

Part I

Chapter I: An Inauspicious Journey

“I shall debark you, Ned Sprye, layer by layer, as I would a juniper tree,” McCready growled as he shifted his sitting position for the umpteenth time. He shoved his bowler down his brow in an attempt to shield his bloodshot eyes from the sunlight boring through the portholes of the aership.

“I am sorry, McCready, but I shall not be brow-beaten simply because I am denying you drink.”

“In my most needy hour.”

“At your own request! ‘Keep me from the bottle, old man,’ said you prior to embarking on this journey. ‘You must promise not to succumb to my protestations and manipulation,’ you soundly declared and upon your authority I am thus complying.”

“You know I do not suffer travelling well, especially on these infernal aerships. All this bobbing about, like a cork at sea. It is not only damned uncomfortable, it’s unnatural.”

“And whiskey would aid you in your pursuit of comfort I suppose?” I quipped, knowing full well his response.

“Damn right it would.”

“And when you are brandishing your dagger, threatening the good captain of this aership within an millimeter of his life, or trying to open the cabin door for a bit of fresh air. What then, old man?”

As per his customary bad humor, McCready answered with a grunting noise, reminiscent of a warthog caught in a snare. He balled himself up, and pulled his overcoat around him in an effort to make everything vanish, especially me.

The journey had begun in the most inauspicious manner possible. While waiting to board the Pan Continental Express on route southward to Sar, two good-sized temblors had struck, tossing everyone this way and that. The whole of Anansia, possibly the entire continent, had been experiencing these earthquakes with some regularity and increasing intensity over the last year. The terminal building shook and swayed, and baggage was thrown from the steward's carts to the ground. I noticed then how much the temblors had affected McCready. His face turned ashen and his hands shook uncontrollably. When I asked him if he was alright, he did not respond, as if in a trance. When I inquired as to his health a second time, he snapped at me, telling me to mind my own business. I sighed a breath of relief, knowing then that my partner had returned to normal.

Now, several hours into our voyage, I looked across at McCready's face; a weathered map of hardscrabble journey through life. Gerald McCready was my partner of some eight years now – senior partner he would have me say – and yet I knew hardly anything about him. More often than not, he was inebriated, perpetually obstinate, and spontaneously cantankerous with any individual who dared to give him greeting in the early morning hours. It took some herculean effort to have even a modicum of affection for the old bastard, and yet, when a situation went terribly wrong, as it often did, there was no better man to have at your side.

In the Great Conflict against The Northern Kingdom of Quegal, McCready had been captured and held prisoner for two years in the northern reaches of that most inhospitable land, where the shade of darkness is perpetually drawn. We have all heard of the cruelty imposed on our brave soldiers by those dark-hearted Northerners lead by their cruel and despicable leader, Sanjan Mashiq, so one can only imagine the ordeal he must have experienced. As testament to their barbarity, McCready wore several large scars about his person: a crescent shaped divot

above his right eye, arching to the tip of his ear, three missing digits on his right, another deep gouge that tear-dropped from the edge of his nose to the side of his mouth partially hidden by a large duster moustache, and a coarseness to his voice as if a jagged tool had been played upon that most delicate of instruments, his vocal cords. There may have been other “souvenirs” punctuating his incarceration in the north among his person but I was not privy to them.

I was eight years old when Mashiq’s army attacked our country’s border on the thinnest of pretexts – some diplomatic slight of some sort; it was never clear. The truth, we suspected, was that our country’s central location on the continent, fair climate, and wealth of natural resources were too tempting for the rapacious barbarian. I was too young and my father too old to serve, but like all good Anansian children, I longed to fight honorably for kin and country. I voraciously read all the accounts in *The National Times*. My playmates and I reenacted all the major battles, especially the taking of Port Janus by our stalwart navy and marines, and in those first years I nightly fell to my pillow with dreams of combat and glory. In that time, as the reader will no doubt recall, we expected a swift a victory. Prime Minister Fallon practically guaranteed it. Who then could have imagined it would be ten long and painful years before the conflict would come to an end. Month after month, year after year, the news from the front looked bleaker and bleaker. I do not need to remind you of the dark pall that fell over our nation. Our beloved Anansia plunged into a bottomless pit of despair; a nadir from which none believed we could recover. So many mothers sent their children off to war only to greet them upon their unceremonious return in plain wooden boxes. We had won the war, yes, but at an irretrievable cost, and for men such as McCready, the battle still raged within.

The Servo-Steward bumbled down the aisle with its sickening sweet chimes. *Bong – bing – bong!* “*Ladies and Gentlemen, the Captain requests all passengers to engage their seat*

restraints as we will be experiencing bumpy skies ahead,” it proclaimed in its hollow voice.

“Refreshment service will be suspended until we have passed the difficulty. Thank-you for your cooperation...” Bong – bing – bong! *“Ladies and Gentlemen, the Captain requests...”* and ever onward, rolling down the aisle to the next compartment, the rancid smell of burning coal and oil trailing after it.

“Come now, McCready,” I said as the aeroship began to roil and yaw. “We’re about to pass over the Yahntis. Time to buckle up.”

With great reluctance, McCready unfolded his himself, eyes still shut tight, and with one groping hand, he managed to secure the restraining belt around the middle of his torso. The old curmudgeon then reconstituted his body back into his contorted position and fell into silence.

Shortly thereafter, as promised, we encountered turbulence so rough, I could feel the tea time biscuits marching their way up from the pit of my stomach. It took all my concentration and strength to assure they did not complete their journey. Incredulously, McCready, slumbered and snored through the cacophony as if he were tucked comfortably into a lush feather bed.

“Your traveling companion’s fortitude is much to be admired, sir,” came a deep voice from across the aisle. I turned towards the speaker, and recognized him immediately; Lord Ballentine Woodes, Anansia’s minister of the exchequer and hero of the Verheiden Offensive. His smile was as warm and inviting as the timbre of his voice. He was, by my recollection, in his late fifties though he had the appearance of a man ten years younger. His face was angular and sharp, but not unpleasantly so. His neatly trimmed beard complemented his jutting chin, and softened his patrician nose. His eyes, dark and full of intelligence, danced behind his wire-framed spectacles. He was impeccably dressed in an expensive, but not ostentatious suit made of worsted wool. And though it might have seemed incongruous for a gentleman of Lord Woodes

social standing to be traveling in coach class, his reputation was well known as a man of the people who eschewed the pretense of luxury and privilege, and for that attitude he was much beloved not only among the veterans with which he served in the Great War, but also with working class Anansians.

“Yes, my Lord. It is a mystery to me as to how he is able to bear it.”

“I will venture a guess that he is a veteran of the Great War. Am I correct?”

“Indeed, sir, he is.”

“That would account for it then,” Lord Woodes said. “I have known men in the battlefield to sleep through a night of unrelenting pounding from the North’s Sixers as if they were peacefully resting in a hammock on some beachfront resort.” His smile was infectious, and yet there resided within it a certain melancholy. He carried himself with great dynamism and bearing, at once commanding yet inclusive. He extended his hand across the aisle towards me to shake. “Ballentine Woodes, sir, at your service.” It was, of course, not the arm he had famously lost in battle, the left one, now a mechanical substitute – but his right, which forced him to turn awkwardly in his seat.

“I know full well who you are, my Lord,” I fumbled, as I put out my hand to shake his.

“Ned Sprye, and it is indeed a great honor to meet you.”

“What brings you and your companion to Sar, Mr. Sprye?”

“My companion and I are Inspectors General on official government business. More than that, as I am sure you will appreciate, I cannot say.”

“Then we shall talk of it no further. I myself am traveling strictly for pleasure – there are no equals when it comes to the comforts afforded by the resorts of Sar, do you not agree, Mr. Sprye?”

“I cannot speak with any authority, my Lord,” I stated, “since it is my first time visiting the southern hemisphere.”

“My dear fellow, you cannot be serious!” he said, eyebrows raised in surprise. “Port Sánchez is one of the great wonders of the known world, what with its carved sea walls created by mile high ocean waves. You can see a thousand paintings but I tell you truly, Mr. Sprye, you will stand in awe for hours on end staring at the magnificence of its coastline.”

“I have heard, my Lord,” I said, not wishing to appear a complete ignoramus, though, in truth, I knew nothing about which Lord Woodes was referring to.

“But it is the people, sir, that are the true wonder of that Southern paradise. Never was there a race on the continent more hospitable and gracious.”

“Without question, the Sarans’ reputation for hospitality is world renowned,” I said hoping to sound worldly. “But you will agree, I think, that in every bushel of fruit there are bound to be a few rotten ones.”

“Too true, Mr. Sprye. Too true. And that, no doubt, is nature of your business in Port Sánchez.” Off my silence, Lord Woode quickly added with a smile, “which you are not at liberty to discuss.”

“Thank you for understanding, my Lord,” I said with a slight nod of deference. Revealing McCready’s and my mission in Sar would not only have been a serious breach of security, but nigh on impossible. Neither of us had anything but the vaguest of instructions from our chief of operations, Major Simkins. “Be on the next Trans Continental Express leaving for Port Sánchez,” was his curt and succinct order.

As the aership has passed over the last craggy peak of the Yahnti Mountains, the air smoothed itself out and once again the annoying Servo-Steward bobbed down the aisles

announcing that we were free to move about the cabin, and that the bar had reopened. That news roused McCready from his somnambulant state, whereupon he opened his eyes, stretched his lanky arms above him and declared his intention to visit the bar in order to discover what exotic spirits it might be offering. Before I could remind him of his solemn oath to remain free of drink for the duration of our flight, Lord Woodes stood up and shouted, “Good God, Mac! Is that truly you?”

McCready was physically startled, and his eyes went wide as saucers when he looked over at His Lordship. “Colonel Woodes, sir,” gasped McCready. His mouth stretched into a large and crooked smile. “Well, I’ll be damned to the four corners of hell.”

“We’ve already visited one corner of hell in Verheiden, eh Sergeant?” Lord Woodes declared, vigorously shaking McCready’s hand. “How much worse can the other three be?” At that, McCready let out a laugh of such large proportion and ease, that it was my turn to become physically startled.

“Colonel sir, may I present my young associate, Ned Sprye. Neddy, this here is Colonel Woodes, a magician of sorts whose greatest trick was to thread one hundred exhausted soldiers through the needle’s eye of death, me included.”

“Now, Mac. I shall take you for an imposter if you display any form of modesty. You had as much to do with our salvation as me.”

“And Lieutenant Altman,” McCready solemnly declared, his eyes cast downward. “We mustn’t forget her, my Lord.”

“Without question, Mac. A hero to us all. God rest her lovely soul,” said Lord Woodes, nodding in solemn agreement. “In truth, I have already had the pleasure of meeting your young Mr. Sprye whilst you were taking your beauty sleep, Mac old boy.” This produced another

guffaw from McCready, who slapped me on the back, and then insisted we all join him for a drink to celebrate such a fortuitous reunion. To my continued surprise, Lord Woodes accepted McCready's invitation with enthusiasm, and shortly thereafter, the two of them bellied up to the bar, singing old army songs and raising one toast after another to the fallen comrades in the Battle of Verheiden.

Chapter II: Our Assignment Revealed

“You are late, gentlemen.”

McCready and I were unceremoniously escorted into a cavernous office, as imposing as the outside of the Sarian Imperial Government building. Murals depicting what I assumed to be famous events from Sar history covered the walls; battle scenes mostly to my reckoning. A severe woman sat behind an equally severe desk. This, I could only assume, was General Sabina Ferrer, whom we had been instructed to meet with. She did not stand to greet us, but instead indicated two heavy, intricately carved wooden chairs on the opposite side of her desk where we were to sit. They were designed, I am sure, to make guests feel as uncomfortable as humanly possible. It was most effective.

General Ferrer was, I ventured, in her late forties. Her skin was a polished mahogany, strikingly contrasted by steel grey hair, wound tightly in a bun behind her head. She wore the uniform of the Sar Imperial Army, and though she spoke impeccably fluent Anansian, she had the unmistakable lilting accent of a native from the southern regions.

McCready, being the old-fashioned gentleman that he was, didn't much like being scolded by a woman. Still, he understood and respected the authority of her rank, and so restrained himself from any protest. In addition, the old boy was under the sad effects of his broken promise. His head, I would venture to guess, was pounding out a laborious atonal symphony courtesy of hard whiskey and high altitude.

Last night, upon disembarking the aershhip, we were processed through customs, where we lost contact with Lord Woodes as he was escorted past the lines of the common folk as would befit his stature. Before that moment, however, he invited the both of us to dine with him at his apartments within the exclusive resort known as Winter Falls; a name replete with irony since

winter never touches the Saran shores. I was more than reluctant; first, we had no idea what our assignment would entail, nor what time frame it would occur in. Second, the notion of eating with a First Tier Lord at a fancy resort seemed fraught with opportunities to embarrass one's self, no matter how gracious and forgiving the host. But before I could give our apologies to Lord Woodes, McCready readily accepted for the two of us, expressing gratitude and thanks. Later, whilst we had been standing in the queue for an hour, I asked McCready why he hadn't declined, since neither of us had any idea what our agenda would be once we reported in to the Saran government officials. "It never hurts to have a high born on your side, Neddy," he snickered. "Especially one such as Lord Woodes."

Now, to my relief, being dressed down for tardiness by the stern General Ferrer, it was clear we would never avail ourselves of Lord Woodes' invitation.

"You are, no doubt, aware of the global situation?" General Ferrer asked.

I looked over at McCready, and could tell at once that he was irritated. He preferred to be told the assignment without unnecessary details. He knew how to execute orders to the letter and I had learned not to interject posits between the lines of those assignments. If I did, I would be met with an iron stare and a terse grunt of impatience. To my great surprise, McCready simply answered, "which one would that be, General?"

"The one that threatens to destroy the entire world as we have come to know it," said General Ferrer in a chilling matter-of-fact manner.

"Ah, no then," McCready said, shifting in his seat a bit. "That particular situation is one we are unaware of."

"Simply put, gentlemen, the continent is being ripped asunder by an unknown force."

"That's a grim bit of news," spat McCready.

“Yes, indeed. Grim. But you, gentlemen, are the first step in the path that will lead our world to salvation.”

“That is to be our assignment then? To save the world?” asked McCready with a wry smile.

“No need for sarcasm, Mr. McCready,” said the General. “Once you hear the facts, you will realize there is nothing remotely humorous in this endeavor.” She stood up slowly, using her hands on the desk to support her body. We too stood, as respect would dictate. She grabbed a wooden cane leaning next to her chair and as she moved from behind her desk, I could see that right leg was artificial. Not a mechanical one, as you would find in Anansia, but one carved out of polished mahogany wood that closely matched the tone of her skin.

McCready’s eyes went wide with the sight of it. “Do you mind if I ask,” he queried after a moment of uncharacteristic speechlessness, “where it was you received your wound?”

“The Battle of Verheiden, Inspector. Same as you.” Of course she knew about McCready’s service in the Great War. No doubt she already read a complete dossier on the both of us before her government would allow us to even set one toe across their border.

“I didn’t realize, General,” said McCready with a sympathetic and gentle demeanor as I’d ever seen before. “My apologies for being an arse and a half earlier.”

“None needed, comrade,” the General said. “Many a brave soldier lost their lives in that nightmare. I am lucky to have only lost a limb.”

“Queer sort of luck, you ask me.”

“Perhaps,” she replied thoughtfully, a little lost in the memory of it all. McCready allowed some memories to seep into his otherwise hard exterior as well. My presence was not acknowledged, which was acceptable to me, since there was nothing that would ever allow me to

understand what these two veterans of the Great War must have experienced. I could only admire the stoic manner at which they endured their wounds, external and internal. The General then nodded to the aide stationed at the entrance, and as he opened the large wooden door, a brickhouse of a man marched towards us with great purpose. He was neatly dressed in his uniform, his chest bedecked with bright, colorful medals. His countenance was proud and precise, but not in an off-putting manner. He came directly up to General Ferrer and saluted her in the Sarian manner; a click of the heels, a swift fist slammed against his left breast, followed by a deep, rigid bow. “Come, come, Neto, no need to stand on ceremony here,” said the General, extending her arms indicating an embrace was in order. The soldier complied, embracing her and giving a kiss on each cheek as was the Sarian custom.

“You are looking wonderful, my General,” the soldier said in heavily accented Anansian, clearly for our benefit.

“Flattery hardly suits you, Captain, but at my age, I will accept any compliment that comes my way.” Before the Captain had an opportunity to protest, the General continued. “Let me introduce you to General Inspectors Gerald McCready and Ned Sprye, representatives of the Anansian government.”

“Sirs, it is an honor,” said the Captain as he awkwardly extended his hand to McCready, knowing that it was the proper way to greet an Anansian, but unsure of the exact process. McCready vigorously shook it, startling the stalwart soldier, which, I believe, my old curmudgeon of a partner secretly delighted in. The Captain then turned to me, expecting the same experience, but I shook his hand conventionally, which seemed a great relief to him.

“This is my old friend and comrade in arms, Captain Ernesto Manrique. He will be your guide, escort, and protector during your mission.”

“Is our mission such that we will need someone to protect us, Madam General?”

McCready asked, raising an eyebrow in suspicion.

“Indeed it is, Mr. McCready. Indeed it is.” General Ferrer sat us all down at a round conference table situated at the other side of her office. “Are any of you familiar with The Sons of Gaea?” she asked. All of us, Captain Manrique included, confessed we had not. “Not surprising. They have kept a fairly low profile. Until now.” The General extracted an oddly colored piece of stationery from a worn, brown leather portfolio, laid it on the table in front of her, put on a pair of spectacles from her breast pocket, and began to read. “To All the Governments and Kingdoms residing with our Fair Mother. Greetings from The Sons of Gaea. We are a group of individual persons who have dedicated our resources, our lives, indeed our immortal souls to the protection of our beloved planet.” The General paused for a moment and looked up at us. “A statement replete with irony, as you will see.” She continued to read. “We are disheartened to learn that you, in your ignorance and, it must be said, arrogance, believe you can stand against Our Mother as she moves to reshape herself anew. No human efforts can detain her from this destiny. But as you move towards impeding her progress, you do great harm. Harm that can only cause more grief to her and to us, her children. As her chosen protectors we cannot allow your cowardly actions to continue. Your so-called scientists shall not prevail in their misguided attempts to reverse the process Our Mother has decreed. Interfering with fate, you will discover has a cost. A great cost. Is it one you are willing to pay? Because pay you shall with the lives of your scientists and countless others if you continue. Their blood will be on your hands, and yours alone. We beg of you to allow The Mother into your hearts. Our destiny is intertwined with hers, and you will see that a new and magnificent existence will await all within her.”

The General let out a long sigh as she replaced the correspondence back into the portfolio. “And that, gentlemen, is the gist of it. This was sent to leaders of each of the six countries on the continent.”

“A bigger basket of claptrap I’ve never heard!” exclaimed McCready. “A bunch of wild-eyed poofsters dancing around a spruce tree wearing nothing but fig leaves or some such? Surely they cannot be taken seriously.”

“I agree with you, Mr. McCready,” spouted the Captain. “It seems like pure *stercore*, if you’ll pardon my language, General.”

“I would agree with you completely if not for this.” She pulled another sheet of paper from her dossier which I immediately recognized as the official stationary of the Anansian Government. “We must urgently inform you,” she read, “that our most esteemed scientist, Doctor Raymond Harrington, was assassinated outside his lodgings late last night in a most cruel and vicious manner.” She again paused, and looked up at us from the correspondence. “I am sure you are aware of this incident, yes?”

“This is the first we’ve heard of it,” McCready exclaimed, not liking surprises. That seemed to surprise the General.

“It is not uncommon for us to be separated from such reports,” I interjected. “It aids in our impartiality while investigating. Or so our superiors believe.” I wasn’t sure it was a smart idea to reveal to a foreign government how little McCready and I knew, though we were most certainly ignorant of Dr. Harrington’s death. I started to feel an uneasiness, as I’m sure McCready did, as to how much more was being kept from us.

“He was,” she continued reading, “as you are no doubt aware, at work on a solution to the crisis facing our world, and based on the correspondence all our governments received by the

association calling itself “The Sons of Gaea,” we must assume that they are responsible for this dastardly act.

“You will appreciate, I am sure, that Doctor Harrington’s work cannot be for naught, therefore I request, with great humility, that you send your own expert in this field, the esteemed Doctor Telesforo Zeta to Anansia at once so he may analyze, adapt, and hopefully continue Doctor Harrington’s research. Time, as you know, is not on our side. Our government will be sending two of our best and most resourceful agents to aid you in the transportation of Doctor Zeta. You shall have the full resources of our exchequer at your disposal for this mission. Signed, Jeremy Fallon, Prime Minister of Anansia.”

And there it was. Our mission? Babysitters to some scientist. Pitiful. A side glance towards McCready confirmed my suspicions he felt as I did. Captain Manrique was disappointed as well. We were, however, good soldiers and if told to leap off a bridge, were trained to hold our nose and jump without concern as to the condition of the water below. Even if it was supposedly aiding the prevention of the end of the world, it seemed a dim and pointless mission. General Ferrer could sense the deflation in our enthusiasm. “I know how it seems on the surface of it all, gentlemen, but, in point of fact, this will be anything but a gentle stroll in the park.” She continued to outline the plan: It would be too dangerous to use any conventional means of transportation to escort Doctor Zeta to Anansia; airship, rail, and even by sea would be fraught with peril and open to sabotage. Instead, we would be traveling through the treacherous Motagua Wilderness that stretched between Sar and the Yahnti Mountains in a caravan of wagons and horses escorted by Sarian troops under the command of Captain Manrique.

“That will be the easy part,” the Captain gruffly interjected. “Any of the passes through the Yahnti Mountain range at this time of the year will be, it needs to be said, close to fatal.”

“Which hopefully will discourage any brigands from attacking the caravan,” replied the General.

“Pardon me, but will it not be the Yahnti natives themselves who pose the greatest threat?” McCready asked. “They are, rumor has it, not exactly welcoming to outside visitors.”

“This is where Captain Manrique will be of great service, since, as it happens, he was born and raised in the Yahntis,” The General said with a warm smile, looking over at the Captain.

“I am not sure how much that will count for anything, Madam General,” the Captain said, frowning. “The Yahntos always attack from above, and tend to ask questions after the deed is done.”

“True, but there are no alternatives I’m afraid. And, it is hardly the greatest challenge any of you will be facing.” That was a daunting statement indeed! It was well-known among practically every soul in the continent that the Motagua Wilderness, with its population of wild and vicious beasts, was a nightmare of enormous proportions. Great white apes, twice the size of an average man, who would rip a person limb from limb just for the sport of it; formidable tigers with monstrous incisors, who hunted in packs and would devour a human being within minutes. And then there were the insects, and the rodents; the lack of potable water or vegetation, and finally the scorching temperatures reaching well above a person’s ability to survive in the open for more than an hour, with or without water. And then the Yahntis! With its narrow canyons, and its famous bandits! All the while the threat of being attacked by unknown assailants dogging us at every footfall. And yet, these were the least challenges of our mission? I shuddered to think of what misfortune greater than these could befall us.

Chapter III: The Querulous Doctor Zeta

“General Ferrer, I really must protest being summoned here most unceremoniously!” A stout man dressed in an overly formal suit, strutted into the General’s office without so much as a how do you do. Upon his head, was an unruly jungle of gray hair. He sported a full beard which jutted out every which way as if it had just exploded. In all this, tiny round spectacles of such thickness they gave only a hint of the eyes behind them, which were decidedly red with anger. “To be swept up by your soldiers from my study and taken here against my will without any explanation is... well, upsetting. Who knows what gossip my neighbors might be spreading now. I am a citizen of Sar, in good, if not excellent, standing and I demand, yes, demand to know what all this is about.”

“My apologies,” the General said. “If you’ll be seated, Doctor, all will be explained to you.” The doctor reluctantly sat in the chair the General was indicating with her hand. “If this were not an urgent matter of great national and continental security, I promise you we would have given you more notice. But as it is such, we had no choice in the matter.” She went onto explain, in Sarian, what we had already learned from the letter sent by Prime Minister Fallon. McCready and I sat much like mute statues during this exchange, since neither of us understood a word that was being said. It was all conveyed to us later by Captain Manrique, and I am grateful for my linguistic ignorance since there was little said that would have made McCready or me happy.

“It’s a fool’s errand you send me on,” the doctor spat back. “There is no saving the world. Especially now that Doctor Harrington is gone. Murdered no less! And will you make that my fate as well? No, I shall not expose myself to such danger for the sake of such a folly-laden enterprise.”

“This is not a discussion, sir. You are being ordered by your government to accompany these men to Anansia,” the general said sternly. “And that is what you will do.”

“Very well, if I am to be a prisoner, then I shall comply. But let it be on the record that I do not go willingly.”

“Noted,” said the General with a sigh. Even without understanding a word this little man was spouting, it became vividly clear why General Ferrer had deemed him the greatest of all our challenges.

“If I can be returned to my apartments, I shall put my affairs in order, and pack my trunks accordingly. Is it to be by sea or aership I shall be travelling by?”

“It shall be neither, and there is only time enough for you to take the barest of essentials, including whatever documents you may require, as you shall be departing at first light in the morrow. A detail will accompany you to your quarters and assist you in that endeavor. You will have three hours to do so.”

“Outrageous! Simply outrageous! I shall protest to the highest of authorities,” he exclaimed as he stood up from his chair.

“Sit down, Doctor.”

“I shall not!” shouted the Doctor, his face blossoming red with indignity. The General gave slight nod to Captain Manrique, who stood up, walked over to Doctor Zeta, grabbed him from the middle, picked him up in mid-air, and shoved him back down in his seat, holding him down by the shoulder with the palm of his hand. This was done so swiftly, the doctor only had time to react with shock and awe.

“I, sir, am the highest authority you shall come in contact with until you are safely delivered into the hands of the Anansian government,” said the general, losing all patience with

the little doctor. “Any lack of cooperation in this matter will be considered an act of treason for which the penalty is death. Am I clear, sir?”

“Yes, Madam General,” the doctor said, sullenly.

“Captain Manrique has been charged with your safety and these two Anansian gentlemen, Inspectors McCready and Sprye, will assure you arrive at their government’s headquarters. That will be all.” Two soldiers appeared, and along with Captain Manrique, escorted the sullen doctor out of the room. The General’s attention then turned to us. “You see the problem, gentlemen.”

“Indeed, Madam General,” answered McCready. “In any language, he appears to be quite a handful. But nothing Ned and I can’t handle.”

“Of that I have no doubt. It goes without saying, however, that as tiresome as the good doctor may be, he is considered by our government to be a national treasure. If anything of a fatal nature should befall him while in Anansia’s care, there would be grave consequences.”

“We have sworn our lives to our profession,” McCready answered without emotion. “You have our word on it.”

“Which is all that is required,” she said with a smile as she stood up. “I hope you will enjoy your evening, gentlemen. I wish your stay could be longer else I would be happy to show you the sights of Sar myself. But duty calls for us all and so I shall bid you good-bye and good luck.” The General extended her hand, which McCready and I shook, each in our own turn, and thus the meeting was at end.

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Since our expedition was to commence at first light, I had fully expected McCready to send a note of apology to Lord Woodes, explaining duty would prevent us from honoring his

kind invitation to dine with him. Yet, after our audience with the General, McCready bade me freshen up and put on the best suit of clothes I could muster from my luggage. “You cannot be serious!” I protested.

“Dead serious, Ned,” McCready said. “I’ll meet you in the lobby in one hour.” I could only imagine how the evening would be spent; eating and drinking into the wee hours of the night, dragging an obdurate McCready back to our hotel, singing atop his lungs for all of Sar to hear. We would probably be arrested by the local police for disturbing the peace, then humiliated having to be bailed out by the Sarian government, only later face discipline once home. It was a depressing prognostication, and my heart sunk to the pit of my stomach. Surveying McCready’s expression, however, it was crystal clear there would be no winning this argument.

We engaged one of the horse drawn taxis Sar is famous for outside of our hotel. It proved to be a long journey to the grand resort in Winter Falls, and an albeit fleeting portrait of this southern country left a most favorable impression. Even though available to them, the Sarians utilized only the most essential technology, uninterested in anything that an average Anansian would consider vital to their luxury and well-being. Notably absent were Servos, mechanical servants that saturated Anansian life, and I for one, was impressed by the lack of them, since I disdain their existence to the maximum degree. A seemingly happy and content people, the Sarians seemed to enjoy the fruits of their own labor and the bounty their rich soil provides. Family, it appeared, were the greatest treasures they possessed. On every street, in every square we passed, you could see children playing, young couples holding hands, families eating together. Singing and dancing spontaneously erupted in any of the gatherings I observed. This was true in the city as well as the rural countryside.

“If only they knew the fate awaiting them,” McCready said, with a smirk as he indicated the pleasing scenes I have described to you. “Considering all this nonsense is true.”

“You believe it is not?”

“I believe none of it matters, if you are soliciting my opinion. If the world is coming to an end, then it is. I concern myself more with the affairs of men and the deeds they do. If there’s murder afoot, I’m all in. Saving the world from natural disaster, however, is hardly in the description of our duties.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever heard you wax so philosophical, old man,” said I with a smile and a wink.

“Nothing philosophical about it, Neddy. There are no crueller beasts than the human kind, and that they need to be tamed, or corralled is a given in my book.”

“You agree with these zealots then?”

“Hell no! When did I say that?”

“Just now, I believe.”

“What I said, if you would bother to listen once and a while, is that none is our concern but what we are ordered to do, which is to deliver that walking piss-pot to our fair Anansia, and then move on to the next assignment. Believing that we are serving a higher cause, that is saving the world, is a waste of a good man’s energy.”

“Well, on that I cannot disagree,” I said, hoping to end the line of conversation. When we arrived at the entrance of the formidable Winter Falls resort -- as resplendent as Lord Woodes described -- we were told by the gatekeeper that his Lordship was called back to Anansia on urgent business, and he sent his regrets in a note, which the gatekeeper handed to McCready.

Upon reading the note, McCready reported that Lord Woodes was most apologetic, insisting that he make up for his rude absence by inviting us to his estate once we had returned home. “Something to look forward to,” said McCready, a glimpse of disappointment in his expression. After folding the note, and slipping it into his breast pocket, he bade the taxi driver turn around and deliver us back to our hotel.

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I had barely laid my head down upon my pillow when there was a knock at the door. A young Sarian soldier nervously explained, in broken Anansian, that Captain Manrique requests we leave at once. Sarian spies, apparently, had detected agents of The Sons of Gaea operating within Port Sánchez. The aide was ordered to take us immediately to headquarters where troops were mustering. When I exited into the hallway, McCready was there, valise in hand, and in a foul mood. As an extra precaution, the young aide indicated we must use the exit at the back of the hotel; the front being deemed too much of a risk. We followed him down the back stairs, out an unimposing doorway, and into a dark alleyway.

“I’ll ask you not to move, gentlemen,” said a muffled voice in perfect Anansian. “Lest you wish to die a most unpleasant death.” The next sound was the distinctive click of a pistol being cocked, and aimed directly at us. The supposed Sarian soldier grabbed me from behind, holding a dagger to my throat.

“What’s this about then?” asked McCready without emotion.

“You would do well, sir, to hold your tongue,” said the gunman in a rough tone.

“Yes, yes, but are we to just stand here all night?”

“For the last time, sir, I am asking--” and that was all our assailant had time to blurt out.

With lightning speed, McCready aimed a solid fist directly at the gunman’s nose. He then

grabbed the brigand's pistol arm, guiding it in an upward salute to the night sky, forcing the gun to discharge harmlessly into the air. I took advantage of this distraction to deliver a solid blow into the imposter's solar plexus with my elbow, knocking the wind out of him. I spun around, kicking the dagger out of his hand, knocked him to the ground with my valise, then pinned him down with my forearm to his neck.

The distinct sound of snapping of bones could be heard from where McCready was, followed by a loud scream of pain. "Not another move, or it shall be your last," declared McCready to his assailant. He then turned to me. "How are you doing, Neddy?"

"Never better," I replied. "A bit too easy, yes?"

"Yes, indeed," said McCready. My eyes had by now adjusted to the darkness and I could see that McCready was holding the pistol directly in front of his assailant. "Now then," he said, "suppose you tell us what this is all about."

"The Mother shall prevail," declared the brigand loudly as he smiled a curious smile. Suddenly, white froth began to appear from the corners of his mouth. His eyes rolled up inside his head, and within seconds, all the blood drained from his face. He was stone cold dead. I turned to the ersatz soldier I held by the throat, and indeed, the same white foam was spewing from his wide-open mouth, his tongue lolling to the side, black as coal, dead as dead could be.

"Well," said McCready in his usual droll humor, "that answers the question."

Captain Manrique quickly arrived at our hotel accompanied by several other soldiers after we sent word. The Sons of Gaea, if that's who it was, had charged two frightened school boys with assailing us. We concluded they were never meant to be a serious threat and therefore must have been merely a distraction. "Or a warning," declared Captain Manrique.

“Or a calling card,” McCready replied thoughtfully. “Letting us know they are privy to our intentions.” It was a logical conclusion, but to what end, I wondered out loud? Would it not benefit their cause to hide their agenda? Why not simply assassinate Doctor Zeta and be done with it? It was difficult to fathom what tenets these zealots were bound by, what ethics they might hold to, which would dictate fair notice. Further, that these two poor, misguided souls would give their lives for such? It defied logic.

“Logic holds no quarter in the minds of madmen,” stated McCready without irony.

“We should, for the sake of precaution, alter our course,” the Captain said. “There are several ways through the Motagua. All are inhospitable, but there is one considered so dangerous as to be suicidal. That is the route I think we should take. Even the Sons of Gaea would think twice about following us there.” Well, of course they would! I would prefer to think about it several more times were someone to ask my opinion, which none did. Instead, McCready nodded in agreement and the matter was settled.

The route Captain Manrique referred to was via a narrow river named the Sotunga (this from the ancient tongue of Sarian ancestors, as was Motagua, the meaning of both long forgotten), which wound across the entire terrain in a serpentine manner. The banks of the river were populated by poisonous snakes known to leap upon any vessel drifting past. In addition, carnivorous fish with pointed incisors the size of small daggers, called Watongias (also from the ancient tongue), roamed the rocky bottom, waiting for any hapless victim that may fall in. The only bright note was that these river denizens tended to keep other hostile beasts, such as the great apes and the tigers, at bay. Small comfort in my mind, which wasn't eased a bit by Captain Manrique assuring us that the barges had their bottoms clad with sheets of iron to prevent the Watongias from chewing through. Well, I supposed, there could be worse fates than being

supper for a hungry school of man-eating fish, though speaking honestly, I couldn't think of any at the time.