

Part II

Chapter X - On The Northern Express

“That thing’s not allowed in the passenger section,” the steward barked as I approached my assigned car. He was pointing a bony finger directly at the clanking, hissing pile of junk standing next to me.

“I have tickets,” I replied. “For me *and* my machine.”

“Don’t care nothing about tickets,” the steward barked. “There’s to be no mechanical devices allowed in the passenger cars. It’s a danger to all. I have my orders.”

“As do I,” I said, showing my identification. “I’m on official business. For Anansia.”

“The Northern Express is of Lavernian registration, subject to the laws of Lavernia and Lavernia *only*. As such, your metal companion needs must travel in baggage with the rest of the machines and whatnot. You’re welcome to join him there if it suits you.”

I had still not gotten used to the unwelcome attention this hulking contraption had garnered from those who passed us. Many found it amusing, wondering if we were from a visiting circus. Most, however, were horrified. As embarrassed as I was about being attached to this iron abomination, the steward’s intractability caused me no little irritation.

“A protest will be filed by my superiors,” I declared, narrowing my eyes.

“As is their wont,” he said, impassively. “Now it’s on or off, sir.” Argument seemed a futile endeavor, so, reluctantly, I attended my servo-partner in the baggage compartment. It was so cold, I could see my breath swirling in concert with the steam rising off the mechanical man. To make conditions even less commodious, a splintery wooden bench was the only place to sit.

I’d been given a small penny-whistle, such as a child would play with, by which I was to command the mechanical beast. Chief Engineer Gillespie assured me it would become second

nature to me once I became more comfortable with the procedure, but that had not occurred. I was constantly fumbling with the thing since my ill-fated visit to the Ministry of Science three days ago and now was having a devil of a time trying to figure out what command to use in order to get the damn thing to sit down. I'd blow one note, and it started walking away from me. Another and it began kicking at a wooden crate. One more misguided note and a wailing siren emanated from the vicinity of its mouth.

I frantically searched through the weighty manual, finally finding the right note to make him sit. If I hadn't had been so flummoxed with this machine, I would more easily grasp the operation of it, much as I'd done with any other device required of my profession. Instead, it felt like some nightmare I desperately hoped I would soon wake from. This was going to be a very long assignment indeed.

~*~

After getting over my initial shock of being introduced to the servo, Chief Engineer Gillespie demonstrated all its various capabilities. She explained the technological breakthroughs that made such a device possible.

First was the engine, the design of which was similar to her motorized chair: A furnace set deep inside the belly of the beast using compressed carbon cylinders, each lasting for one week. The furnace would heat a boiler, creating the steam from water reservoirs in its legs to power a complex network of motors to move the limbs, torso, head, and the various weapons secreted on its person.

"Austin's brain, however, is the most remarkable feature of all," Gillespie said with great enthusiasm.

"*Brain?*" I asked, incredulously. "It has a brain?"

“Yes, indeed,” she said. “A series flat metal disks—twenty to be exact—sandwiched inside his chest cavity. Punched holes on each disk in various patterns represent tasks or actions read by a stylus; what we engineers like to call ‘programatizing.’ It responds to sensors in and around his body, such as the eyes, ears, and, believe it or not, his mustache, which measures the proximity of objects nearby, especially you.”

“Me?” I asked, taken aback.

“You’re his partner. His only purpose is to serve your needs. Austin will detect your presence at all times, within several meters. Therefore, a sample of your blood is required. It will create a ‘bond’ between the two of you. He will then respond to your commands and your commands only. If you are separated, he’ll track you down.”

“I’m very sorry, Chief Engineer, but nothing you have said so far makes any sense to me.”

“Yes, it must be overwhelming. We have a manual for you to study, of course. But you must take comfort in knowing that Austin is perfectly capable of looking after himself.”

“Why do you keep referring to it as a ‘him?’” I asked. “It’s a machine, is it not?”

“Yes, well, I’m not sure why I made him a ‘he’ really. Austin just seemed to be leaning in that direction. Especially with the mustache. His first name stands for ‘Autonomous Servo Type-N.’ And Ironborne because, well, you get the point.”

“If I may be blunt, having a servo as a partner is not only absurd, it’s dangerous.”

“Austin is very much up to the task of a junior inspector,” the Chief Engineer said with conviction.

“There are human inspectors perfectly capable to the task,” I protested.

“I should think you of all people would understand, Inspector,” the Chief Engineer said, “having just lost your partner, Mr. McCready. Would it not have been preferable to have had a partner who cannot die?”

“I’m sure your intention is to not be insulting,” I said, feeling the blood rising in anger to my face, “but this tin can is not and will never *be* a substitute for someone like Gerald McCready.”

“No, of course not,” she said. “Please forgive me for implying such a thing. It’s simply that having someone at your disposal like Austin, well, you needn’t worry about his safety is all I am trying to say. He has the strength of ten good men, is practically indestructible, and is dedicated to your safety and yours alone.”

Had the world gone mad? Had *I*? The very idea of having a machine as a partner made my stomach turn. This must be some kind of elaborate joke staged by Simkins. But the Colonel was not the type to construct such an elaborate ruse. No, this was all too real. A perfect example of bureaucracy in action: the stamp of approval given without considering the consequences. Apparently, I was to be the test subject, which would be so typical of the ministry. I also knew that no manner of protest would prove efficacious, and resigned myself to my fate, consenting to having a blood sample drawn.

They inserted the vial into the back of the servo in a manner I would have preferred not to have seen. Within seconds of doing so, the thing turned its copper-clad visage towards me and fixed its glowing red eyes upon my person. It would not be an exaggeration to say I was unnerved to the marrow of my bones.

“Walk around in front of him would you, Inspector,” the Chief Engineer said. I did as was requested, and its head turned in any direction I moved to.

“Now if you would be so good as to walk towards the end of the hall.” Again, I did as they asked me. The servo moved with me, matching my pace precisely. “Perfect.” The Chief Engineer exclaimed, and turned to her assistant. “Let’s show Inspector Sprye the fun bits, shall we, Aiden?”

Her assistant dutifully picked up a silver penny whistle and played a triad of notes. The servo immediately took a defensive posture, surveying the room. Aiden rolled a canister on the floor towards the machine and without hesitation it unleashed a powerful stream of electrical plasma, identical to that of a Timlo Electro-Blast rifle, from the palm of its left hand, destroying the object. I was duly impressed. Another triad of notes and a burst of flames shot out from its right palm, engulfing the remains of the canister on fire.

“You might want to stand back for this, Inspector,” the Chief Engineer said. She nodded to her assistant. He played another set of notes and the servo assumed the stance of a boxer, fists at the ready.

The assistant donned a protective helmet, breastplate and gloves. He played another set of notes as he cautiously approached the machine, holding up his fists as if to do battle. Without hesitation, the servo attacked, and within three well-placed blows, knocked the assistant flat on his backside.

It was a most impressive display, and despite my misgivings, I quickly realized it would make a formidable weapon. But I could never see it as a partner. It was just a machine, a tool. How useful it would be, only the test of time would tell.

~*~

With some negotiation, I was given access to the dining car, but only to acquire a boxed meal. One unexpected benefit of my servo companion was that it gave off quite a lot of heat—

the thick overcoat, I had learned, was to provide insulation for its internal furnace—and so within an hour the baggage car had warmed quite nicely allowing me to remove my overcoat and eat my supper in relative comfort.

I glanced out the window and realized we were passing by the town of Verheiden, site of the decisive battle during the Great War. Much of it was still in ruins, even after ten years. Surveying the burned-out buildings and cratered landscape, my thoughts drifted to McCready, and the riddle that was the Sons of Gaea.

There was something missing in it all, and I couldn't for the life of me put a fingerpost to it. As McCready had trained me, I began making a list of the facts I knew for certain. There wasn't much, but I'd hoped it was enough to build a sketch, however faint.

First was how such an organization found financing. Zealots are known to be rich in passion but are usually low in funds. That did not appear to be the case with the Sons. Where was their backing coming from? I thought of the impressive "war machine" which had ambushed us in the desert outside the Montagua wilderness. Its intricate workmanship was a marvel to behold, and must have cost a farthing or two. And then there was the recruitment of its members, and each of them being fitted with a poison-filled tooth. Was it a government? A government like Quegal? Or perhaps a smaller nation such as Cantella, which changed regimes every two or three years? If so, what would be a nation's political objective in supplying aid to a band of murderers? Money is the fountain spring of all evil, as the old saying goes, and must be followed to the source. Where did the money come from?

Second would be the group's leadership. To be certain, a crazed and diabolical mind was at its head. And yet, there was too much method to its madness; the calculated manipulation of our

journey to the Yahntis was a prime example. No, whoever was the Sons' puppet-master must be clever and organized. And dangerous. Very dangerous.

The third part of the puzzle was how the Sons of Gaea seemed always to be one step ahead of us. Was there a spy in our midst? In Anansia? In Sar? If there was, how far up the chain of command did their influence extend? The leader of the Yahnitos, Te Ashone, had warned me to trust no one, and while that was advice not to be ignored, how to discover and consequently seal the leak appeared elusive.

Finally, was the *why* of it all. Which is to say, why murder? Murder is an act of desperation, of depravity, and rarely bolsters public support for one's cause. Without doubt, an extreme act gains attention and generates fear among the masses. Surely there must be a myriad of civil actions to prosecute their case.

Arguably, the Sons of Gaea had reasonable grounds on which to protest, i.e., to allow nature to take its course. It was not a view I shared, but that mattered not. A debate on the subject was allowable, if not welcome. But murder? Of scientists, no less? Scientists whose only concern was the pursuit of knowledge? There was no political agenda in their actions; they wanted merely to discover things not yet discovered, as benign an enterprise as anyone could imagine. And yet, *they* were the targets, not politicians, not officers of the law nor the military. First, the esteemed Doctor Harrington, followed by the irritating Doctor Zeta. The Quegelian scientist, Akira Faz, was the next obvious target, but still the question remained: *why*?

I threw my tablet to the floor in frustration. There were more questions than answers on my ledger. To get to the bottom of this mystery would take heavy excavation. The Inspectors assigned to investigating The Sons of Gaea, Halls and Andrew, were capable enough, but I could not disengage myself from the subject, try as I might.

“What do you think, my iron friend?” I said, turning to the servo. There was, obviously, no answer from my impassive companion. “Yes, that’s my opinion as well,” I said with a sigh. I should have been studying the manual the Ministry of Science had given me. It was two days travel to the city of Ojusla, in the middle of Quegal. It would then be another day’s journey to the capital city of Disaq, where I would have an audience with Premier MASHIQ; presumably the younger. There would be sufficient time to figure out how to control this beast. I felt my eyes laden with sleep and unconsciously leaned against the mechanical man, using its warmth to ward off the biting cold.

~*~

I was jolted awake by the sound of screeching; unearthly screeching, as if a thousand people were being murdered all at once. My mechanical man bolted upright, knocking me off my perch and onto the floor.

“Alert, Inspector Sprye. Alert,” it declared in a shrill voice.

“Thank you for the notice, you clanging monstrosity,” I said, none too happy about the rude awakening.

The Mono shuddered to an abrupt stop. I scrambled to my feet and ran to the next car, hoping to discover the cause. Pandemonium had broken out among the passengers, who, dressed in their bedclothes (for it was just dawn), demanded of the stewards an explanation. The stewards, equally rattled, were doing their best to calm the situation.

“Avalanche,” was all I could make out amongst the din of panicked voices. I recognized the not so friendly steward who had banished me to the baggage compartment. I tried to make my way to him through the throng when I was suddenly confronted by a young boy screaming his head off, pointing directly at me. Behind me, actually. I whipped around to see that my

mechanical man had followed me into the compartment. Everyone noticed what the young whelp was going on about and joined him in a chorus of screams.

“Thought I told you to keep your contraption in the baggage compartment!” exclaimed the harried steward.

“It was not my intention—”

“Get that monstrosity back to where it belongs,” he barked. “Afore I throw it off!”

I would have liked to see him attempt such a feat, but instead of arguing, I diplomatically retreated to the baggage car, my trusty hunk of junk obediently following behind me.

It seemed the Mono had stopped in the nick of time, thanks to the alertness of its engineers. As it approached the Shasiq Mountain Pass, a temblor had shaken the area, causing snow and ice to slide down the mountain range blocking the pass, burying the Mono track five meters deep. They had sent a scouting party out to survey the situation. Once they reported back, they would decide. It was entirely possible the Mono would be forced to return to Lavernia, supplies being limited to only a few days.

Turning back would most likely put an end to my mission. The Quegalian leader was not known for his patience. I am, to a fault, dogged in my resolve to see an assignment through to its end. Naturally, there could be worse fates than turning in this hunk of junk to the Ministry of Science with a polite, “Sorry it didn’t work out,” but it would forever haunt me that I failed in completing my mission. Hubris or folly, I was determined to see it through, come what may.

I restlessly paced back and forth, trying to devise a course of action. Would it be possible to *dig* our way forward? Somewhere in the manual, I seemed to recall, in the emergency procedures sections, there was a passage about digging which I found odd at the time. I grabbed the weighty

tome, turned to the relevant section and began flipping pages until I found what I was looking for. It wasn't exactly designed for these purposes—what could be?—but it might do the trick.

My friend the steward thought otherwise.

I had grabbed his attention, waving wildly through the passage between the baggage and passenger cars. He came toward me with a look of severe irritation. I explained that my mechanical man could shovel away at the snow with greater rapidity than a crew of ten. He near laughed his head off, possibly the most amused he'd been in the whole of his life. "The scouting party estimates twenty meters of ice and snow between us and a clear path," he chortled. "A crew of a hundred couldn't clear it in a month of LastDays!"

I begged him to let the servo give it a go. "If we fail, then so be it," I pleaded. "But why not try?"

"Because we have limited supplies on board and needs must make it back to the Lavernia Station afore they run out," he stated with authority.

"If you would allow me to at least demonstrate—"

"I can't waste any more time with this nonsense, sir. There're preparations to be made and passengers to attend to. You and your machine will confine yourself to this car and this car only if you please." He promptly slid the door to the baggage car shut.

Well, what to do? Sit on my hands and accept the long trip back to Lavernia? No. That was an option I could not entertain. I looked out the small window afforded me in the baggage compartment. Craning my neck around most uncomfortably, I could see that the Mono's track was almost at ground level, instead of the usual height of four meters. I decided, most uncharacteristically, to throw caution (and sense) to the wind.

I unsecured a shovel attached to the wall. I grabbed the penny whistle, ripped the instruction page out of the manual, and headed for the double sliding doors used to load and unload cargo. After a bit of fiddling, I could unlatch them open. A blast of wind pushed me back, and the cold sliced through me like razor blades. This would not be an easy task. I counted to three, then jumped.

The distance from the car to the snow appeared manageable, but I hadn't counted on how deep the snow had fallen, and thus found myself waist high in it. A brilliant move on my part. Less brilliant still was my mechanical partner who, with my example before him, nevertheless jumped right after me. Now both of us were helplessly stuck, and the temperature made survival unlikely for any long time. At least for me. The mechanical beast was impervious to such conditions. In fact, the snow melted around it due to the heat it generated. The scene would have been most comical were it not so dire. Me, freezing to death, while the machine created a pool of water around him.

Waving for someone's attention proved a futile effort, since there wasn't another living soul outside the confines of the Mono. Who would be so daft as to venture out from the warmth inside after all? Only a fool and his mechanical man, that's who.

As I stood half-buried in the snow, contemplating the scarcity of my options, I was suddenly lifted up and out of my snowy prison. It was the servo. He picked me up and held me above his head.

"Attention, Inspector Sprye," it squawked. *"Rescue mode now activated."*

I was grateful to be free from the snow, albeit startled, but he just stood there, holding me in the air, not moving one mechanical muscle.

I was trying to figure out how to direct him to bring us back to the baggage car. The only command I could remember was *walk forward*; the procedure for turning him around completely eluded me. I blew a note on the penny-whistle and...

“*Walking forward*,” came its reply and immediately began trudging through the snow along the side of the Mono, towards the direction of the canyon pass. Because of his incredible strength, and the heat radiated from his person, our progress forward was unimpeded by the snow.

As we passed by the various cars, several passengers looked out their windows in disbelief. And quite a sight we must have been; me, holding a shovel, being carried in the arms of a mechanical beast. All I could do was give a meek smile and wave.

“Hey now, what do you think you’re doing!?”

We’d arrived at the engine compartment in the front of the Mono. An engineer was sticking his head out of the window, looking at me with a most quizzical expression.

“Thought we’d do a bit of digging,” I shouted.

“Are you mad?” the engineer yelled. “Get back to where you belong and hurry up with it!”

“I’m afraid this thing has a mind of its own,” I replied, as we marched past the flabbergasted engineer. “And very determined!”

We arrived at the entrance to the pass blocked by fallen snow and ice. I played the command for the servo to stop, which he did immediately. I racked my brain, trying to figure out how to direct him to let me down. I tried a few combinations, none successful, and I shall not burden the reader with descriptions of the various positions I found myself in: it will suffice to observe that none of them befit a grown man. Somehow, some way, I found a combination of notes that

finally freed me of his grip, by being tossed into the air, only to come crashing down, my fall broken by the powdery snow.

I consulted the page I'd ripped out of the manual, then put the whistle up to my lips and played the combination of notes indicated.

"Excavation mode activated."

I placed the shovel in his hands and played a series of commands, directing him towards the barricade of ice and snow. I was finally comfortable using the whistle to manipulate his motions, much like a piper and his dancer.

I commanded the servo to dig cautiously at first, uncertain whether his effort would be effective. Eventually, I felt confident enough to increase his speed, but still I wondered if it would be enough to satisfy the engineers of the Mono that forward progress was attainable. About five meters in, it became clear that it would not.

And then I hit upon an idea; what if I used Austin's flame cannon demonstrated by the Chief Engineer back in her lab? Would it not melt the snow faster than if he were to continue digging? Fortunately, the commands for flame mode were included in the excavation procedure. The servo put the shovel down on my command and pointed his arm at the sheet of ice. As in the laboratory, a steady stream of fire spewed out from his hand. The ice melted away as if it had never existed, revealing yet another mountain of snow behind it.

I commanded him to take up the shovel, and he began digging once again. I could see, however, that while he was making headway, the task at hand was more daunting than imagined. But even so, we persevered.

"Hey, there!"

I turned around to see a group walking towards us on the Mono track. At first, I assumed it was the stewards come to haul us back into the baggage compartment, but as they approached, I could see they were carrying pickaxes and shovels.

“Perhaps it’s not such a daft notion you had there, sir,” the engineer declared. “With your machine helping, we might make short work of this calamity.”

With the engineers and stewards joining in, it wasn’t long before we’d broken through the formidable wall of ice and snow. All that remained was to widen the gap sufficiently to allow the Mono to pass through. By then, I’d become comfortable enough to whistle commands without referencing the manual, alternating between shoveling and torching. By sunset, we’d finished the job, creating enough room for safe passage. The work party exchanged many slaps on the back and expressions of good will.

The engineer came up to me and shook my hand. “Pars Sunderson, at your service.”

“Ned Sprye,” I replied.

“That machine of yours did a marvelous job, sir,” Sunderson declared as we headed back towards the Mono. “What a wonder he is, yessir.”

“His name is Austin,” I said. “Austin Ironborne and you can thank him by allowing us to travel in the passenger car.”

The engineer nodded his assent and directed the steward to accommodate us in the first-class car. No amount of protest from our friend the steward could persuade the engineer otherwise, so they showed Austin and me to a spacious private compartment.

The Mono started up again moving forward through the pass and cheers were heard throughout the passenger cars. After a soothing bath, and a sumptuous meal, compliments of the

grateful engineer, I opened Austin's manual, determined to learn everything about my new partner before we reached our next destination.

~*~

“Status report:

“Carbon rod at fifty percent.

“Estimate four days until replacement required.

“Water levels are sufficient.

“Timlo Generators at seventy-five percent capacity.

“Lubrication oil at eighty percent.

“Fire plasma level at twenty percent. Recommend replenishing at earliest convenience.

“Overall assessment: fit as a fiddle!”

“Thank you, Austin,” I said, chuckling. Chief Engineer Gillespie had given her creation a sense of humor.

After two days of luxury—something I could get used to if only I had more than an Inspector's salary to live on—I scoured through the manual, making notes, and memorizing combinations for the myriad of functions. I was only halfway through and already understood how powerful an asset this mechanical wonder could be. Hopefully, by the time I was to be presented before the Premier, I would be proficient in the operation of my trusty companion.

We were due to arrive at Ojusla within the hour. This was the furthest north I had ever ventured, and looking out at the bleak landscape that was Quegal, I resolved to never visit again. Once past the imposing peaks of the Shisaq Mountain range, snow gave way to sheer ice. The frozen expanse was as blue as the Western Sea and just as empty; temperatures so below the freezing point, the steam from the Mono would instantly crystalize and fall to the ground like

shards of glass. Inhospitable would be a kind assessment of the environment. The sun, trapped behind a constant layer of clouds, never penetrated the surface of Quegal. How anyone could survive under such conditions, I could not fathom, but I then understood why Premier Mashiq had been desperate to invade southward in search of more favorable climes.

To be perfectly honest, I hadn't met a Quegalian before. I'd read descriptions in the *National*, unflattering as they were. I'd even seen etchings, but never had I encountered one face to face. And it wasn't for want of trying. But the Great War never got as far as Landhaven. When it was finally over, all the Quegalian soldiers, including those captured, returned north. I had assiduously studied their culture and politics, as all Inspectors were required to, but there was still scant information available: an impenetrable veil obscured all of Quegal's internal machinations. Except for the occasional rumor, nothing was truly known about them.

Yet I felt I was up to handling the task given me, that is meeting the Premier or his representative, exchanging diplomatic pleasantries, collecting the estimable Doctor Faz, and returning the way I came without, hopefully, spending the trip home in the baggage compartment. In the meantime, I would enjoy the last moments of my comfortable accommodations, reveling in its warmth and comfort.

~*~

“You will come with us, please.”

We had barely stepped off the Northern Express when two Quegalian police officers stepped in front of us, producing their credentials. One was female, and I assumed to be the senior of the other, a wiry youth. Both had the typical features of Quegelians; tall, thin, dark skin, flashing blue eyes, and hair whiter than new-fallen snow. They had rather thick Quegelian accents, but communicated themselves clearly enough.

“You are our escorts, I presume?” I queried, impressed with the efficiency of this government’s security.

“Follow us, if you will,” the senior officer replied coldly, without answering my question. Her demeanor gave me some pause, and I suspected something not right with the situation. This was confirmed when they marched us in the opposite direction of the loading platforms.

“We have very little time before making our connection to Disaq,” I explained.

“That is none of our concern.”

“Well, it will be. I have an audience with Premier Mashiq. He’s expecting me to arrive within the week.”

“And I’ll be visiting the moon on my next holiday!” said the younger officer, as they both laughed loudly.

“I have the proper documentation in my luggage,” I said. “If you’ll allow me to collect my things—”

“We’ll let the captain of the guard sort all that out,” said the senior officer. “Right now we have instructions to take you into custody.”

“Custody?” I was flabbergasted. “For what reason?”

“You are in possession of a most dangerous weapon,” the senior officer replied. “A direct violation of Quegelian law.”

“What? You mean Austin here?”

“Precisely. It has been reported to us that you used this weapon whilst on board the Northern Express.”

“That is complete nonsense,” I said. “If it hadn’t been for my mechanical companion here, the Northern Express would be back in Lavernia by now. Who would dare make such a claim?”

“We are not at liberty to say,” the senior officer said.

I knew damn well who it was; the surly steward who had been less than pleased to have his authority overruled by Engineer Sunderson. Before I could offer any further protest, the officers brought us to a rather utilitarian building, by Quegelian standards; their architecture typically being geometrically intricate and imposing.

“That thing of yours will have to wait outside,” said the senior officer, pointing a finger at Austin.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” I calmly replied. “He is designed to follow and protect me. At all costs. Even if that includes knocking down this brick wall.”

The two officers exchanged looks, the junior looking to the senior for guidance. “Very well then,” the senior officer said with a shrug. “There’s room enough in the cell for the both of you.”

“In a cell? Am I under arrest then?”

“That should have been obvious, sir.”

“It most certainly was not!” I yelled. “I am a representative of the Anansian government on a diplomatic mission to the Premier of Quegal!”

“So you have stated,” said the senior officer with a sigh. “You can plead your case to the magistrate when you appear before him.”

“And when will that be?” I asked, choking with frustration.

“Not long,” she said, casually. “A month at most. Now, sir, if you’ll kindly remove your hat and coat, the sergeant over there will prepare you for booking.”