Marka want of us? The old witch spoke to you before leaving. What did she say to you?”

Jeff wrenched himself from his own thoughts to hear Mary add: “That horrid woman horrified me. I couldn’t tolerate her presence a minute longer.”

Jeff turned round, livid. “What? Who are you talking about?”

“Marka, of course—the old servant.”

“Old and ugly, was she?” he murmured, dully.

“As to that, yes,” Warren put in, “But why did you say that?”

Jeff did not reply, and his fingers clenched on the controls. An atrocious fear had invaded him, and he understood the strange phenomenon of which he had been the object, and which had affected no one but him.

But why? For what reason?

He tried to expel Marka’s marvelous face from his memory, but did not succeed. He might have tried, if only for a moment, to recover the real image of the old woman from his memory, but that was impossible, for at no time had she appeared to him in her true aspect...unless the contrary were the case, and her youth and beauty had assumed the appearance of old age and ugliness in the eyes of his companions. Even in the inverse of the paradox, however, he could not glimpse the reality, and the hidden meaning of that mysterious imposture.

“Well, Landry, answer! What did she say to you?”

Manzini was posing this question for the third time when he finally decided to answer it.

The vehicle rolled, dived, veered, flew through the air, rolled again, bounded and stopped. As if by the effect of a magic wand, the landscape had changed abruptly, and dead terrain appeared around the vehicle.

There was nothing comparable to the aridity and desolation of the spectacle that confronted their eyes. The vitrified soil, congealed in tormented and chaotic forms, extended as far as the eye could see. A few sparse blades of grass appeared here and there, stubbornly resisting the hot blast of a violent wind sweeping the rocks and the dust that drifted at the edges of gigantic crags, whose sharp ridges seemed ready to bite a low, heavy and colorless sky.

The cruel perfection of the landscape had something horrible and terrifying about it, and Jeff hesitated before moving forward again.

Further away, clouds the color of lead moved aside to give way to ferocious sunlight, reflected by the cracked and bloated ground. A tortuous heat rose from the superheated soil, and Jeff had to switch on the vehicle’s air conditioning.

They continued on their blind course, however, in a desert where there seemed to be no life, and where death seemed to reign as master.

They soon had to call a halt to get a few hours’ rest, remaining on their guard in the meantime and keeping watch on the functioning of the apparatus, which seemed to be suffering from the brutal heat prevalent in the country.

Finally, in the early morning, they distinguished within the light mist that enveloped them the structure of a vast city built in the rock, in the middle of a sinister landscape swept by the winds and drowned in the howling of the unleashed elements.

At low speed, the little vehicle moved between steep rocky slopes cluttered with stones and debris of every sort.

Silhouettes moved between the decrepit and dilapidated buildings, which constant maintenance could not protect from the fury of a hostile nature—and the first faces that came toward them made them feel nauseous.

Men and women were walking through the fissured streets, shamelessly displaying the wounds and frightful stigmata that were eating into their flesh. In a crack in the rock, a young boy was tearing apart and devouring the remains of an animal caught in a trap. Further way, a human skeleton, half-covered in dust, was directing its round, empty orbits at the little group.

The further the machine advanced, the more horrible and repulsive the spectacle became.

Half-naked individuals were squabbling around a meager pool of water, trying to recover the slightest drop—down to the last molecule—but the avid earth sucked in its share, and the thin trickle of water was lost in the superheated sands, which the wind striated with fine, bizarre and abnormal undulations.

On the threshold of their dwelling, two leprous old men were crouching down, frozen like statues, waiting for death to bring the deliverance for which they had probably never ceased to wish.

Death reigned as master in this place. It dictated its laws to the people, who only tried to survive by virtue of a natural and unconscious instinct.

The voyagers got out of their vehicle, but no one addressed a single word to them. One might have thought them phantoms on the frontier of life and death, incapable of distinguishing between the two states, insensible to everything, sparing of the slightest gesture or movement. An acrid, fetid odor saturated the dead city and clutched at the throat, like some monstrous witch’s ointment.

While his companions hesitated to continue walking amid the smoky shadows of the sandy street, Jeff advanced at hazard, straight ahead. Marka's words were resonating in his head like strokes of a gong punctuated by the howling of the wind. It was as if thousands of serpents had combined their hisses in a hallucinatory chorus rising from abandoned Syrinxes.

Jeff went along the sordid side-street, stepped over collapsed bodies stripped of flesh, went around human debris projecting from the sand and shoved aside a leprous individual whose horrible nudity interposed itself momentarily between him and the deserted open space, like a fleshless scarecrow agitated by the breath of torment.

He stepped over a miry patch where a few vermin-laden pieces of detritus were rotting, then stopped suddenly, cocking an ear toward groans that had just reached his ears. He adjusted his direction, took a few more paces, and reached the doorway of a collapsed building. There, on the threshold, a creature huddled in a fetal position was moaning: "I'm thirsty... I'm thirsty... Something to drink... For pity's sake... Something to drink..."

Jeff bent down rapidly, took up the gourd that hung from his belt, and, without caring whether the supplication was addressed to him or not, found that his soul was telling him what to do.

The gourd that he held out was snatched by two avid and skeletal hands, and when the withered face of the old woman emerged from her rags, he felt a terrible internal blow. The vitreous eyes that fixed themselves upon him suddenly took on the gleam of the same unknown colors that he knew so well.

There was no noise around him at that moment: no howling, no whistling. It was as if, at a stroke, nothing more existed of the external world but him... and *her*.

The creature drank a long draught and gave the gourd back to him with a gesture of thanks. In that emaciated face, eaten away by old age and infinite suffering, he was able to read the striking beauty and marvelous youth that were hidden there, as if beneath a carnival mask that a simple gesture on his part might tear away and throw to the wind. But the gesture was unnecessary, because he knew now that he had reached his goal. When she leaned toward him, he scarcely had the strength to pronounce: "Speak, I beg you—tell me where the passage is."

He wanted to shout her name and beg her again: "Marka!"—but the sounds would not emerge from his throat, and he waited for the reply.

The moribund woman's thin arm pointed at the rocky spurs.

"At the summit... At the end of the gully that leads to the brown rocks... behind the curtain of vapor that no one has dared to go through... but with your vehicle you can... go, then... that's where the orifice is."

This time, the name reached his lips and he murmured: "Marka!"

She replied, once again: "Go!"