

Chapter IX – A Somber Homecoming

“He was a craggy old bastard, was McCready,” Major Simkins declared, “but the best Inspector the Ministry has ever seen, or will ever see again.”

“You’ll get no argument from me, Sir,” I said. “On both counts.” I sat across from my superior, his modest desk cluttered with files, papers, charts, and maps. Within this collection was a curious assortment of intricate wooden puzzles he’d collected from all over the world, each unique in design and all impossible to solve. Often I’d pick one up and fiddle with it, not able to make heads or tails of it. The Major would then take it from me, and within seconds, solve the thing. I suppose that’s why he was head of the Foreign office at the Ministry of Security, and I but a junior Inspector.

Major Reginald Simkins was an amiable man, who at first glance appeared somewhat bland, but once engaged showed a keen intellect not usually found in civil servants. He was much affected by McCready’s death. They had both been agents in the field together. But he sensed I’d taken the loss still harder, so tried his best to give me some solace, to no avail.

I have scant memory of the trip from Wellsborough to Landhaven. I seem to remember supervising the loading of McCready’s coffin into the luggage compartment. I vaguely recall giving my ticket to the conductor. I remember Ariel by my side. I believe she held my hand. And Corporal Dennington sat across from us, not sure what to do or say. Frankly, there was nothing to say and if he had, I doubt I would have acknowledged it. Reflecting back, I should have been more attentive to Ariel, but was utterly lost in grief; a wall stood between my sadness and the rest of the world. Ariel understood, and let me to my dark humor.

When we arrived in Landhaven, Ariel went directly to the Sarian Embassy to file her report, and I attended to the unenviable business of bringing McCready’s mortal remains to the

coroner's office, standard protocol whenever a field agent loses his life in the prosecution of his duty. I did not stay for their conclusions, having lived through the details. I then reported to Major Simkins' office, where we now sat, grieving over the death of our comrade.

"It was a hornet's nest we sent you and McCready in," Major Simkins continued.

"Apologies for that."

"All part of the job, Sir," I said, trying to hide my sarcasm and doing a poor job of it.

"It seemed rather straightforward on paper," he said. "Arduous? Perhaps. But fatal? I wouldn't have guessed it."

"We discovered in a rather harsh manner how little can be predicted when dealing with The Sons of Gaea," I declared.

"Yes. We underestimated them. I say *we*, because that's the politic thing to say, but the burden of this failure really falls on the Prime Minister's office, though it is unlikely they will ever admit it. I warned them we were dealing with a dangerous group of zealots."

"With all due respect, Major," I said, trying to contain my anger, "that is a monstrous understatement. They are the most murderous bunch of criminals the world has ever known."

"So the Prime Minister finally realizes," he said with a sigh. "Too late, sadly, for McCready." Damn *right* it is! Too late for the whole bloody planet, now that we've lost the only scientist who might have found a solution. But what was the purpose in pointing this out? It had all happened. It was done and there was no putting spilt milk back into the bottle.

"You need rest, Ned," Major Simkins said, placing a conciliatory hand on my shoulder. "We will discuss all this later."

"I don't need to rest," I said defiantly. "I need to find the bastards who killed McCready and make them pay for it, preferably with the greatest amount of suffering possible."

“I more than understand your sentiments, my boy, truly I do,” the major said, attempting a sympathetic tone. “Now is not the time for revenge. There’s still work to be done. First things first, though. You need time to recuperate. Catch your bearings, yes?”

“Major—”

“Go home, Ned. Take a long bath, a snort of whiskey, then get a good night’s sleep,” he said. “Don’t make me order you.”

“I shall do so, but under protest,” I replied, my eyes cast down to the floor.

“Noted,” he said with a smile. “Dismissed.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said with great reluctance. He was right, of course. In my present state, I was good to no one, not even myself.

I went to my lodgings, where my landlord, Mr. Coulter-Harris, greeted me warmly, then handed me a gram from Ariel. She was being ordered back to Sar on the first aeroship in the morning and asked if we might dine this evening. I was at the point of complete exhaustion, physically and mentally, but I dashed off a quick reply saying I would be delighted to escort her to dinner at Ralstons, the finest restaurant in all of Landhaven. I tried to flag down a human messenger out on the street, but there were none to be had; only servos, and I wasn’t about to trust a machine to deliver it properly, so I went to the Sarian Embassy and called on her directly.

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“My government, General Ferrer in particular, is less than satisfied with the results of our mission,” Ariel said with a wry smile. “To state the obvious.” We had ordered one of Ralstons’s specialties: sautéed Faunta, fished this morning from the Western Sea. It was, as are all the dishes at Ralstons, excellent. But neither she nor I could appreciate the fine meal before us. Ariel

knew there would be hell to pay on her return to Sar. “Everyone looks for a scapegoat when failure rears its head, and I’m a ready-made one. Gift-wrapped even.”

“They can’t blame you for the events,” I said. “I’ll back you up on that one.”

“Sar is not Anansia,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m willing to accept whatever judgment is given. That is my duty.”

“I respect your dedication,” I said. “But truth is truth.”

“Have you not ruminated on all the things you would have done differently to prevent the disaster from happening?” She inquired, her eyes narrowing.

“Well, yes, of course—”

“And your conclusion is you did all that could have been done?”

“No.” I had, in fact, been kicking myself since we’d left the Yahnti mountains. It was hard not to see all the various alternative scenarios that might have been had I done this, or not done that. It was impossible to push those thoughts out of my mind.

“The lingering doubt will be with me the rest of my days,” she said as her eyes filled with tears. I realized how extraordinarily beautiful she was. I do not mean just physically, though her dark brown eyes sparkled with intensity, her auburn hair caught the light with its luster, and she wore a crisp dress uniform giving her an imposing yet enticing bearing. All that was certainly beautiful, but I speak of an inner beauty: Ariel Bárcenas was as kind and caring person as you would ever want to meet; rare qualities in any human being, but made even more precious in combination with her dedication to duty and her fearlessness on the battlefield.

I put my hand on hers. “Ariel...”

“It’s nothing,” she said, pulling away her hand from mine to wipe away the tears. “Well, actually I think it’s the quality of Landhaven’s air. Honestly, how can you live in such a polluted

environment? I've never seen so many vehicles, mechanical devices, factories, and houses spewing out such vile exhaust. The sky is almost black. It's a wonder anyone is still alive in Anansia."

"I hadn't noticed," I said, smiling.

"The sooner I get back to Port Sánchez, the better I'll be for it."

"I wish there was time to take you for a picnic at The Gardens. Or go punting along the Walthingham River. You'd see the better part of Landhaven and Anansia."

"Why Ned Sprye, I thought you'd had your share of river adventures!" She said and laughed. I laughed too. My foot was almost healed, but the painful memory lingered still.

"I will miss you, Lieutenant," I said with all my heart.

"Well, *Inspector*, I don't leave until the morning," she replied with a devilish smile.

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For the sake of discretion, I shall report only that the evening was the tonic both of us desperately needed.

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I escorted Ariel to the Pennington AeroPort the next morning. As the reader might imagine, she was less than enthusiastic about her pending voyage. Even my assurances that there would be a full complement of alcohol on board gave her little comfort. We said our goodbyes, vowing to see each other again, though neither of us knew how that would be possible. It would have to remain in the hands of that unforgiving master of us all: fate. Other people might declare nothing else mattered, and catch the next Mono to one of the many coastal cities in Ariel's inviting country, but we were not those people. We had dedicated ourselves to duty, and that would dictate our destiny.

As I watched Ariel's aeroship sail over the horizon, I made to leave, but I found myself frozen, caught in the sudden memory of embarking on the unfortunate journey that would end in McCready's death. It seemed a lifetime ago. What was to come next, I couldn't imagine. I didn't *want* to imagine. Something needed to be done in the name of McCready, but I hadn't a single clue how to begin. What would McCready do? He might start by assessing the worth of such an endeavor and eventually conclude it was an exercise in futility. "I'm dead, Neddy," he would say. "What's the damn point?" And he'd be right; it was no longer his fight. It was mine.

I returned to my lodgings, feeling betwixt and between; neither in the world nor free of it. I fixed myself a cup of tea and sat in my "thinking" chair; an old, overstuffed thing I'd inherited from my father's study, where I intended to make a plan of action. I finally awoke with a crick in my neck, and uncertain as to where I was. Mr. Coulter-Harris informed me it was Thirdday, and that I'd received several grams from The Ministry. "Why didn't you awaken me?" I said, alarmed that I'd been asleep for two whole days.

"I tried to, Mr. Sprye," he said. "Several times. Another day and I would have sent for a doctor, I promise you." I apologized for my attitude, which he took with his usual grace, then asking if I'd like breakfast. I thanked him for his kindness and set about to review the grams. One announced memorial services for McCready would be on Fifthday of this week. Well, thank goodness for small favors—I hadn't missed it!

Another informed me there would be no inquiry regarding McCready's death. The case was closed, and no further action would be taken. I was furious. The politicians had finally gotten their hands into it. No sense getting embarrassed simply because they'd botched up the salvation of the world. Yes, yes, citizens, go about your business. Ignore the temblors, etc., etc. I could imagine Parliament debating whether there was *ever* a pending disaster. Prime Minister

Fallon would assure the citizens of Anansia that no public servants were lost in a secret mission to remedy a disaster that didn't exist. Where did you hear such rumors? Base falsehoods, and anyone who disseminates such lies will be brought before the courts on charges of treason. The machinery of government never works so well as in the denial of facts.

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"I told you to take some time off, Ned," said Major Simkins, a little nonplussed that I had barged into his office unannounced.

"Why has the Prime Minister closed in the investigation into the Sons of Gaea?" I demanded to know.

"He's done nothing of the kind," he said, far too casually for my taste.

"It states otherwise in *The National*," I bellowed.

"We don't want to create wide-spread panic among the public, do we, Ned?" I saw Major Simkins's patience was wearing thin and yet I persisted.

"The public *should* be panicked. The world is coming to an end!"

"Now, son—"

"Is McCready's death to be swept under Parliament's carpet? He cannot have died for nothing," I decried with more emotion than intended.

"I assure you he did not," Major Simkins said. "And if you'll calm down, I will explain the situation, but only in broad strokes because you're in no condition to hear the details."

"What then?"

"Sit down first," he insisted. "You're like a tempest moving about my office. I appreciate your distress, but I won't have you breaking any of my furnishings on account of it." I sat,

though still agitated. “First, you are being promoted to Senior Inspector. Soon you’ll be given a new assignment. It is, perhaps even more critical than your previous one.”

“Has it to do with the Sons of Gaea?” I inquired.

“Indirectly, yes,” he said, standing up. “And that is the last bit of information I’m giving you. Go back to your lodgings and make yourself presentable, Ned. You look like a wild man.” I caught myself in the mirror behind his office door and he was right: I did look a mess, possibly insane. “I’ll see you at the memorial service and not a moment before.” The Major escorted me out of his office, gently, but firmly.

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McCready’s memorial was held at Garrison Hall, where most state-sponsored ceremonies were held. It was the oldest building in the city of Landhaven and was showing its age. The veterans he’d served with in the Great War, most notably, Lord Ballentine Woodes himself, were in attendance along Major Simkins and a number of Ministry officials. The Security Minister herself, General Constance Pearson, presided over the service. She blandly recounted the events of McCready’s career — he’d been given the prestigious Boar’s Crest, for instance, one of the highest honors bestowed upon a noncommissioned officer — but there was little said about the *person* he had been. Then again, how much did I really know about him, other than our time in the field together?

After the General finished, Lord Woodes then took the podium. “I would not be here talking to you today if not for Sergeant Gerald McCready. I imagine there are many gathered in this ancient hall who would avow likewise.”

“Here, here!” “Good old Mac!” “Remember Verheiden!” His brothers in arms shouted out.

“Tough as iron was old Mac and never did he give ground to the enemy. Never. Not because loved to fight. He most assuredly did *not*. Anyone who’s been on the battlefield understands the romantic notion of taking arms against another human being is greatly overrated. We fight for duty. We fight for our brothers in arms. We fight to live another day. Nothing more and nothing less. Mac understood that. Not only understood, but *embodied* it.

“Finding good in this world of ours is not an easy task. In fact, it’s damn impossible these days. The human condition, I would argue, is one of constant strife. We too often allow the worst instincts to grab hold of reason. What we cannot comprehend, we view with distrust. What we cannot control, we become hostile to. Will humankind ever rise above this condition? I wish I knew. What I do know is that when we lose a good person, a person such as old McCready, my optimism for our survival wanes. And before any of my comrades think I’ve lost my memory, or my mind, I am well aware our old Mac was anything *but* a vessel of human kindness.” Laughter broke out amongst all in attendance, including myself. Never was spoken a greater truth.

“He could be rough and sharp-edged,” Lord Woodes continued. “He did not suffer fools, more often than not, giving them a swift punch in the nose in response to their inanity. No saint was our Mac. But there was none more loyal, or more dedicated to setting the world right than him. That, in my estimation, is the definition of a good person. He will be missed. Indeed, he will.” If there was a dry eye in Garrison Hall, I did not perceive it. Possibly because my own were full of tears. Lord Woodes’ eloquence was legendary, and consequently one could expect nothing less than a brilliant speech. When he spoke of McCready, however, he spoke directly to our hearts and made them full.

“Inspector?” I heard someone call as I left the hall. To my surprise, it was Lord Woodes approaching me. “It’s Mr. Sprye, yes?” Lord Woodes asked as he caught up to me.

“Yes, my Lord,” I said, flustered at being remembered by such as Ballentine Woodes. “A pleasure to see you again.”

“You as well,” he said, proffering his hand; the non-mechanical one. “I wish it would have been under more pleasant circumstances however.”

“As do I, my Lord,” I said, returning his handshake.

“Honestly, I’d always thought of Mac as somewhat indestructible,” he said with a smile.

“As did we all,” I said in agreement.

“I was hoping you might shed some light on the circumstances of his death. There’s been nothing in the papers, and your Ministry has been tight-lipped, even to members of Parliament.”

“I’m sure you’ll appreciate, my Lord, that there is very little I can reveal, except he died valiantly.”

“I see,” he said, disappointed. “Perhaps someday you’ll be at liberty to recount for me his last moments. As a personal favor.”

“It would be an honor, my Lord. As soon as I am able.”

“I will be forever in your debt, Mr. Sprye.” He handed me his calling card. “Use this to gain entry to my club. I dine there every Secondday and Fourthday without fail. Please be my guest whenever you are able.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” I said, taking his card. “I look forward to it.” He shook my hand once again, and I watched him amble towards his waiting moto-car. “Lord Woodes,” I called to him. He turned back towards me. “One thing I am at liberty to say is that his last thoughts were of you.”

“Really?” he said, with a puzzled expression.

“To be perfectly frank, I’m not sure he knew where he was: on a battlefield somewhere I imagine. He kept saying your name, looking at me with great intensity. I believe he thought I was you.”

“I see,” Lord Woodes said. “He said no more?”

“Only that he asked for forgiveness and then let go of this earthly plane immediately afterward.”

“Forgiveness?” Lord Woodes asked, his countenance turning grim. “Mac had no need for absolution. Weren’t a better man walked the earth.”

“I agree,” I said. “Yet, he did so.”

“I appreciate you telling me, Inspector,” he said, sadness sweeping over his face. “You have no idea how much.” He walked back to his moto-car, and I perceived by his countenance that he was troubled by what I had recounted. Then, oddly, his mechanical arm juttled out and upward, as if punctuating his thoughts. He quickly gained control of it with his other hand, looking back at me to see if I had noticed. Fortunately, my training aided me in turning away in enough time to feign that I had not.

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I reported to Major Simkins office on Firstday for my new assignment but was informed by his assistant he had been called away for an unscheduled meeting. While I waited in his office, I picked up one of his puzzles that had been bedeviling me for years, an intricately carved oblong box, with various knobs and slides on the sides. The trick was to find the proper combination that would open it only to reveal another box within containing another set of slides, and then another. Major Simkins delighted in a visitor’s frustration in trying to solve one puzzle or another. Mac never bothered with them. “Life is puzzle enough,” he’d say.

“Sorry about that, Ned,” Simkins said, rushing in to his office. “Seems lately there’s been a constant stream of conferences about absolutely nothing.” He then noticed me with the puzzle box in my hands. “Ah, the Ermudo. Any progress?”

“None.”

“Took me a good long time, my boy. Drove me to distraction, that little monster did. You’re welcome to take it with you if you like,” he said with a grin. “Give you something to do on the long journey.”

“Is that a way of introducing my next assignment?”

Major Simkins sat down at his desk and opened the file before him. “Indeed. As I mentioned when we last spoke, Prime Minister Fallon has not given up on finding a solution to the geological crisis.”

“Is he turning to magic then? Or willing it so?” I said, rolling my eyes. “I was under the impression the only man left to solve the mystery was murdered two weeks ago.”

“Yes, well, fortunately there is another,” the Major said. “The last known scientist to have any expertise in the area. It will be your job to retrieve and escort him safely back here to Landhaven.”

“From where, if I may ask?”

“The City of Disaq, in the Kingdom of Quegal,” the Major said.

“You cannot be serious!” I exclaimed, catapulting out of my chair.

“Dead serious,” Major Simkins said. “It’s our only hope.”

“Then there is no hope!” I said, not able to comprehend such an outrage. “A Quegalian? To rescue us from disaster? It’s absurd.”

“This is not a measure taken lightly, Ned. There simply is no other option left to us.” That we were turning to a former enemy for help put in sharp relief how desperate we’d become. I suppose I might have spent hours trying to convince my superior the grave mistake this strategy was, but it would be to no avail.

“Who is this great Quegelian savior?” I asked, sighing in resignation.

“Doctor Akira Faz.”

“Faz? Inventor of Quegal’s ghastly armaments that nearly destroyed us?” This was the most egregious news of all! Every year our troops dreaded the new horror Quegal would unleash upon them, each more lethal than the last, and Doctor Faz had created every one of them. “Has the Prime Minister gone daft?”

“He is considered an expert in many sciences, including several published theories on temblors and the current conditions of the continent. More important, he has agreed to help.”

“He is the enemy,” I argued.

“Not anymore,” the Major countered.

“By a handful of years,” I persisted.

“You’re to be on the Northern Express Mono by Fifthday.”

“And what about the Sons of Gaea?” I asked, for I could not let it go. “They’re no longer of interest to anyone?”

“They are. I’m putting Falls and Andrew on it.”

“Falls and Andrew? They know nothing about these bastards.”

“They have the dossier. And your report.”

“Their partners weren’t murdered in cold blood,” I exclaimed. “Let them babysit the Quegelian. I have the right, the *obligation* to see the Sons of Gaea brought to justice.”

“I’ll debate this no more, Ned,” Major Simkins said, reaching the end of his patience.

“You have your orders. That is the end of the subject.”

I wanted to say more, but refusing a direct order was not an option. And I understood his reasoning; bringing personal feelings into a case is a recipe for disaster. A fatal one. Nonetheless, it sat in my gut like a lead weight.

The prospect of traveling to Quegal would give any Anansian pause. Few had ventured to the northern region after the war ended except for merchants seeking a new market in which to peddle their goods. Quegal maintained diplomatic relationships with all its former adversaries, establishing embassies in all the major cities, but a veil of mystery remained over that frigid kingdom as little news made it past the Shasiq Mountains at its southern border. There were rumors to the effect that Premiere Mashiq’s oldest son, also named Mashiq, had assumed the day-to-day duties running the government, his father too infirm to rule directly, though it was said that the old man still had a hand in policies. There was talk, unsubstantiated, of unrest among the general population, especially in the northernmost regions where resources were scarce and the environment hostile to all living things. No one knew for certain what transpired in Quegal. Apparently, I was about to find out.

“Now as to the matter of your new partner,” Major Simkins said.

“Which is also not up for discussion, I assume.”

“It is not. This afternoon, you are to report to the Ministry of Science’s Industrial Division.”

“An engineer then?”

“All will be explained to you there.”

“Any field experience?” I asked, becoming suspicious at the Major’s evasions.

“None.”

“May I at least know my new partner’s name?”

“Austin,” he said. “Austin Ironborne.”

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“Have a seat, Inspector,” a thin man in a white coat said as he guided me into a windowless room, two stories underground in the Ministry of Science. “The first thing we’ll need is a sample of your blood.”

“I’m sorry?” I said, unsure I heard correctly.

“Only a vial’s worth. It shouldn’t take but a moment.” He sat me down on a cold metal chair, as a medi-servo moved towards me, holding an imposing needle at the ready.

“Whatever for?” I asked, standing up from the chair. I felt disoriented the moment I walked into the Science Ministry’s building. It was full of Servos going every which way, and as many people dressed in white coats, crisscrossing from one room to the next. The receptionist, wearing a helmet on his head with an array of wires snaking this way and that, for what purpose I could not fathom. He coldly asked me for my name, all the while pushing buttons and speaking to people I could not see. I naturally assumed I’d be introduced to my new partner, this Austin Ironborne fellow, as the next logical step. I would brief him on the details of our mission, and that would be that. Instead, I was confronted by this man in a white coat wanting to extract blood from me with the assistance of his diabolical Servo.

“Sit down, Mr. Sprye and roll up your sleeve, please,” the thin man said impatiently.

“I most certainly will not until I get some explanation why!” I said.

“Chief Engineer Gillespie will be happy to answer any questions you might have,” he said.

“Excellent. Let’s wait for him, shall we?” I said, not willing to budge.

“*She* should be here momentarily,” he said, unhappy with my attitude.

On cue, the door opened, revealing an older woman with short-cropped hair and thick glasses, seated upon a motorized chair. “Sorry to be late, Inspector,” she said with a disarming smile. “Are we all done collecting the sample, Aiden?”

“Not exactly, Chief Engineer.”

“Oh, what seems to be the problem?”

“Forgive me, Chief Engineer,” I said, intervening before her assistant could speak. “But no one has given me a clue as to the necessity of extracting my blood.”

“Oh, yes, I see,” she said. “I thought you’d been briefed on everything. Apparently not,” she added, glancing over at her assistant. “Well, that is unfortunate, but something we can work with. Let’s reverse the order of standard procedure, shall we, and dispense with the collection for the time being. Does that suit you, Mr. Sprye?”

“I don’t wish to appear obstinate, Chief Engineer,” I said, feeling a bit chagrined. “I thought I was here to meet a gentleman assigned as my partner.”

“You are, Inspector,” Chief Engineer Gillespie said. “And if you’ll follow me, I will facilitate your introduction.” I did as she asked, realizing there would be no further details forthcoming. Her assistant walked directly behind me, his faithful Medi-Servo ever by his side. Apparently, blood would be drawn from me by the end of my visit whether I wished it or not.

As Chief Engineer Gillespie rolled down the hallway in her motorized chair, I noticed there were none of the usual noxious fumes one encounters with such devices. “It’s a new technology we’re working on. Much like the engines that power the Monos, but in miniature form, you see. Using conventional steam heated by coal, but in a more efficient manner. In

addition, the steam exhaust is captured and put back into a reservoir to be used anew.

Evaporation occurs, naturally, but at a much slower rate than similar engines. We're beginning to apply these now to some of the Servos."

We came to an imposing set of double doors guarded by two sentries. Recognizing the Chief Engineer, they opened several locks that secured the doors. "It's all a little hush-hush in this part of the building, don't you see," the Chief Engineer said with a glint in her eye.

As we entered this large, dimly lit room, I noticed a solitary figure at the far end sitting on a metal bench. The closer we got, I realized it was a man; a rather large man, wearing a thick, black overcoat. Though the rim of his bowler hat cast a shadow over most of his face, I made out a prominent mustache, extending well beyond the confines of his upper lip. The rest of his features were unremarkable. Plain to a fault, in fact.

"Greetings, Inspector Sprye," the man said in a tinny voice.

As he stood, extending his hand for me to shake, I noticed an odd hissing, like steam escaping, and the sound of gears moving. Then I looked up to realize his eyes were glowing red. To my utter disbelief and horror, I suddenly understood that this was no human being. This was a mechanical... *thing*. An abominable Servo!

"I don't understand," I said, turning to the Chief Engineer. "Is this some sort of a joke?"

"Not at all, Inspector Sprye," she said with a proud smile. "This is your new partner: Austin Ironborne."