

## Chapter VIII – The Other Side

“I have known every single one of my soldiers for over a year,” Ariel said defiantly. “I have watched them face the enemy with great fortitude and courage. I simply cannot accept that any of them could be associated with these insane criminals.”

“And yet it is true,” Te Ashone said in a measured voice.

“I need proof,” Ariel loudly rebutted. “Actual proof. Not your word, with all due respect, that they confessed whilst under the influence of some magical root!”

After our escape had been thwarted by Te Ashone and her warriors, Ariel and I assumed a swift and sudden death would await us. Instead, we were brought into a vast refectory. Long tables filled the area upon which sat bounties of every imaginable food: fruits, vegetables, and sundries. A warm, pleasant light shone from above conveyed by a shaft in the center of a tall dome ceiling that extended upward through the whole of the mountain into the clear blue sky from which this light originated. The whole Yahnito community was present in this hall, seated at the tables and partaking of the feast before them. Children ran around playing games and teasing each other as children do. Laughter came from every corner. As Te Ashone escorted us to one of the tables, the occupants seated moved over to make room. No one gave deference to Te Ashone or her position in the community. Here, she was one of the many, and there was no ceremony to stand upon.

“I am sure you have many questions,” Te Ashone said, as we settled into our seats.

“The only question I have, and demand an answer to,” Ariel repeated, “is why you have murdered my soldiers.”

Te Ashone was silent for a long moment as she regarded Ariel. Finally, she spoke. “Yes, I believe you deserve an answer to that.” She nodded to one of her attending warriors, who

reached into a woven sack strung around his neck and handed Te Ashone a folded parchment. She set it down in front of Ariel. "I should warn you, this evidence is... disquieting." She carefully opened the package revealing eight human teeth. Ariel's eyes went wide with horror at the realization of what these were: the very teeth of her soldiers!

"What is the meaning of this?" Ariel demanded, anger rising to her cheeks. "Is this the way of the Yahnitos? To defile the bodies of my comrades?"

"Not all is as it seems, Lieutenant," said Te Ashone. She took a wooden spoon from the table and pushed it down on one of the teeth. Incredibly, the spoon crushed the tooth with very little pressure, revealing a green powder concealed within its cavity. "A fast acting poison," Te Ashone explained, anticipating our confusion. "Causing instant death."

"I have seen the result of this poison," I exclaimed. "The agents who attempted to abduct us in Sar used this cowardly way out of prosecution."

This revelation gutted Ariel, but she remained adamant. "I still must protest your actions, Te Ashone. It was my duty to take them back to Sar where they would face justice as traitors."

Te Ashone nodded sympathetically. "*My* duty, which I do not take lightly, is to protect the Yahnitos from harm using any means necessary. Perhaps you could have successfully brought them to trial in Sar, but I doubt it. You would never have even made it home alive."

"Cecilia Martinez and I were at the academy together," Ariel said, trying to come to terms with this devastating revelation. "We both came from a long line of soldiers. It doesn't make any sense that she should be involved in a cult. This cult especially."

The Yahnitos have lost a few to the Sons of Gaea," said Te Ashone with understanding, "which is why we knew to look for the false teeth. It is disheartening when someone close to us has so drifted so far off the path of what we hold to be true and right."

“Having your people in their ranks may explain how they were able to mimic the Yahnito weapons when they attacked us,” I said.

“If that is true,” Te Ashone said, “then it is doubly hurtful to realize children of Yahnti could be so disrespectful to their traditions.”

“Why didn’t they just kill us in our sleep then?” asked Ariel. “It certainly would have saved them from their own death.”

“I can only assume they had done their duty in assuring the murder of Doctor Zeta,” I surmised, starting to see how the puzzle pieces were fitting together. “There was nothing left except to return home and prepare for whatever their next assignment would be. It seems clear the Sons of Gaea manipulated our decision to take the river route by their assault on us at the hotel. And that, in turn, forced Captain Manrique to head in a direction across the desert to the Yahntis thus facilitating their ambush. Very clever for a gaggle of misguided zealots.”

“I do see merit in their cause,” Te Ashone allowed. “It is their method I take exception to.”

“I couldn’t disagree more, madam,” I said, nonplussed by her declaration. “I see nothing meritorious about the Sons of Gaea whatsoever, even their supposed cause.”

Te Shone gave me an indulgent look, as one would a child. “Mother Earth holds all of us in her loving hands, Mr. Sprye. What dies is born again, and what is born, dies once more. It is this cycle we depend on whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Our Earth is living, breathing, and evolving always. This cannot be disputed. Even the scientists will tell you so. The Sons of Gaea, however, believe modern science is not compatible with The Mother’s wishes. They contend that it is an evil bent on destroying her will, and they are willing to murder in order to prove their point. How far from Mother Earth’s wishes could that be, if not an outright insult to her?”

“I respect your beliefs, madam, and have no evidence to suggest other than what you claim. But as my partner is fond of saying, ‘philosophy is none of our concern until a crime is committed on its behalf.’ Then the perpetrator of that crime must be brought to justice.”

Te Ashone gave me a respectful nod then, not wishing to engage in the debate further, asked how she could be of assistance. I replied that giving us safe passage to the other side of the mountain would be assistance enough. “There, hopefully, an Anansian company of soldiers will be waiting for us.”

Before departing, we attended the funeral service for Captain Manrique, which I found quite moving. His body was wrapped in a fabric dyed a vivid red, and placed upon a bier constructed from willow saplings. He was then carried atop the highest peak of the Yahntis. The whole of the Yahnito community gathered in silence as Te Ashone spoke and sang in their native tongue. We then silently departed, leaving his earthly remains to be reclaimed by the mountain.

I should note, though it does me no pleasure to do so, that the eight traitorous soldiers were unceremoniously buried in the ground on the Sarian side of the mountain. Only Ariel and I attended their interment. I could tell their betrayal still devastated her; it would difficult for any of us to not be otherwise. After a moment, she walked away in silence, not being able to find a fitting eulogy.

At morning’s light, our wagon was loaded with supplies, and our horses refreshed. Two Yahnito guides were assigned to see us to the other side of the Cuido Pass. McCready was placed in the back of the wagon, and made as comfortable as possible. As we departed, Te Ashone gave her blessing and a piece of advice: “Trust no one.”

In half a day’s time, we breached the other side of the Yahnti Mountains, coming through the Cuido Pass and into a green meadow announcing we had arrived in Anansian territory, albeit

on the far outskirts of our fair country. Missing, though, was the complement of Anansian soldiers expected to escort us to the capital city of Landhaven.

“Well, that’s a disappointment,” I said, shaking my head at the empty landscape before me.

“It’s been four days since the agreed upon rendezvous,” Ariel said. “I would not have remained either were I the commanding officer.”

“Is that meant to be a comfort?” I asked. “I assure you it is not.”

“Any thoughts, Ned?” Ariel asked. “Other than sarcasm?”

“I seem to recall a small mining town some eighty kilometers to the west – Ferriston – the last stop on the Western Mono Line,” acknowledging her admonition. “It’s probably our only option.”

“Very well,” said Ariel with a sigh of resignation; a sigh that mirrored my own feelings for why should anything be straightforward or simple on this mission? We thanked and dismissed our Yahnito guides, both in Sarian and Anansian, and though it seemed they understood neither of our two languages, they bowed and headed back towards their home deep inside the Yahnti mountains.

We urged our horses westward and were no more than a hundred meters from the canyon’s mouth when we heard a shout from behind us. A solitary Anansian soldier was furiously pedaling a bicycle in our direction. “I say, I say, hold up a moment, will you?” He shouted.

Ariel pulled on the horse’s reins, halting our forward progress. “What now?” she exclaimed with exasperation. The soldier managed to catch up to us, huffing and puffing all the way.

“It is Inspector Sprye, yes?” He said as he dismounted and walked towards us.

“It is,” I replied.

“And this must be Lieutenant Bárcenas,” the corporal said, recognizing Ariel’s uniform.

“Am I correct?”

“Yes,” Ariel said warily.

“Forgive me for not meeting you at the pass,” he said, catching his breath. “I was having some difficulty with family of wolverines who thought my breakfast should be theirs.”

“And you are...?” I said, suspicious of his sudden presence.

He stood up as straight and saluted us. “Corporal Angus Dennington, at your service. I was stationed at the entrance, or I suppose, from your point of view, the *exit* of the pass.” The Corporal was not far into adulthood, slight of build, tall and willowy. His hair was shockingly red, as were his cheeks, no doubt due to the exertion of cycling at full speed.

“Where is Colonel Stanton?” I asked.

“Ah yes, well you see the Colonel and the rest of the company are headed back to Landhaven. After four days we assumed you’d been... well, delayed, and our resources were running low so the Major was forced to depart. He was convinced, however, that you would prevail, and so I was stationed here to greet you. And the Colonel’s instincts were well founded it seems, because here you are.”

“Indeed we are,” I said, giving a sideways glance to Ariel—if only this callow youth knew what we’d been through.

“May I inquire as to where the rest of your company is?” Corporal Dennington asked.

“Still in the Pass, yes?”

“No. We are the sole survivors,” Ariel said dryly.

“Oh. That is unfortunate news,” the corporal said, his face betraying shock. “And the Sarian scientist. Doctor Zeta. He is...?”

“Dead,” I replied. Not wishing to further elaborate, I asked what his orders were.

“I was to send word when you arrived so an escort might be arranged. But if it’s only the two of you—”

“Three,” Ariel interjected.

“I see,” the young corporal said, looking confused.

“Inspector McCready,” I said, indicating the back of the wagon. “His injuries are quite severe and he is unconscious, but alive.”

“Yes. Yes, I see,” he said. “Well, all three of you can be accommodated without difficulty.”

“Accommodated?” I asked, for it was my turn to be confused. “In what manner accommodated?”

“Why,” exclaimed Corporal Dennington with great enthusiasm, “in my balloon of course!”

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Our Yahnito guides had been standing at the mouth of the Cuido Pass, having seen Corporal Dennington cycling towards us, wondering if they were needed to intervene should there be trouble. Fortunately, there was not, and equally fortunate that they were able to take charge of the horses and wagon.

The corporal had concealed his equipage behind a ridge on the side of the mountain. It was a standard issue, military-grade balloon, used principally for observation and communication. In a pinch, however, it could be commandeered for a rescue operation such as was being done now. The corporal’s basket was not the exact definition of commodious, but he was correct in assessing that it would fit us all comfortably.

“We should make Wellsborough in two days, provided the winds are with us,” the corporal-balloonist chirped as he made his preparations. “From there we can take the Express Mono to Landhaven, if that suits you, sir.”

“Wouldn’t Ferriston be closer?” I asked.

“Indeed it would, Inspector.” He paused from his work to look up at me. “Unfortunately, it no longer exists.”

“Doesn’t exist you say?” I asked, not being sure I understood him correctly. “How is that possible? I was there no more than two years ago.”

“A temblor, sir,” the corporal said. “A monstrous fissure opened wide like a giant mouth and more or less swallowed the township. The greatest disaster reported since the quakes began. The loss of life... well, as you might imagine, devastating. Not since the Great War have so many Anansians perished.” The news took me so aback, I was forced to sit down. Doctor Zeta’s forecast had come true – more vividly than I could have imagined, than *anyone* could have imagined.

“When did this occur?” I asked.

“Two weeks ago. It’s been in all the papers, but I suppose you wouldn’t have heard about it, being incommunicado during your travels.”

“No, but we experienced a temblor in the Montagua Wilderness. It might have been at the same time. Almost lost my foot because of it.”

“How’s that?” the corporal said, a puzzled look on his face.

“A long story,” I said. “The events of which I am happy to recount once airborne.”

“We shall be ready to lift off within the hour, Inspector.”

“Ned. May I have a word?” Ariel pulled me aside, a worried look on her face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, half expecting her to express a suspicion that the young corporal might be a member of the Sons of Gaea. The thought had already occurred to me a few times.

“I have a confession to make,” she said. “I have never traveled in the sky before. The very thought of it terrifies me.” I was taken aback: Lieutenant Ariel Bárcenas, as brave a soldier as I’d ever encountered, would not have hesitated to charge an enemy head on with nothing more than a rifle and her wits. Now she was white as a sheet at the prospect of flying in a balloon.

“It really is a remarkable sensation,” I said in an attempt to assuage her discomfort. “Pleasant actually, and quite safe.”

“That is a matter of personal opinion,” she countered, finding my assurances unconvincing. “If there should be a mishap while traveling on the ground, there you *are*. But should something befall you suspended in air, well, simply put, there you are *not*.”

“Ariel—”

“Perhaps it would be better if I took the horses and wagon and met you at Wellsborough. I shouldn’t be more than a day later than you.”

“I understand your hesitation, truly I do,” I said.

“I think not—”

“But you must agree there’s no practicality in us taking separate routes.”

“I know you are right, Ned,” Ariel said, giving a nod of resignation. “Though I’d rather you were not.”

“Good old McCready was not overly fond of flying either. Only a sufficient quantity of brandy would see him through. I regret we have none here.”

“Brandy?” Corporal Dennington asked, perking up. “Forgive me for overhearing, but, in fact, I always carry a bottle for just such occasions. I’m well aware that not everyone is as enthusiastic about ballooning as I.”

“Corporal, I shall see to it that you are recommended for a promotion!”

“Most kind, Inspector, but hardly necessary. I quite enjoy my current duties, thank you.”

“A medal of commendation then,” I said with a broad smile.

“Let me get you and Lieutenant Bárcenas safely to Wellsborough, before you make any promises you may regret, Inspector,” Dennington said with a wink. The young balloonist’s statement did anything but boost Ariel’s confidence in the enterprise.

“I’ll take that brandy now, Corporal,” she said, her face an even paler shade of white than before.

“Make it two,” I said, my confidence waning in equal measure to Ariel’s.

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The winds were indeed in our favor, and we made Wellsborough several hours earlier than young Corporal Dennington had forecast. Ariel managed the trip admirably, sleeping most of the way under the calming influence of the brandy.

The first task upon disembarking was to see that McCready be looked after, and we were lucky have landed in the right city. Wellsborough, as the reader will no doubt recall, was built around a legendary spring thought to cure all manner of illnesses back in ancient times. Pilgrims from all over the world would come for the waters believed to originate from a mysterious divine source. These days, however, it headquartered the National Ministry of Health, and was the primary center for modern medical research. A clinic, free to all, was built directly above that miraculous spring, which is where we took McCready.

Upon examination, the doctors concluded that while McCready's wounds were indeed healing, his chances of survival were less than hopeful without surgical intervention. Absent this, they were certain he would not last the night. Even with surgery, they doubted he would recover fully, if at all.

I stood nervously in the observation gallery watching the doctors go to work on McCready below in the operating theatre. They were assisted by medi-servos, which I was none too thrilled about, making a mental note that should I ever find myself in similar circumstances, to leave instructions that not a single one of those abominations touch me no matter what cost to my surviving the procedure. As it was, their various instruments, which looked to my eye like devices of torture, poked and prodded poor McCready's body for over an hour and it was excruciating to watch.

Afterward, he was taken to a recovery ward. The doctors said they had done the best they could with what they had, admitting they had very little. Despite of the doctors' objections, and Ariel's too, for that matter, I refused to leave McCready's bed. I asked Corporal Dennington to escort Ariel to Landhaven, but both insisted they would not depart Wellsborough without me. Ariel offered to stay by my side, but I demurred, saying it wasn't necessary, and that at least one of us needed to be refreshed for the next leg of the journey. She said she understood, though I could tell she was hurt. It wasn't that I wouldn't have welcomed her company, it was more that I needed to be alone with my thoughts and McCready.

Does one ever truly understand or appreciate the teachers we are given during the course of our short lives? I think not. When I was no more than four years of age, I had gotten caught up in a large oak tree I decided to climb for reasons I've since forgotten; perhaps on a dare or some such foolish thing. At any rate, my playmates ran away despite my cries of pain and fear, no

doubt concerned they would be punished for getting me up there. It was the first time I felt alone and helpless. And thought, ‘oh, Ned, how pitiful an end is this?’ After a time, when I’d resigned myself to death – as only a four-year-old could – an older lad came up on his bicycle, climbed the tree, and rescued me. From him I learned kindness and the worth of caring for others.

When I was at the most unfortunate age of thirteen, fully feeling my oats coming into supposed manhood, and having no one else to prove my burgeoning masculinity too, I treated my mother horribly, using her emotions as my proving ground, too often reducing her to tears. My father, a soft-spoken man, pulled me into his study and sat me down. “Son,” he said with a stern expression, “when it comes to you or your mother, I will *always* choose your mother. I beg you not to force me to make that choice.” I heard that message loud and clear, and I thank him for forcing me to understand how all human beings, men and women alike, are to be treated with respect.

And then there was McCready, who took a naïve, wet behind the ears youth under his care and guidance. He wasn’t kind about it, indeed, at times he was quite cruel. But that is the teacher you want when facing life or death situations on a daily basis. One instance stands out in my mind. We were on assignment in Lavernia, that small allied country to the north of Anansia. While we were dining in the hotel’s restaurant, two men, dressed in overcoats, approached us. I had observed them earlier, but they seemed non-descript and, to my eyes, non-threatening. They smiled benignly as they approached, but without a moment of hesitation, McCready pulled a pistol from his waistcoat and shot them both dead. You can imagine my shock and the commotion it cause inside the establishment. It turned out, however, that these two gentlemen were assassins affiliated with the Lavernia Separatist Movement instructed to eliminate us before we’d finished our dessert. Later, when I asked McCready how he could possibly have known

their intentions, he replied that until I learnt that instinct, I would never become a full Inspector. I like to think I have since acquired that skill, and I have McCready to thank for it.

Sleep was impossible, so I occupied myself with reading the *National Times*, hoping to catch up on the domestic news and some additional details about the temblor that had destroyed the town of Ferriston. After several weeks, what news there was of the incident had been relegated to the back page. But, there were two small items of note: Prime Minister Fallon's promise to find a scientific solution to the problem, and a letter the newspaper received from the Sons of Gaea declaring the Ferriston disaster a warning from "The Great Mother" to the Anansian government that it must cease its efforts to thwart her will. Both issues, I was sure, would soon disappear from *The National's* pages, and in the minds of the general public since whatever solution there might have been was erased by the death of the querulous Doctor Zeta.

My reading was interrupted by a long, guttural sound coming from McCready. I looked over and there he was, his eyes wide open staring straight at me. I leapt up from my chair leaned over him. His mouth was awkwardly moving as he tried to speak.

"Take it easy, old man," I said, smiling. "It's going to be alright."

He grabbed hold of my arm with preternatural strength, pulling me down close to him.

"Colonel..." McCready whispered.

"Just your old Neddy here," I said, realizing the old badger had no idea who I was.

"Colonel... Woodes."

"I'm sorry, McCready," I said, "I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"*Lord... Woodes...*" His eyes were desperately pleading with me, and my heart was breaking seeing that in his mind, he was in some other time and place: the battlefield perhaps, where he believed he lay dying with his commanding officer, Colonel Woodes.

“Try to rest, old friend,” I pleaded. “I beg of you.” He let go his grasp on me, his arm going limp.

“Forgive me. Forgive me,” he said with gasp.

The fierce light that had shown so brightly in life, departed those weary eyes forevermore. Gerald McCready, my friend, my partner, my mentor, passed on to what I hoped would be a more pleasant world than the one he’d occupied. A place where the old curmudgeon could finally rest in peace.