

4. Negotiations

After long, hard thought, Aristide decided to keep his prisoner alive, since he would have him in his power from then on. He even decided to speed up the recovery since he had the means.

So, he went back to his three companions who were dozing off in the fresh night around the improvised couch of Pia. He told them that she had been exposed long enough to the vivifying fresh air and it would be best now to put her under shelter in the grotto while they waited for her to wake up, which should be no more than a couple of hours. And he immediately started to help them move the sleeper, putting her on the pillow mattress under a well-chosen rock. When she was comfortably set up on the couch he said there was nothing more to do now but imitate her. The three men unanimously agreed to stay by her side and they stretched out on the sand. As for him, he left them and went back to his cabin, lit a big lantern and saw to his prisoner.

He found him where he had left him on the lower bunk of his cabin but not in the same condition. The fever had risen (the temperature was now over 106 degrees) and the pulse was beating fast in his arteries. He was tossing and turning in a silent nightmare that was not transmitted to the palm of his claw by any detectable mental communication, but that Doctor Cordat nevertheless felt was the effect of a dangerous cerebral agitation. In such a case it was completely normal since the patient had received a load of buckshot in his brain.

Being first and foremost a doctor, Aristide told himself that his primary duty was to give all possible care to the sick thing. He soaked his handkerchief in water, made a compress sprinkled with ammonia and put it on the patient's head. After he cut the white cotton that covered him from head to foot he took it off and could then see that the enemy was indeed a gigantic insect—probably a giant ant—with a huge chest above an abdomen that was just as huge, two huge antennae that were used as arms and two jointed legs.

The antennae and secondary legs, six in all, looked atrophied, but were still in a rudimentary state. A black shell covered the body and limbs, as well as the head, like crab's armor. But in spite of the drastic modifications that an extraordinary heredity or maybe a refined art had given to the frightful insect, its general form was still there and left no possible doubt as to its nature: it was a monstrous ant, of the genus *atta barbara*, as tall as an average man and reduced to the four usual limbs of a mammal. But it was still an ant, a reasoning, evil and even learned ant, with a head as big as its abdomen and endowed with strong mandibles, two faceted eyes and a frontal eye with three triangular ocelli that looked like they had been particularly damaged by the gunshot they had just suffered.

As prepared as Aristide was for some kind of full discovery like this, he was just as stunned as at first sight. He took a magnifying glass from his desk and began tirelessly examining and checking all the details of such an abnormal organism.

And suddenly forgetting his personal woes and thinking only of his interest in science, he told himself that he had to preserve such an extraordinary phenomenon in order to get all the information from it that he could. So, the best way to obtain such results might be to resort to the strange medicine whose power he had personally experienced and that was still in its special flask, easy to recognize among the others on the third shelf of the cabinet of dissecting tools. Yes, that was the first thing to do! To go back into the crypt of the Phoenician Tower, find the anatomy lab again and get the flask!

He looked at the wall clock and saw that it was 11:30 p.m. He was sure that everyone was asleep around the yacht. He would never again have such a good opportunity for his project.

He quickly grabbed his lantern, carefully closed the cabin door and went back down into the grotto. Without a sound he made sure that the three workers were sleeping in the sand around Pia, who had not moved an inch on her frilly bed.

He headed toward the fold of rock that hid the entrance to the gigantic stairway. He found it with no problem and marched up. As he was going up he wondered if everything was real, if he was not dreaming, if he had really experienced such unheard-of adventures in only a few hours... But of course! There was the riverbed, the sporadic flow where he had come out into the underground foundation of the prehistoric fortress. And there was the stream that fed the turbine and the waterfall rushing down from the higher level after watering the wheat fields in the crypt. There were the final steps and then the crypt itself with its electric lights stretching as far as the eye could see down the hallway. There

was the ramp leading to the treasure. There was the endless procession of worker ants carrying their booty to the reserve silos or to the hungry larvae. It was not a dream, but tangible reality! The brave workers were never idle; they were always at work and were not even distracted by the intruder with his lantern.

And finally there was the door to the laboratory! He recognized it, pushed it open and entered the cave where he had been the subject of such horrifying experiments. Nothing had changed. His place was empty on the marble table; the slab was awaiting his return, ready to support his condemned head. A few feet away the disemboweled neighbor still had his chest and belly gaping open; under the table his guts were calmly bathing in alcohol.

Preoccupied with the idea that had haunted him during the day, Aristide brought the lantern close to the dead man's head to see it better: its resemblance to Pia was obvious. There was no doubt: it really was her unfortunate brother who had fallen into the hands of the giant ant to be used as its subject. And how very close he had come to suffering the same fate himself! But it was all over with now, as far as he was concerned. Now it was a matter of dealing well with this adventure that had started so badly, but that from now on would be so simple and promised such brilliant results. To work! To work! Hats off to him who had died in the name of science without knowing it! And especially that his unhappy sister never know about it...

Aristide turned to the cabinet and at first sight recognized the flask that had been used to dress his wound. The faint odor that he smelled was a sure sign. He could still smell it under the bandages wrapped around his dissected arm.

He grabbed the flask and a few other things that looked like a good catch, bandages, compresses, leather straps, cotton shirts and caps; it only took a few minutes.

He soon closed up the tragic door, strode down the hallway of ants and climbed up the ramp to the attic to put some gold ingots and precious gems into a towel that he tied up. Finally he went back down the gigantic stairway and was soon back on board his yacht.

No one had budged. He went back in the cabin and wasted no time getting to work.

After covering the wounded with a blanket that he secured tightly to the four limbs with the help of a double strap, he soaked a bandage in the blue elixir and bandaged the head. Then he put on a compress moistened with the same liquid and over all of it put a band of cotton. Thus wrapping him up like a mummy, he could finally think about getting some sleep himself.

Where was he going to sleep for the night? There was a second bunk that was usually used to throw his laundry and clothes on just above the wounded. He jumped up on it fully dressed and a few seconds later was sleeping the sleep of the just.

At the first light of day Aristide was woken up by heavy footsteps on the bridge above his head. He jumped down from his box and first checked the condition of the wounded. He had calmed down and his fever seemed to have dropped off. So, the blue elixir worked. That was an important point and the perfect opportunity to replace the bandages on the giant ant's skull. The young surgeon got to work first thing. After that he left the cabin, locked the door behind him and with the key in his pocket he went to see the workers. Just as he had thought they were already in the middle of calking the boards and had only good news to give about the young lady they were in charge of. She was still sleeping calmly, which reassured them.

Aristide went to check up on things and found everything as they described. He jumped in the water to wash himself under the rising sun. Then he went back to the workers to ask them about provisions. They thought it would be best to send Baselli to the nearest village to bring back whatever he could get while they finished the calking. It would only take two or three hours. Aristide agreed with them, took some gold from his leather belt and put the good fisherman in charge of bringing back, with whatever help he needed, all the food he could find, especially eggs and dairy products, as well as a couple of bags or a cloth to prepare them.

Baselli left, placing his daughter under the doctor's good care, and promised to be back before noon.

When the doctor saw that the two carpenters were busy at their work and the patients were sleeping well, he decided to go quietly back up into the Tower to bring back a new load of objects—gold bricks, precious stones, medication and grains of wheat. He prepared three or four towels to make the transport easier, grabbed his gun, which he had reloaded, and said that he was going to look around

to see if he could find some game. And he gave the two workers a bottle of good wine to be in a good mood for the morning.

After that he left without a sound and pretended to check on the sleeping girl's condition. He took advantage of the workers being inside the yacht to slip into the grotto and find the stairs.

A half hour later he was on his way back with his towels full of the booty he had found and that he had put at the bottom of the stairs to get them when it was convenient. It only took a few trips back and forth between the yacht and the hiding place and soon the various treasures were safe and secure on the boat, some in the crates fixed by the workers, the rest in his cabin where he was eager to get started on a conclusive experiment as soon as possible.

Remembering the effect that a few mouthfuls of ant wheat had had on his own body when he was first in the fields of the Tower, he wanted to try the same treatment on the wounded and also see if it might not help to wake up Pia.

So, he started blowing a few grains of wheat between the mandibles of the monster with a little pipe and happily noticed that by a kind of reflex, or at least an unconscious movement, the mandibles slowly chewed the prey given to them.

It was a kind of unspoken invitation to continue. The doctor hurried to repeat the operation and did not stop until he made the giant ant take in about half a pound of fresh wheat. Then he let the patient digest what he had taken in and went to see the sleeping young lady. He took a flask of ammonia and a glass full of the same wheat that the wounded had just swallowed with such obvious pleasure.

First he put the ammonia under Pia's nose. She sneezed right away, three times, and then opened her eyes. But she was still drowsy and kind of dazed. The doctor then put a few grains of ant wheat between her lips and she started chewing, without looking like she knew what she was doing.

But as the ammonia started working on her brain, she regained consciousness. Soon she showed clear signs that she liked the wheat and was ready for more. Aristide complied. He was glad to see that this time the wheat seemed to go down like candy. After giving her as many grains as he had brought in the glass, he was sure that the truly magical wheat united the most stimulating and vitalizing properties for the nerves with a fast-acting property specific to the muscles. He himself had felt the effects the morning before when he got the strength to make a voyage of discovery through the crypts of the Tower, carry away his findings and go back to the grotto to join the workers repairing his yacht; and all this after suffering several days of total starvation and with an arm still hurting from the most meticulous and cruel dissection.

There was a series of really striking circumstances and the young doctor could not reconcile them to know what to think or expect of them. While he was pondering these things, the sleeper woke up for good, stared at him and suddenly asked, "What have you done with the *bestia*?"

"The beast?" Aristide repeated, taken by surprise and not yet ready with a plausible story.

"Yes, the beast who attacked me with his venom! I didn't have time to see his face, but I saw his hooked feet when I was about to ask him what he wanted. His demon feet, all black, with huge claws. You killed him, I hope, because I can still hear your gunshots ringing in my ears."

"Well, no. I brought him back to health and now I'm basically taking care of him in my cabin."

"You're taking care of him! What are you thinking? Such an evil beast with the devil's claws! You might as well take care of Beelzebub! I'm sure it's him and maybe you can't even kill him. But you can always try. Cut off his head! Does this awful beast talk? Has it said anything to you while you're waiting for it to strangle you to thank you for your care?"

"No, not yet," Aristide was amused by the avenging fury. "I put too much lead in its head, you see, and it's shut him up."

"It must be really wicked to hide its face like a penitent of Saint Francis! You'll show it to me, won't you, when I can get up?"

"Are you strong enough yet?" the doctor asked to call off the dogs before this flood of questions.

"No, not at all, but I will be. My legs still feel numb, like when you're too cold, you know, but they're tingling, which might mean it'll soon be over. So, what did you give me to eat that was so good? I thought maybe it was manna, like the Hebrews had in the desert, as the Holy Book says. It felt like snow on my tongue and it made me feel strong. I'd like some more!" she added like an innocent baby.

“Well, I’ll bring you some more in an hour or two,” Aristide said. He put his hand over her eyes to stop the interrogation. “You should get some more sleep now and not think about anything.”

She was quiet for a minute and when he started to leave she asked curiously, “Where did the beast come from? Obviously from the depths of this grotto since it didn’t come in from the front. Do you know if that’s where it lives?”

“We’ll find out some other time. For now, sleep!” the doctor ordered, slipping away to his yacht. There, too, things had changed.

On the cabin bunk the Beast was sitting up. It had broken the strap around its arms like it was string, torn off the bandage and compress that were covering its face and stared straight ahead with all the facets of its motionless eyes.

Aristide jumped on it and grabbed the two pincers that lay bare on the blanket. Maybe he expected it to put up a fight, but he met with only passive surrender that was literally translated by nerve messages rushing through his fingers. The messages were communicated in the long and short pulses of Morse code.

“Obviously he’s going to kill me! And he’s right since I would kill him if I were in his place. What a brilliant idea I had to put him aside for vivisection! If it weren’t for him I would be free and healthy with four fresh subjects to choose from for my studies. Instead, here I am under his thumb with a broken head and not enough strength even to stand up...not to mention that I don’t have my anesthetic pipe. He’s going to get even and it serves me right. He isn’t stupider than me!”

He stopped for a minute as if he was worn out by the psychic effort, then continued patiently, like he was talking about someone else.

“It’s too bad, really! If I know things that he doesn’t know, then he, too, might have a lot to teach me about this outside world that I know nothing about, but that would like to know everything!”

Now, without even realizing it Doctor Cordat had already become used to this basic way of understanding his patient’s thought as a result of his two experiences; and unconsciously his own thoughts answered the monster, which right away felt them through the palm of its antennae. And these were his thoughts:

“The beast is right! It knows a lot of things that I have no idea about, not to mention the rest of the human species. The two of us could teach each other a great deal, if we could share our knowledge! But how could we do that? We would have to trust each other and make a pact that would put an end to all hostility.”

The monster answered immediately, “It’s easy. Without my pipe of venom, I’m unable to harm a fly, let alone a man. You’ve disarmed me. I’ll give you my word, if you give me yours. Mine is unconditional and I will trust you...”

“What guarantee do I have?”

“Our mutual interest.”

Aristide was quiet. He thought about it.