

Chapter VI - Ambush!

“These are Yahnto arrows,” Captain Manrique reported. “There can be no doubt about it. You can see here the distinctive azure stripes along the shaft. But we’re two days from the mountains. They would never attack this far from home.”

“And yet, here they are. Attacking,” I replied. “Vigorously I might add.” A flaming arrow flew by us, as if to emphasize my point.

“*Someone* is attacking us,” the captain said, nodding, “wanting us to believe they are Yahnitos, but they are not. You must trust me on this; I am one of them. This is not their way.” There was little time to argue the point. While the terrain had provided no cover for a dozen or so kilometers, our enemy had managed to set upon us without our noticing, having completely obscured their presence with a screen of smoke and dust. The soldiers charged with keeping a lookout recounted seeing a dust cloud approaching, but gave it no importance given that dust clouds were a common phenomenon in this area. By the time they recognized the irregularity, it was too late, as arrows began flying from the cloud with overwhelming speed and accuracy. It was reckoned by Captain Manrique that there must be no less than fifty soldiers behind the smoky camouflage given the volume of projectiles being unleashed at us.

To add further woe, a deafening, high-pitched sound, like a perpetual scream from some tortured soul, emanated from behind the smoke screen, making it difficult to think properly, let alone communicate with each other. I had to agree that it seemed very unlike the Yahnti natives to have such modern technology at their disposal, but there was no time to ponder the how and why of it all. Survival was the first order of business. Whoever was attacking us (and the unspoken assumption was that if not the Yahnitos, it must be the Sons of Gaea), was doing so

relentlessly and with ever increasing intensity; mounting a counterattack seemed impossible.

They had us pinned down good, and our chances for survival were scant.

The reader might not be surprised to learn that McCready survived what should have been a fatal wound for anyone else. Powered by sheer instinct and iron will, he snapped off the feathered side of the arrow, and pulled the remaining shaft swiftly through his neck. The razor sharp tip had missed the main artery, but had ripped through his vocal cords, already damaged during the Great War, rendering him mute. That did not stop McCready from picking up a rifle to join in the battle against objections from Captain Manrique, Ariel, and myself; there was no talking him out of it.

Together – for McCready had relented, allowing me to join in the fight – we crouched down behind one of the wagons, and, side by side, as we'd done countless times before, used Sarian rifles, beautifully crafted but woefully inefficient, to pick off whatever targets the enemy presented, which were few. The enemy now included long, multi-pronged spears into their arsenal, hurled at such force as to penetrate our wagons through and through. Fireball missiles arced over and into the center of our makeshift fortress, and in spite of our soldiers' best efforts, extinguishing them proved futile.

Desperation forces you to consider strategies which otherwise would be thought of as sheer folly. "I have something of an idea," I shouted above the din.

"Let's hear it, Ned," Ariel shouted back.

"We need to light the wagons on fire."

"Nonsense. We'd be sacrificing our only protection," Captain Manrique said, shaking his head.

"Captain," Ariel said, turning to her commanding officer. "I believe I understand what Mr. Sprye is getting at. Fight fire with fire, yes?"

"Or in this case, smoke with smoke, but yes, that's the basic concept."

"Yes," Captain Manrique said, nodding with understanding. "It's just insane enough for it to work."

I looked over at McCready, who gave a smile of approval, then pointed to the arrows sticking up from the ground. At once, I understood what he was getting at. "Mr. McCready further suggests we gather the enemy's spent ordinance and repurpose them as best we can."

"To what end?" the captain replied, frowning. "We already have superior firepower in our rifles."

"I believe Mac's logic is that the enemy has some sort of shield protecting them behind their camouflage," I explained. "But most likely only in the front. If we lob the spears over and above them, they might just find a target."

"Yes. I see," Captain Manrique said. He turned to Ariel. "Give the order, Lieutenant."

Ariel shouted instructions to the Sarian troops, who put our plans into action. Within moments, the wagons were ablaze, smoke billowing out, successfully concealing our movements. The ablest of soldiers launched the spears back towards the enemy, and our strategy seemed to be having some effect: one lucky spear silenced the bombardment of piercing sound coming from the enemy, finally giving us a chance to gather our wits. We had only accomplished a small reprieve in hostilities. The harder task lay ahead; to mount an offensive against our attackers. As we began to formulate counter-measures, a plaintive and familiar voice filled the air.

At the commencement of the attack, Doctor Zeta had fainted dead away with the first sight of a flaming arrow whizzing past him, fortunately sparing us his histrionics. Two soldiers laid him out of harm's way, secreting him behind one of our makeshift barricades. We assumed that would be the end of it. It was not.

"What is the damned fool doing now?" shouted Captain Manrique, pointing towards the open area between us and our enemy. There was Dr. Zeta, running madly around in circles, back and forth, up and down, screaming himself into a frenzy. Amazingly, he'd managed to avoid the arrows being loosed from the other side of the cloud. "*Stercore!*" The captain exclaimed as he jumped up and turned to Ariel. "Provide whatever cover you are able, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Sir," replied Ariel, saluting him, concern clouding her stoic demeanor.

"It's madness to go out there, Captain," I said, grabbing on to his arm.

"Indeed it is. But I swore an oath to protect that wretched little man from harm. With my life if it came to it. Now it seems it has." He said something in Sarian to Ariel, handing her a blue envelope from inside his jacket. She nodded solemnly, took the envelope, and placed inside her own jacket. Captain Manrique then turned to me and McCready. "It was an honor to have known your acquaintance, gentlemen." He grabbed two rifles, slung several bands of ammunition around his neck, stuck a Sarian broadsword into his belt, and set out towards his rescue mission.

As the doctor danced a mad dance betwixt us and the enemy's position, the captain fired into the smoke-cloud with both barrels as we in turn fired volley after volley to cover him, chucking spears as best we could into the air towards the enemy's position. But our foes quickly found their bearings and redoubled their attack; slews of arrows came at us with impossible rapidity. Captain Manrique was struck in the left shoulder forcing him to drop the rifle, that arm now lifeless. He continued to march towards the doctor, who had been hit twice in his thigh and

once in the side of his abdomen, but he'd hardly noticed having whipped himself into even more of a hysterical state, hopping back at forth as if negotiating a bed of hot coals. The captain was struck several more times by the unrelenting stream of arrows, and yet he moved forward as if fighting against a northern wind towards Doctor Zeta whose lamentable howling reached fever pitch.

McCready could stand it no more, and made to rush to the captain's aid. I held him firmly by the leg, imploring him not to leave his post, that to do so would be suicide, but he shook me off. Because that's the man he was. Because he could not stomach watching such bravery as Captain Manrique displayed against impossible odds without taking some action to defend him. I stood up to join him, but he pushed me back down, his expression was both stern and caring, as a father would show to a child he means to protect from certain harm.

I watched in horror as arrows flew whilst he moved towards the fray. He fended them off with a makeshift shield he'd fashioned from a broken piece of a wagon, but some still found their mark in his leg and arm. McCready paid them no mind. Captain Manrique had been brought to his knees by the onslaught of weapons hurled at him. McCready tried desperately to get to him, but the attack was just too overwhelming, and before long, McCready also fell to his knees, unable to move.

Suddenly, the onslaught of arrows abruptly ceased. Ariel and I exchanged a look of puzzlement. McCready and Captain Manrique lay on the ground, arrows grotesquely jutting from their bodies, but still alive. The same, however, could not be said for poor Doctor Zeta, who was splayed out upon the ground in a pool of blood; a single arrow piercing his forehead. His eyes were fixed in horror, staring straight up to the sky. We had utterly failed in our mission to protect the querulous little scientist from harm, upending whatever chance there may have been to save

the world from destruction. Our report would show that many lives were sacrificed in the prosecution of that duty; we had done everything in our power to assure his safety, and would, no doubt, be exonerated, perhaps even commended by our superiors. But in the end, it mattered little in light of the consequences of our failure. As Doctor Zeta had predicted, the world was now most assuredly doomed.

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We recovered McCready, the captain, and the sad little scientist's body. Within minutes, the enemy's smoke-screen dissipated into the air, revealing not a legion of soldiers as we'd supposed, but the most remarkable machine I had ever laid eyes on. It measured no more than five meters in width, and perhaps three meters in depth and two meters in height, fashioned from copper, brass, and other metals I could not easily identify. There was a control station in the center with an array of keys, levers, and wheels intricately connected through a system of gears to control a dozen launch mechanisms on turrets, fed by a cache of arrows, spears, and missiles. Some were like catapults, others like crossbows. A thick iron shield protected the front of the apparatus as we had surmised. In the center was a large convex lens connected to a long tunnel of black cloth stretching to the control area and ending in a hood. This, we realized, was how the operator targeted our pitiful fortress with pin-point precision. A large wheel centrally placed on the control panel panned the lens left and right, and as it did so, the launching devices followed suit. It seemed to have been the right decision, therefore, to create a camouflage of our own after all. Vents below those shields were the source of smoke and dust, manufactured by a furnace and a propeller that utilized the dirt from the desert's floor. Above the whole apparatus were two brass cornucopias from whence the distracting high-pitched sounds had emanated.

“Look!” Ariel shouted, as she pointed out towards the horizon. A carriage, propelled by a powerful steam-driven engine, was retreating towards a waiting dirigible tethered in the far distance. We considered giving chase but lacked the personnel to do so. It confirmed with certainty, however, that this was not the work of Yahnti warriors, but a force with technology at their disposal more advanced than even Anansian standards. Most probably agents working with the Sons of Gaea, which would explain why Doctor Zeta’s death had successfully concluded their dark mission. We considered using the device for our own purposes, but it would be more of a burden than boon, and so set to destroying it to prevent it from being used against us. Much frustration and anger were taken out on the technological marvel, until it was reduced to a smoldering pile of jink.

Ariel tended to Captain Manrique and McCready, their condition most grave, as best she could. That both of them were still alive was a testament to their incredible fortitude. Heartsick as I was by my partner’s condition, there was work to be done. Few of the wagons were recoverable, but we set to repair those that were. Most of our provisions, weapons, and ammunition had been destroyed making it doubtful we could survive another attack.

Anger gripped me in a stranglehold as I sat in my tent that evening, attempting to process the day’s events. Who were these bastards, these so-called Sons of Gaea, who believed their cause so righteous as to sacrifice so many lives? Here was McCready, veteran of the Great War, lying unconscious next to me. Still, one should not count out the old cur, thought I. If ever there was a man made of iron, McCready was that man. Survival was his most reliable attribute, was it not? And yet... his skin so sallow, his heartbeat barely detectable, and his breathing less than faint, when there was any at all, did not well portend him surviving this adventure. And all for an obnoxious little scientist sent on a dubious mission to stem the tide of an inevitable fate. We

knew he would be trouble when we first laid eyes on him, back at the beginning of our mission, which now seemed a thousand years ago, but we did not figure him to be the cause of such calamity. I made an oath then and there, that if McCready should succumb to his wounds and leave this earthly plane, I would march straight in to Major Simkins office and tender my resignation. But not immediately. No, I would not quit until I hunted down every last one of the miscreants responsible for McCready's undoing, making them pay in equal measure with their miserable lives.

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Captain Manrique died during the night in spite of Ariel's furious attempts to save him. He proved himself to be as perfect a soldier as any nation could hope for, a person of strong integrity, and good humor even in the heart of battle. I would have liked to have known him better.

Ariel reluctantly assumed command of the Sarian troops, now numbering a scant eight. Her first order at daybreak was to bury those who had died in battle. A curious exception was the body of Captain Manrique. When I asked why, Ariel demurred, saying only that she would explain in due time. "Right now, there are graves to be dug," she said without emotion as she handed me a shovel, grabbed one for herself, then walked towards the detail of soldiers preparing the final resting places for their fallen comrades.

After that unenviable task was completed, Ariel inquired as to my intentions. "At this point, I see no alternative other than to continue home," I replied. "If McCready has any hope of surviving, that's the only way, I believe."

"I agree," she said. "We'll leave just before dawn."

"Would it not be best for you to return home via the river?" I asked, surprised. "The mariners will be waiting for you, no?"

Ariel shook her head in the negative. "Our orders were to escort you and Doctor Zeta to Anansia. The barges have already returned to Sar. Besides, you would never survive the Yahntis alone, Ned, and you know it," she said with a wink. I could not disagree with her; a man who can barely walk escorting another in a comatose state through treacherous mountains full of hostile inhabitants had little or no chance of making it to the other side, there was no doubt about it.

We waited out the unforgiving heat of the day under whatever shelter we could muster, keeping a keen lookout for any further danger, futile as that might seem since we could hardly have defended ourselves. It only made the wait for the sun to set tense and exhausting. After eating a supper consisting of what scraps of food we could recover from the wreckage, our diminished company retired to their tents.

In the middle of the night, Ariel entered my tent and sat beside me on the cot. Silently, she gently caressed my cheek, I responded by doing likewise, and as our lips moved towards each other, our hands intertwined, tightly grasping each other as if to do otherwise, we would surely be lost in grief. Without words, we made love; sometimes passionate and furious, more often gentle and soft like a summer breeze moving through a field of wildflowers. Both of us were spent, emptied of any emotion, good or bad – we held each other, lost, deep inside our embrace. After a time, Ariel dressed and slipped out into the darkness, leaving me to my own thoughts, and she, presumably, to hers as well.

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Two days of hard slogging towards the Yahnti Mountains had left us on the razor's edge of death. We were at quarter rations and if we did not find a source of water by the time we

reached the mouth the canyon known as Cuido Pass, which would lead us to the other side, our fate would be sealed. Ariel was confident there would be such a source, or at least she said so in order to keep moral from slipping. "The Yahnitos," she reasoned, "couldn't exist without it." A solid assumption to be sure, but I desperately wished Captain Manrique were alive to confirm it. Also uncertain was the reception we would receive from the warrior tribe within the narrow canyon that few passed through unscathed. Would they take pity on our miserable condition? One could only hope.

McCready managed to stay alive during the arduous journey, though he still remained unconscious. I dared not allow myself any hope of his recovery, and expected to find him dead every time I checked on his condition. But there was just no killing the old buzzard; he held on to the slenderest thread of life, but hold on he did and tightly.

Ariel and I spoke few words during the journey, but each night she would enter my tent and we would lose ourselves in passion, hold each other for a while then she would slip out of my tent just before beginning preparations for the next morning's journey. I would not call it love. Perhaps, under different conditions, there could have been something deeper between us, but that time had clearly passed. We simply provided for each other a means in which to forget, for a fleeting moment, what had transpired and what we were yet to face. It is the most basic of human instincts, I suppose, to seek solace and comfort from a fellow human being without having to attach any "higher" emotions to it. I will not lay too harsh a judgement, neither for myself, nor others in this regard, but the inevitable result is emptiness; a void; a wasteland of lost opportunity. I will always mourn what might have been between Ariel and me had events played out in more positive manner, but they had not. These are the thoughts one is left with when half-

starved, and driven mad by thirst, facing unknown circumstances, compounding double-fold one's grief and anxiety.

Just before nightfall, we arrived at the mouth of the pass. A cold wind blew out from the opening with an exacting force, in stark contrast to the heat of the day, and chilling us to the bone. There was little choice but to enter; we needed to find water and immediately, our containers being bone dry. Looking up at the imposing mountain face, Ariel was certain someone was observing us, despite the fact that there were no signs of life to be seen.

Darkness enveloped us just twenty meters in to the canyon, spooking the two horses who'd survived our travails. They reared up high, whinnying loudly with fear, nearly tipping over the wagons containing the body of Captain Manrique, and McCready. It was indeed a forbidding place, the walls reaching up endlessly, denying any of the winnowing sunlight from reaching the canyon's floor. Ariel ordered lanterns to be lit as we pressed forward.

Moving a hundred more meters inward, we heard water gently burbling up ahead, and never was there a sound more glorious and welcome! We dashed towards the source, discovering a humble, but sufficient well-spring flowing from the side of the canyon. You would have thought we'd discovered a treasure chest full of gold by the lusty way we gathered up the precious resource into our hands, cups, dishes, whatever we could find, and raising them to our parched mouths, drinking down the cool, clear liquid which reawakened our throats, and rejuvenated our spirits. It did not take long before our weary company lay on the canyon floor, almost drunk in finally satisfying our thirst. A giddiness overcame us, owing to the relief of having escaped, once again, an encounter with death. We laughed loudly with little provocation; a monstrous, inhuman belch proffered by a soldier; a cooking pot perched on a wagon clattering down onto a boulder; Ariel losing her footing, falling flat on her arse. Oh yes, dear reader, I must

confess there was nothing too mundane, too juvenile, or too insignificant to send us into fits of giggling like schoolchildren, and not a one of us felt ashamed of it!

After a time, laden with sleepiness, we all sat around a small campfire built from scraps of an abandoned wagon. Our food stores were bare, but someone had the clever idea of making a stew from what we had on hand, now having water to spare, and our hunger was sated as if we'd had the most sumptuous feast at the fanciest restaurant our imaginations could conjure. A young soldier spontaneously burst out singing. It was a Sarian ballad, and, without comprehending a word of it, I was moved to tears. Its melody spoke of loss, longing, and a hope of better days to come. I looked over at Ariel, and her eyes also welled up with tears. This was not the outcome we had hoped for, and yet, here we were.

The soldier abruptly stopped singing, her gaze moving towards the shadows just outside the lanterns' influence. All of us turned towards where her eyes were pointing. There, surrounding us, were thirty Yahnti warriors, their faces obscured by tattoos of intricate, and frightening design. All were brandishing spears, ready to strike. How they had arrived without detection was a mystery, but that they meant serious business was not.