

## Chapter IV - Into the Motagua Wilderness

“What have I done to deserve such misery!?”

It was Doctor Zeta again, moaning and groaning as was his wont, day into night. It had been two days since we ported into the Sotunga river. Two barges had been stuffed with soldiers and supplies. A third held the horses and wagons needed for the trip through the Yahntis. The workmanship of these vessels was exquisite as you might expect from Sarian artisans. The ubiquitous abstract carvings adorned the sides, complemented by colorful banners flying proudly in the wind. As promised, the bottoms were clad in steel, although the scraping sounds of the Watongias could still be heard in the night as they attempted to eat through the supposedly impenetrable hull, which was not the lullaby one might hope for.

The barges were piloted by a crew of three Sarian mariners. One held the tiller, while two others stood on the sides, using long poles to push the vessels forward from behind. A conventional propeller, I was told, would vigorously agitate the waters and the man-eating fish below, causing a violent frenzy resulting in the vessel being destroyed within minutes. The poles, by contrast, were expertly guided softly and swiftly into the water, and therefore seemed to be of no concern to the carnivorous river dwellers. As to the poisonous serpents along the riverbank, copper mesh covered the open area of the barges to prevent any of them from finding their way onto the vessel. I remained skeptical of their fortitude, so fixed a keen and vigilant eye shoreward whenever I ventured on deck. I should say that in spite of the danger lurking all around, the Motagua Wilderness was breathtakingly lush; vivid green vegetation blended effortlessly with the hues of brightly colored flora spread throughout its canopy. The sun glanced through the tall and formidable trees in beams of warm, golden light giving everything it touched a dreamlike quality as if it were a painted by a great master artist. The river itself was a dark turquoise, with

strong currents on the surface that caught the light in such a manner as to create a mesmerizing shimmering effect.

Unfortunately, I was assigned to watch over the burdensome Doctor Zeta on the second barge. McCready and Captain Manrique had conveniently pulled rank, encamping themselves on the lead barge "...to keep an eye out for whatever may come our way," or so argued McCready. The only consolation was that I shared that onerous duty with Lieutenant Ariel Bárcenas, Captain Manrique's second in command, whose company was pleasant compensation indeed. While she possessed the solid physique of a professional soldier and countenance of someone trained to be alert at all times, she had a quick wit and an easy laugh. As a bonus, she spoke fluent Anansian, and more than that, was curious about all aspects of the culture and politics of my country. At first, I half-thought she might have been a spy what with the battery of questions she threw at me. It did not take long, however, to realize she was genuinely intrigued by all things Anansian. I described to her the various points of interest and history I thought a foreigner might find interesting; the things we all learned in grade school, such as the Four Spires of Trippany, built by the ancients, a wonder of the continent; The Transition, from which we established self-rule and the creation of parliament; the discovery of electro-magnetic energy by the Anansian father of science, Doctor Hawley-Manstahl, which revolutionized life on the planet as a whole, and so on. I also took the opportunity to express my disdain for the current obsession Anansians had for Servos, the mechanical beasts that seemed to infiltrate every household and institution. "It is making us weak and lazy," I said, shaking my head. "Doing the work meant for humans! There is even talk of new models that can mimic being a child's nanny! Can you imagine?"

Lieutenant Bárcenas could not. “That would not do in Sar,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “We have a strong belief that whatever work may be done, should be by human hands, especially when it comes to raising our children. Do not get me wrong; I admire the technological advances your country has made, and I doubt the Great War would have ended without your remarkable weapons, but a Sarian prefers a weapon as an extension of their own hands, not the other way around.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said, though admittedly, I was not averse to a Timlo Thirty-Five Electro-Blast rifle tucked neatly under my arm when confronting a brigand. She asked how the Great War had affected us, and I thought it best to be frank: Anansia was still recovering from the wounds the conflagration imposed upon it. While it was always our instinct to keep a confident, stoic front in the face of adversity, the fact was we as a nation wondered if we would ever be the same again. “And now, with the continent supposedly tearing itself apart, it seems less likely, day after day, that Anansia will ever recover.” Ariel (for we were on a first name basis by now) nodded pensively, admitting that her country was in a similar state. Having lost her father and older sister in battle, Ariel joined the army as soon as she came of age feeling obligated to fight on in her family’s memory. “And, it seems, the fighting will never be done,” she declared. “Despite the so-called armistice, Eastern rebels are refusing to concede, constantly testing our mettle at the Sarian border.” She and Captain Manrique had been pulled off the border patrol and assigned to our current mission. “I am not one to question orders,” she declared, “but can this mission really be as important as protecting our country from the invasion of a creature so vile that hell itself would not have him as an ally?” Her eyes filled with fury as she spat out the name “Captain Rendo Aga.” Aga, the pirate, mercenary and all around rogue and his band of bellicose miscreants had done, as we all remember, Quegal’s dirty-work during the

Great War, and afterwards continued to be the scourge of the Eastern seas. His heavily armed warships had effectively cut off all trade routes on that side of the continent including those of Quegal, which completely erased whatever goodwill he had obtained from that nation, making him an international outlaw with a sizable bounty upon his head. That bounty, so the rumor went, was a source of great pride for the dastardly pirate, but as of late, reported Ariel, he had moved his operations inland, converting his warships to dirigibles, attacking the small Sarian villages along the border from the skies above in the middle of the night with electro-pulse cannons he'd stolen from the Anansian army. While the Sarian Guard had been able to restrict his aggression to the border, there was doubt as to how much longer they could hold Aga's forces off.

"It seems Quegal has had the last laugh," I said as we dined on dried meats and cheese. "Their greatest triumph comes in the sad ebbing of war."

"I have heard the common people are struggling there as well," Ariel said.

"I have little sympathy for them, I must confess," I said with disdain. "If they are suffering, it is from a self-inflicted wound."

"That's a harsh declaration, do you not think?" scolded Ariel.

"Why did they not more vigorously protest their leader's incursion into peaceful countries such as ours?"

"Is that how it is done in Anansia, Ned Sprye?" she asked with more than a modicum of sarcasm. "When your country calls you to arms, do you refuse to serve until you're satisfied the cause is just?"

"To a certain extent, yes," I said, somewhat more defensively than I had intended.

"I see," Ariel said with an air of amusement. "Well, it is not our way in Sar. We are descended from warriors, and it is instilled in us at an early age that what we do, we do as one

nation, one people, one family. I do not pretend to understand the customs and culture of the Quegelians, but I venture to say ten years of war and strife has done as much damage to their spirits as our own.”

A deafening crash interrupted our debate. The force of it slammed all of us supping below decks to one side of the hull, along with the food, tables, chairs and supplies. The barge then began to swing violently back and forth, tossing the lanterns from their perch down onto the floor, where flames sprung up from wherever they landed and smoke filled the cabin. I tried desperately to get my bearings, calling out for Ariel, but to no avail. Every time I attempted to stand upright, the furious rocking of the barge knocked me back down. My only recourse was to crawl on all fours like a wounded bear, moving towards what I hoped were the stairs leading to the upper deck.

“*Adiuva mea, adiuva mea!*” came a cry from the smoky shadows. It was Doctor Zeta. I was sorely tempted to ignore his plaintive cries, but duty bound me to crawl my way towards the pitiful doctor’s position. Since his wailing was constant and high-pitched, there was little difficulty in discovering his whereabouts, trapped between two large barrels of wine. I grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket dragging him with one hand, whilst I groped my way forward with the other. The smoke, however, was getting the better of me, and I felt on the verge of tumbling down a deep, dark well of nothingness when a strong hand grabbed mine. “This way, Ned,” a terse voice commanded. It was Ariel, and never was I so grateful to hear her voice, not only for being rescued from certain disaster, but knowing she was safe and alive.

We emerged from the miasma below only to arrive in utter chaos above. Two of the mariners were frantically manipulating their polls to dislodge the barge from the bank of the river, while soldiers scrambled to keep the deck secure. I glanced over at the lead barge which

was spinning around in the water like a whirling top. I could see McCready and Captain Manrique aiding the soldiers and mariners attempting to steady their craft. His eyes made contact with mine, and I gave him a slight wave to indicate I was as good as conditions would dictate. Satisfied, he returned to his daunting task. On the vessel behind us, cavalrymen were desperately trying to calm hysterical horses rearing up. "Have we been attacked?" I asked Ariel, assuming the obvious.

"A temblor," Ariel replied, "As big a one as I've ever experienced." There was no time to make any further inquiries as she rushed to aid her soldiers. I attempted to look out towards the shore to assure myself there was indeed no enemy attacking our vessels, but a moving mosaic of orange, red, and blue blocked the view through the protective copper mesh. I suddenly realized the mosaic was actually composed of venomous snakes crawling up from the river banks, violently hissing and jabbing their fangs as they attempted to gain purchase on the mesh, but in failing to do so, tumbled into the water, instantly becoming appetizers for the carnivorous river dwellers, the Watongias, who now covered the surface. I say appetizers for it became abundantly clear in that moment we were to be the main course for having been aroused by the movement of the barges, they began to slam themselves against the sides in an attempt to tip us over and into their waiting gullets. They grabbed onto the mariners' poles, using their powerful jaws to whittle them down to the size of twigs, forcing the pilots to abandon them lest the monsters use them as a bridge to the deck itself. The ever-helpful Doctor Zeta contributed to the ensuing panic by screaming hysterically at the top of his lungs, cutting through the shouts of the soldiers desperately attempting to stabilize the situation like a high-pitched siren. Try as I might, I could not calm the doctor down. A burley young soldier, reaching the end of his patience, grabbed the troublesome little man by the roots of his hair and made to throw him overboard all the while

yelling at him in Sarian. Had I not swiftly intervened by pulling Doctor Zeta away from the determined soldier's grip he would have been devoured in seconds. The young soldier and I tussled back and forth, the doctor screaming unabated until finally the matter was swiftly settled as the soldier's fist connected solidly with Doctor Zeta's nose, knocking him into unconsciousness. The young soldier then left to help his fellows whilst I made sure the disagreeable scientist was still alive. Having assured myself that he was, I found some rope to tie him to a post fixed in the middle of the vessel, hoping he would not regain consciousness until the current crisis had been contained, or we all perished, whichever came first. No sooner had I finished tying the knot to secure the doctor that a blood-curdling scream came from the back of the vessel. I rushed over to see the crew frozen in horror watching the river turn crimson with blood. It took me little time to realize it was the young burly soldier who had tried to throw Doctor Zeta overboard, now almost unrecognizable as he was rapidly devoured whole. Oh, how I wished for an electro-pulse cannon at our disposal so we could blast the horrid creatures into oblivion. But, alas, we did not, and so we were only left to helplessly witness the carnage before our eyes.

Our vigil was abruptly interrupted as we rammed into the lead barge, tipping the stern upward, forcing all on board to tumble aft against the wooden railing, which was the only barrier between us and the carnivores waiting impatiently in the river for fresh meat. Within seconds I found myself sliding over the edge, desperately clawing the deck with my fingernails. I hung on to a bit of broken railing at the edge of the barge, but felt a nipping at my boot heels. Looking down, I saw a sight I shall not soon forget; the ferocious jaws of a Watongia, latched on to my boot like a blacksmith's vice. Others leapt from the river, attempting to take their fair share of my vulnerable appendage. It's interesting how in times of intense jeopardy one's focus becomes

hawk-like, as I could now see the detail of my attackers with such clarity as to make them all the more hideous. Yes, their incisors, as reported, were as large and sharp as daggers, now encrusted with the blood and flesh of their prey, but it was their eyes that gave me greater pause; black, soulless, and full of malice. Though their bodies were but the size of a large man's fist, they were encrusted with a dull, metal-like armor making them almost impervious to any violence turned against them. The leather of my boot gave way to the attacks of the Watongias, and I could feel the flesh of my foot penetrated by the sharp points of their teeth. I was going to die. That much was clear. It was not the death I had imagined for myself, but, then again, do we ever really have a choice in such matters? I began to think my last thoughts, which I cannot now recall except to say there was a comfort in such memories of home and hearth. As my fingers gave way, and I began fall freely towards my watery sepulcher, a strong hand grabbed my forearm, rescuing me from certain death. I looked up to see Lieutenant Ariel Bárcenas, smiling as she pulled me back up to the relative safety of the deck. "How many times am I to save you, Ned Sprye?"

"Just this once more will be sufficient, thank you," said I, smiling back, as much from the relief of being alive than anything else. Two soldiers ran towards me and with the butt of their rifles, pummeled the monsters attacking me until they let go their grip and plunged back into the river, taking my boot with them, and exposing my mangled bare foot covered in blood. After regaining my bearings, and the barge its equilibrium, we attempted to rescue as many of the soldiers as possible, but I am pained to report that many a poor soul were lost to a gruesome fate, one that I would have shared had it not been for Ariel's swift and steady rescue.

## Chapter V - Towards the Yahntis

“And to think you could have been called ‘One-Foot Ned’,” McCready guffawed with that obnoxious warthog sound of his. “Without doubt, a moniker to be proud of!” The old curmudgeon broke into a fit of laughter as did Captain Manrique and the rest of his soldiers, including Ariel, though, to her credit, she tried hard to conceal her amusement.

“Make sport if you must,” I said, my eyes narrowing, “but one millimeter more and you’d be writing my epitaph.”

“Ah, but what a tale you’ll have for the grandkiddies, no?” said McCready, not letting up. “Imagine it, me buckos; Your old pop were almost a sumptuous feast for a school of man-eating fish!” And more laughter. Here I was, my poor, wounded foot propped up on an uncomfortable boulder, unable to move about without the aid of a makeshift crutch, and McCready mercilessly poking fun at me. I supposed it was fitting to allow the tension held within ourselves to be relieved, letting the steam out of the boiler as it were, and laughter was indeed the proper tonic, but must it be at my expense? Six soldiers and two horses were lost to the murderous Watongias. Many provisions, including ammunition, went overboard leaving us woefully short of what was needed for the journey. For three more days, we remained on tenterhooks lest another temblor or an unanticipated disaster befall our party, but eventually we came to the river’s end and into a desert that stood between the Motagua and the formidable Yahnti Mountain range.

We were far from being out of danger. The Yahnti foothills were still thirty kilometers away; a daunting journey of at least two days. Once we’d left the protection of the Motagua canopy the heat proved itself to be nigh on unbearable. By mid-day we were forced to halt our progress lest the horses collapse from thirst, there being no source of water or shade on route.

We set up our tents, lay under what makeshift shade could be manufactured, and waited for the setting of the unforgiving sun. Then, rising hours before dawn, we would try to make as much ground as possible before the temperature became lethal. The surface was unyielding, and we were openly exposed due to the flatness of the terrain, keeping the soldiers on high alert for any sign of trouble. It made for a tense and tiring march, knowing full well that when we reached the Yahntis, a greater challenge awaited us.

Doctor Zeta, having been deeply traumatized by our misadventure upon the river, kept mercifully to himself, remaining sullen and close-lipped during the day, and withdrawing to his tent in the evening to take his meals in solitude. Had he done otherwise, the disdainful scientist might have found himself at the business end of a Sarian broadsword, since most of the soldiers blamed him for their comrades' misfortune. He did, however, have his wits in order enough to confirm and analyze the temblor that nearly killed us all after we had disembarked. "Yes, of course a temblor. On a scale larger than your small minds could ever comprehend," he declared. "The world is doomed. I suggest you prepare for the end."

Now, sitting around a campfire with my fellow survivors, all relieved to have escaped the boney clutches of death, I must admit to feeling euphoric, reveling in the simple things we take for granted, such as breathing and the other attributes of being alive. After a few more cups of wine to soothe the tensions of the day (and in McCready's case, to drown them) our company retired for the night, save those soldiers assigned watch duty. I shared accommodations with McCready who sat on his cot looking at me through the bleary lenses of his blood-shot eyes. "What?" said I, somewhat irritated. "Is there to be more commentary on my sorry state? Or perhaps a lecture on being more careful in the future?" His only response was an amused snort, followed by his eyes rolling up inside his head, and like a felled tree, collapsed on his cot with a

thunk, snoring as loud and constant as a mono-train at full speed across the open plains of Lavernia. I tenderly moved my leg up and into my own cot, and carefully settled myself for sleep. Thinking about Dr. Zeta's pronouncement, there was the nagging feeling that all was most certainly for naught. If that was the case, as it seemed to be, to what purpose were our feeble activities as inhabitants of a world condemned to die? I am not one to indulge in philosophies; I am unconcerned with the deeper existential conundrums that seem to occupy long beards, or perhaps more accurate, I find the subject an excruciating bore which is to say, the practical application of it eludes me. Still and all, I could not help but wonder why we creatures have strived so doggedly to advance civilization, why we have endured crippling strife, both externally and internally, why have we cared so deeply, and hurt so mightily if it's all to end in one swift and sudden moment; like one of those theatricals with the curtain falling decisively at the finale. Then end. No more. Farewell forever.

Best to push that out of your mind, I said to myself. There is no necessity, nor time frankly to indulge in such thoughts. There will always be scofflaws preying on the innocent right as the continent tears itself into pieces, consequently there will always be a need for justice served, and that, after all, is what I've dedicated my sole existence to, and so that is what I shall do, come what may. Loath as I was at the prospect of waking up one morning with the world ended, McCready and I still had a job to do, and shirking our duty was not an option. These were my fleeting thoughts, most likely the effects of the medicine Ariel had given me earlier, as fatigue claimed its hold on me and, mercifully, I began to drift off to sleep.

"Ned?" came a voice outside the entrance of the tent. "May I come in?" It was Ariel.

"Certainly. Yes, by all means," I stuttered, wondering if this wasn't a dream I'd fallen into. She brushed open the flap and entered, then looked over at my comatose tent-mate snoring

away. "Do you think Mr. McCready will mind?" she whispered as a gentle, amused smile caressed her lips.

"He is, and I say this literally, dead to the world," I said smiling back. "*Ain't that right, Mac?*" I shouted in his general direction, producing not even the subtlest quiver on his ragged face. Ariel laughed, which made me laugh in return, then turning to her, asked how I could be of service.

"I thought it prudent to check your wounds before you retired and I reported for watch duty," she said as she held up her medical kit bag.

"Yes indeed," I said a little too quickly, betraying the excitement I felt with her unexpected but much welcomed visit. "I should report, however, that the concoction you administered to me earlier seems to have abated any discomfort, not only in my foot, but the rest of my body as well."

"As it was designed to," she said with a glint in her eyes, then sat on the edge of my cot. "Never the less, your dressings need attending to, so I have brought fresh gauze and a poultice." With great and gentle care, Ariel lifted my injured foot and laid it upon her lap. She rolled up my pant leg to the knee, and with expert hands unwound the wrappings covering my injured foot. "Interesting..."

"Something amiss?" I said, trying to not sound concerned.

"No. Not at all. It is healing nicely. And... no sign of infection. Excellent."

"Oh, that's good to know," I said, with a sigh of relief. "You had me worried."

"You have the constitution of a Sarian, Ned Sprye," Ariel said as she began to clean the old salve away softly with a warm cloth. "I am impressed." My heart lit up and my cheeks rouged upon hearing that declaration. Here I must confess, dear reader, that I have never

succumbed to the mysteries of love, though there have been several romances in my lifetime for which discretion demands silence. It was not for want of trying, I assure you. It was simply that I could not subject someone to the precarious profession I had chosen; having someone waiting every night in dread for me to arrive home safe and sound seemed to me a cruel and undignified abuse of that person's spirit. In spite of what the poets may say, love has limitations, or to put it a different way, there is a grave responsibility that come with holding another's heart in your care. Yes, there is a selfish side to this argument; I don't believe I could be sufficiently effective in my duties were I to know that someone was in constant worry of my safety. A keen sense of self-preservation is needed when charged with the task of facing dangerous criminals; take your mind off it for but a moment and the results will be fatal, mark my words. A weak justification?

Perhaps.

As I lie on my cot, soothed by the gentle motions of her expert hands upon my person, and mesmerized by her dark eyes, I felt the pangs of attraction akin to the sensation of what I imagined was love; as vivid and pleasing as anything else I had experienced to date. "I'm going to apply the new poultice. It may sting a bit."

"Yes, fine. Thank-you," I croaked.

"Are you alright, Ned?" Ariel asked with a quizzical expression on her face. "You look a bit, well, fevered."

"I'm fine, really I am," I protested, knowing full well I was anything but.

"Brace yourself." I did as she asked, turning my head to the side, less to prepare for whatever discomfort might come, but rather to avoid betraying my thoughts bombarding my mind. And as I turned, who should I see but McCready, eyes wide open, staring at me with such childish glee as ever you could imagine a man of his age and demeanor could. The old bastard

gave me a conspiratorial wink, then turned away, closed his eyes, as a malicious grin formed on his lips, reveling in my discomfort.

~\*~

*“Oh, glorious morning!  
Oh, glorious day!  
I met a dear lassie at the faire last night,  
And to me she says she’ll marry.”*

“Spare me your doggerel, old man,” I grumbled as McCready sang his taunt loudly, unfettered by good manners. “It’s giving me a headache.” And what a monstrous headache I had. We had risen two hours before dawn, as per the company’s routine, and I had not slept a wink. After ministering to my wound, Ariel bid me pleasant dreams and kissed me on the forehead. From the look in her eyes I could discern it was more than just a friendly gesture. Perhaps she was hoping I would take it as a cue for me to reciprocate with a deeper, more passionate response. And, let me assure you, I was more than willing, but, dammit, there was McCready, across from me, privy to everything that might transpire between Ariel and I, making it damn near impossible to act in any other way except to thank her for her medical assistance and wish her a pleasant goodnight. There was a slight look of disappointment in her eyes, confirming my instinct that she was hoping for more, but she refused to betray any further emotion (her military training, I supposed) and so gave me a curt nod as she departed.

The next morning, we ate our simple breakfast in silence. Ariel’s demeanor was polite but distant. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw McCready, smiling at me in his devilish way. Now, insult to injury, here he was chortling his unnecessary and irritating canto, while we trudged on horseback towards the foothills of the forbidding Yahnti Mountains, the sun dribbling onto the horizon, its bellowing furnace already making its presence known.

*“Devoted am I,  
Devoted is she.  
And ne'er will I roam upon the Western Sea.”*

“Must you? Really?”

“Indeed I must, young Ned! And you should be singing as well. For love is the rarest of commodities and when discovered, must be declared to the universe.”

“I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about,” I said as I turned away, fixing my gaze on anything but McCready.

“Oh, my boy, my boy, you do. In your heart, you most certainly do. I may seem a tough old crab--”

“An understatement if ever there was one.”

“Fair enough. But, and I say this as one who has lived some years on this miserable continent, love is a serious matter not to be ignored. When love presents itself, it must be aggressively pursued. Damn the consequences. Damn them, I say and your Aunt Mable too.”

“What has gotten into you, McCready?” I asked, for I'd never heard him go on in such a manner.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. The ramblings of an old, worthless sot. Pay me no mind.” Never had I heard him speak of such things, to me or anyone else that I had knowledge of. We rode in silence for an hour or so, me for lack of anything to say, him seeming deep in thought until finally he spoke. “Do you remember that band of miscreants we were chasing? The ones who broke into the National Bank, murdered two tellers and the bank president?”

“The Hartswell Gang? Of course.”

“Do you recall when we had them cornered in that abandoned warehouse over in Old Town, and the shooting got hard and heavy?”

“As if it was yesterday. Why are you asking me this?”

“Our backs were up against the wall that day, were they not? Had us penned in like cattle they did.”

“A bad situation if ever there was one,” I said in agreement, wondering where this was heading.

“And when the battery stores ran to nil on the Timlos, and we had to rush in with only our pistols. Those bastards throwing everything at us.”

“I remember it well.” And I did, though it was not the first or last time we’d faced such a situation. “What of it?”

“I had a premonition of sorts then I might lose you.”

“How’s that?” I could have been knocked to the ground with a feather, thinking it must be the lack of sleep causing me to have an auditory hallucination.

“Listen to me for once, would you!” McCready said, severely irritated at my interjections, “This is no easier to say than if I were to gouge my eye out with a dagger.” He looked over at me, his eyes, unbelievably, filling with tears. “A fear seized my heart as we were about to rush their barricade that if any harm came to you, I could scarce survive it.” He turned away, looking out at the horizon. “I realized then and there that you are like my own son, Neddy. To lose you would be have been a hell-scape I’d not want to inhabit. You’ve got a full life ahead of you, and you should be living it to the fullest. If love presents itself, you need to grab hold of it as if it were the only thing in the world that mattered. Do you understand me?”

“I’m not sure if I do.”

“You’re a fool then. Why I bother trying to knock some sense into you is beyond me.”

He fell silent once more, leaving me to wonder who was currently inhabiting McCready’s body; this was not the man I thought I knew.

Since this mission began, I had seen signs of transformation in my senior partner heretofore hidden deep within his crusty shell. Perhaps it was his encounter with Lord Woodes, his former commander, that loosened emotions long buried; perhaps the temblors, ever increasing in intensity, forced him to recall past traumas from the Great War; perhaps it was only a bad bit of stew he’d eaten before embarking onto the aeroship bound for Sar. Whatever the cause, there was no denying a stark change in McCready’s demeanor. But how was I to react? Acknowledge my affection for him as well? I could not imagine that helping anything. More likely, I would get an earful of disdainful squawking about getting too personal, unbecoming our profession, and the like. Although perhaps not, given his recent admission. I would be telling the truth, though. If not wholly a father figure per se, I certainly held him in great esteem as a mentor, as one to admire, to emulate even, though not, obviously, the curmudgeonly aspects of his character. And yes, perhaps I did love him as much as anyone in my life save my own mother and father, who had passed this earthly plane long ago. It is in the nature of our profession that we must operate as one unit during an assignment, much as a right arm works in concert with the left to accomplish a singular task. The truth of the matter was that McCready was really the only human being with whom I’d spent any time with, and if I was honest with myself, the only person I *cared* to spend time with! Should I say something? Would now be the time? Or should I leave it at that?

“McCready. I--”

“Save it, boy. There’s no need to--”

A sharp, piercing whistle interrupted McCready's rebuke followed immediately by a roughhewn arrow flying passed my nose, nearly taking it off. "Get down!" McCready shouted as he dismounted and ran over to me, pulling me off my saddle. We both crashed onto the unforgiving surface, my damaged foot taking the brunt of the impact, and sending me into a fit of excruciating pain. Within seconds, a barrage of arrows filled the air above us, coming from left and right, some finding their targets in the wagons, some in the soldiers scrambling to find cover.

"Can you move?" McCready asked, all business now.

"Yes," I replied, not sure if I could, but there seemed to be no choice in the matter. Either move or be killed. I pushed myself up, holding on to McCready for support. We hobbled over to where Captain Manrique and Ariel were rallying their troops to form a barricade with the wagons.

"Stay put, Neddy," McCready said.

"Nonsense. I'm fit enough to fight."

"The hell you are. Stay put or I'll tie you to a wagon wheel."

McCready stood up, and surveying the current situation, proceeded to move towards the captain and Ariel, presumably to ask what his orders would be, being the good soldier he is. But before he could reach them, one of the damnable arrows found its way to McCready, piercing his neck through to the other side. A look of shock and irritation crossed his face. He fell to his knees, blood pouring from his mouth as he attempted to shout a curse at our enemy that would have sent them running in abject fear had they been able to hear it.