

Chapter VII – Te Ashone

Your view of the world changes dramatically when suspended from a cliff a thousand meters above the ground by your ankles. Not only does the blood rush to the brain, but thoughts as well. Mostly disagreeable ones.

As the perceptive reader may have surmised, the Yahnitos were less than thrilled by our presence. Within short order, our weapons were seized, and our hands were bound tightly behind our backs. It is worth noting that none of this was done aggressively, but rather with strong, persuasive action. There was no mistaking from their demeanor, however, that any lack of cooperation on our part would be remedied with great severity.

They escorted us through a passage secreted in the canyon wall – solving the mystery of how the warriors could so stealthily come upon us – where steps presented themselves carved into the interior of a shaft leading steeply upward; an exhausting climb ending onto the narrowest of pathways, dug into the mountain face, just wide enough to walk single-file. Attached to the side of the cliff, were a dozen or so wooden wheels, each one two meters in diameter; the perfect size for a human being to be splayed out upon it. One by one, they strapped our arms and legs were to the discs, all ten of us, including Ariel, for they made no accommodation for rank. Once that task was completed, the Yahnito warriors departed as silently as they had come, leaving us in the charge of four children: two boys, two girls, no older than ten years of age. That's how much of a threat they consider us, I thought. Little did I realize their assignment was not to guard us, but to facilitate our torture. At regular intervals, known only to them, the children would turn each of the wheels, so that we would be upside down. We would be left in that position for what seemed like forever, but more likely five to ten minutes – enough, let us say, to discomfit the body and disorient the mind. Ariel, two wheels to the left of me, rallied her troops to stay the

course and be strong. One of the Yahnito girls slapped Ariel's face with surprising force, then brought her index finger up to her lips; the universal sign for silence.

In between fulfilling their duties, the youngsters played games with each other just as any children would. It was an odd sensation to have your torturers laughing with glee as they won a point at Stones & Crosses (not exactly the game we all played as tykes, but close enough), reset the pieces, rotate us on our wheels, then set down to play another round.

As the sun rose, its harsh light bore deep into my eyes despite them being closed shut. Thirst overtook whatever sense remained within me, and once again, it seemed as if I'd come to the journey's end. There wasn't even enough strength left in me to ruminate about how things might have gone differently. I must confess, I did not give a single thought to McCready's whereabouts. In fact, I was very much at the point where I cared little about anything. Just let it be done! Snuff out the candle, shall we? If it's to be more of this, hand me a dagger and I'll be happy to facilitate my own execution, only please, children, stop turning this damnable wheel, will you?

Thus, having reached the brink of utter madness after endless hours spinning around on the death-wheels, my mind raced back and forth between an incident that occurred when I was twelve years old, being beaten up by a group of older boys for reasons I could not recall, and wondering if I would ever eat again, and if I did, what would it be. It was then I vaguely registered two Yahnito warriors removing Ariel from her wheel. Unable to stand on her feet, the warriors carried her past me, disappearing into the side of the mountain. I struggled to make eye contact with her, but to no avail. What was to become of her? Were we to be taken off one by one to our execution? Regrets flooded into my head; why hadn't I declared my affection, or, let

us be honest, my love for her? This was the last time I would ever see her again; why did I stand on ceremony? Propriety be damned! What a fool, what a ridiculous fool I'd been.

"Idiot is the word I would use, Ned," said McCready, standing in front of me. The children paid him no mind as they continued to play their game.

"Mac! You're alive!" I exclaimed, for he was looking no worse for the wear considering the travails that had befallen him these last few days. "How did you get here?" One of the children, nonplussed by my outburst, came over and gave my cheek a solid whack, then returned to his playmates.

"I have no idea," McCready replied, calm as calm could be. "Does it matter?" I shook my head; no, it didn't matter because if I was seeing the old badger, it was probably because at any moment I would be taking that same journey he had into uncharted wilderness. "You're not going anywhere, son," he said, seeming to read my thoughts. "In fact, your little lass will be rescuing you in due time, mark my words." I wanted to ask how he knew such things, but he stopped me. "There's little time to tell you what I needs must do, so shut yer trap and listen good. It's going to be you from now on, understand? You alone, without me to mollycoddle you. There'll be a mountain of challenges ahead, literally, and you'll often think you're not up to the task; 'if only old Mac were here he'd know what to do', but you don't need me or anyone else to guide you, understand? Don't go doubting yourself. Trust your instincts. Always."

I wanted to tell him how wrong he was; that I'd never measure up to the man he was; that we'd always been a team, and would continue to be so; that all this talk was nonsense anyway since there seemed no way out of my current predicament, but before I could launch into my counter argument, two warriors unleashed me from my wheel, forcing McCready to disappear

from whence he came. They escorted me to the same egress they'd taken Ariel, and I assumed her fate would await me as well. In fact that turned out to be the case, but not as I imagined it.

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My escorts brought me into a large cavern, lit with what seemed a thousand lanterns. Abstract symbols were intricately carved into the walls, their meaning obscure to my eyes. A hundred warriors sat cross-legged in a circle against the walls and in the center stood a tall woman of indeterminate age, wearing a robe that brilliantly reflected the warm light of the surrounding lanterns. She beckoned me towards her with a simple gesture, and my warrior-escorts guided me to her, for my legs could scarcely support my own weight, especially with my already injured foot. The woman stared deeply into my eyes as if she were reaching through to my very soul. I could see no alternative other than to return her gaze as steadily as possible. After a moment, she moved towards me, pressed her nose against mine, took in a full, deep breath, then exhaled just as deeply. While perplexed by this engagement, I felt an unexpected calm come over me that I'd never experienced before. As she disengaged, she gave me a gentle smile, then bade me sit. My guides helped me to do so, and as I was lowered to the floor, she sat next to me, cross-legged as in the manner of all the attending warriors. As we sat in silence, I thought this was either going rather well, or rather badly. I could not, honestly, tell. In any case, I was glad to be off the death-wheel, and out of the sun. After a moment, two children brought food and drink. The woman gestured that I should avail myself of what was set before me. I did not hesitate, for being spun on a wheel attached to a cliffside a thousand meters above the ground can stimulate one's appetite. I wasn't quite sure what I was eating, but it tasted pleasant enough, and it wouldn't have mattered: I would have devoured anything put in front of me at that point, including my own gammy foot if it came to that.

Satisfied I was beginning to feel at ease, the woman finally spoke. “I am Te Ashone, Daughter of Yahnti, and the current protector of those who live within it.” She spoke in lightly accented, but perfect Anansian.

“Ned Sprye, Inspector General of Anansia,” I said, my mouth unashamedly full of food, “and I am at your service, madam.”

Te Ashone laughed loudly, “I’d forgotten how formal you people from the northwest can be.” Still laughing, she gestured to the shadows beyond the lanterns’ glow, and in Sarian, beckoned someone to come forward. It was Ariel. As she came toward us, I could see she’d regained the color in her cheeks and my heart soared at the sight of her. “Lieutenant Bárcenas has recounted the tribulations you have experienced,” Te Ashone said as Ariel sat next to her. “We are sorry for the pain it has caused you, but pain is the greatest of all teachers, is it not? Although we’d have gladly postponed the lesson indefinitely, no?”

“Wiser words were never spoken, madam,” I said, nodding in agreement.

“We are most grateful for the return of Yahnti’s son, Te Whiti, known to you as Captain Ernesto Manrique.”

“I wish we could have done so while he was alive,” I said solemnly. “He was a man to be respected, and it was a pleasure to serve with him.”

“Your words do him honor,” Te Ashone said, bowing her head. “Now, I am sure you will want to take some rest. You are all welcome guests of Yahnti. Lieutenant, I will see to it that your soldiers are taken care of.”

“We are most grateful, Te Ashone,” Ariel said. “I give you my promise as a Sarian officer we will not abuse your generosity.” The Yahnti leader bowed her head in response.

“Might I inquire,” I said, somewhat hesitantly, “as to my associate, Gerald McCready?”

Te Ashone's expression turned somber. "Our healers are doing what they can for Mr. McCready, but his condition is quite grave."

"But the old goat is still alive, yes?" I asked, feeling my heart dance a happy jig at this welcome news.

"He is," the Daughter of Yahnti replied. "When you've bathed and rested, we will take you to him." And at that, our audience was at end. Te Ashone stood as did the circle of warriors in unison with her. One by one, they exited, leaving Ariel and I alone.

"I thought all was lost," I said with a sigh of relief.

"It is not over yet, Ned," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, somewhat alarmed by her declaration.

"Do not mistake Te Ashone's politeness for charity. If it had not been for the envelope Captain Manrique gave me, we would all be dead by now." The envelope, Ariel explained, had contained a note from the captain begging forgiveness for abandoning his people and to be received into the mountain after his death. Attached was an aged piece of parchment upon which there was a simple illustration of a ram; his animal totem. "We have been granted a stay of execution thanks to him, but if you know anything about the Yahntos, you would know they do not suffer intruders well."

I protested, "It was not our intention—"

"It doesn't matter our intention," Ariel said. "There is only what Te Ashone decides is best for the Yahntos. Do we pose a threat? Will we encourage others to seek them out? Are there ulterior motives to our coming here? And, perhaps most important, were we responsible for their native son's death?"

"But we weren't," I said.

“Perhaps,” was Ariel’s chilly response. “We shall see what the verdict is in due time. Until then, I suggest you get some sleep, Ned Sprye. You look horrible.” She gave me a wink of the eye, and left me to finish my meal.

The Yahntos might be the oldest group of indigenous people in the world, but their origins are unknown except for what can be gleaned from their mythology, which has it that their ancestors had risen up from the sea, and migrated to the Yahntis – which actually means *born of the sea* in their ancient tongue – growing legs, arms, and what have you on their journey until they took the form of human beings, though they did not, and *still* do not, consider themselves as such. As a living testament to their ancestors, when being initiated into adulthood, a young member has tattooed upon their chest the totem chosen for them by the elder council; an animal or, more often, sea creature. Those who choose to be warriors have their faces tattooed with arcane symbols which come to them during the ten days spent on the highest peaks, without food or water. To call them a hardy lot would be an understatement. To call them primitive would be a fatal error. While civilization grew up around them, they remained assiduously neutral and independent (especially during the Great War) avoiding contact with others unless absolutely necessary. There were exceptions, of course: Te Ashone had learned the languages north and south of the Yahntis (in fact, I later learned she actually went to the National University in Provencetown, graduating with honors) and many left the mountains to live among “the others” either for love or ambition, such as Captain Manrique. But for what is reckoned to be more than a thousand years, the Yahntos have lived within these mountains in harmony and peace, except when they needed to defend their homeland, which they have done aggressively and without mercy. All of this information may be easily accessed by the curious reader in *Copelin’s*

Continental History, Volume II, Pages 234-267, and yet they still they remain a complete enigma, even when encountered face-to-face as I was about to soon discover.

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“Ned! Wake up! Ned!”

I was uncertain how long I’d been asleep, but it felt like two fortnights. Having eaten and bathed, I was taken to a small chamber where a pallet of animal skins lay on the floor. The instant my head touched those skins, I fell into the deepest slumber I can ever recall, which I was now being disrupted by this annoying, urgent voice, and I was none too happy about it.

“What?” I said groggily.

“We need to leave,” the voice whispered in my ear. “Immediately.”

“No, no. I’m enjoying my sleep just now,” I said, yawning. “Perhaps later.”

“Of course you’re enjoying your sleep. You’ve been drugged!” I began to recognize the voice as Ariel, which brought a smile to my lips.

“Nonsense, my love. Come, lie down beside me. There’s plenty of room,” I said, patting the animal skins.

“Ned!” Ariel slapped me on the face.

“Why did you do that?” I said, feeling like a child being punished. But it brought me to my senses, as she had intended. I opened my eyes, but I couldn’t see a thing, the chamber being almost pitch black. A solitary lantern attached to the wall near the entrance was guttering, giving only the faintest of light, but enough for me to see the outline of her face, which showed concern and distress.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I asked, trying to catch my bearings.

“There’s no time for questions, Ned. We’re in great danger, and need to leave now.” She pushed me up into a sitting position.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked, realizing I was completely naked.

“Here,” Ariel said as she handed me, not my clothes, but a Yahnito tunic.

“I can’t wear this,” I protested.

“Put it on now. Time is running out.” I tugged it on as best I could, and with Ariel’s help, stood up, though I was having trouble with my balance.

“We must find our way out of here before they discover we are gone.”

“Where are your soldiers?”

“They’re dead, Ned,” Ariel said, choking up. “Every single one of them.” I was fully awake now upon hearing that declaration.

“And McCready?”

“I don’t know.”

“If he’s alive, we have to find him.”

“There’s no time. We don’t even know where they’re keeping him.”

“I can’t leave McCready here to die.”

“Ned—”

I started towards the entrance, not letting her finish what would surely be an admonition to take sensible, logical action considering the circumstances. I cannot explain why I refused to heed her, but I did. She followed, but was not happy about it.

The minute we exited the chamber, a labyrinth of corridors and passageways confronted us, all going this way and that. I realized then I had no memory of the geography. In fact, I hardly remembered anything of my time among the Yahnitos except vague images of speaking

with Te Ashone, having a soothing bath, and being laid down on the pallet of skins. That was all, nothing more. Ariel was right: I had been drugged! Even now, I was feeling its effects, barely able to focus on the task at hand. Fortunately, Ariel marked every nook and cranny in her alert, military mind, and so with her guidance, we were able to find McCready who was being kept in an infirmary, unconscious still, but alive. His wounds had been tended to, but he was teetering on the edge of life, that much was clear.

“What now?” Ariel asked, and it was a reasonable question, but I had no answer.

“Will you help me with him?” I asked in reply.

“To do what?”

“I’ll carry him on my back,” I said desperately. “I can’t leave him here.”

“Ned—”

“Will you or will you not help me?”

“Ned,” Ariel put her hand gently on my shoulder. “We will *all* perish if we try to take him. The odds for just the two of us surviving are practically nil.”

I knew what she said was true, but I did not want it to be. I did not want to leave him, though I knew I must. “Good-bye old friend,” I said, my eyes brimming with tears. “This is not the end, I promise.”

We moved back to the warren of corridors, and Ariel guided us where she had calculated our best route of escape would be. Less than ten meters down a passageway, we heard noises behind us; the Yahnitos had discovered us. Though it was folly to think we could outrun or outsmart them – this was their mountain, after all – we had to try.

“This way,” Ariel said as she pulled me into another passageway that led downward. “It’s a risk, but if we can try to make it back to where the horses and wagons are, we might have a chance of escape.”

“Worth a try,” I said, because I honestly could think of no better plan. I almost tumbled end over end several times trying to negotiate the rough steps, my injured foot not helping my balance, but we made forward progress ever downward, and hearing no more sounds of pursuit, may even have eluded the warriors. And then we hit a dead end. A solid wall of granite. We were trapped. In a prison of our own making.

I must applaud your tenacity,” came a familiar voice from the blackness above our heads: Te Ashone. “I would call it courage were not your actions so foolhardy.” Two lanterns were lit, revealing ten warriors standing behind the Daughter of Yahnti.

“You executed my soldiers,” Ariel said, defiantly stepping towards Te Ashone. The warriors raised their weapons, but their leader bade them stand down.

“I’m afraid that is true. I wish it were not. If you will come with us peacefully, I will gladly explain our reasons, though I am under no obligation to do so.”

“Why not just kill us here and now and be done with it?” Ariel said, spitting out the words as if they were poison in her mouth.

“Because you are not members of the group of murderous zealots calling themselves the Sons of Gaea.”

“You’re damn right we aren’t,” I said angrily. “I should think that would have been obvious by our story.”

“Stories can be... fabricated,” Te Ashone said. “But not when under the influence of the Ujiro Root.”

“The *what?*” I said, irritated, and so very tired of strange names and riddles.

“It is what you both were given – as well as your soldiers – with your food and drink. It releases any obstacles to the truth. Under interrogation we learned all we needed to know: that you were not part of the organization responsible for the murder of our son, Te Whiti, your Captain Manrique.”

“Then why kill my soldiers?” Ariel asked, a mixture of ferocity and anguish on her face.

“Because,” Te Ashone said, “all eight of them confessed that they were, in fact, loyal and dedicated Sons of Gaea.”