

Prologue

Greg held tightly on to the propulsion device set to its maximum speed as it began to sputter forward. He checked the heads-up display, seeing that its battery was at half a percent, and rapidly declining. He still had some emergency power left, but he knew the device wasn't meant to be operated at these speeds. He continued his escape, dodging rocks and schools of fish, speeding toward the surface. All he could hear was the sound of his own breathing amid his panic. He pressed the S.O.S button on his right wrist, recording a message to send to his team's home base.

"I don't know if anyone is going to receive this, but I am in serious danger! I'm sending you my coordinates, please, send help!"

He neared the surface as his breaths deepened. As he finally broke the surface of the water, he looked around, spotting a fishing boat through the fog straight in front of him. He began heading towards it, until he looked at the water behind him. His eyes widened as his grip loosened. The propulsion device kept going, but he stayed in place.

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"Jake, ye are the worst navigator I've ever had the displeasure of having on my crew! Look where ye have brought us now!"

Jake dodged the mug his captain threw at him before it crashed behind him. "Well, the Bermuda Triangle isn't exactly easy to navigate, cap'n. Maybe *you* should have plotted a course through here."

"Get out of my sight, boy. And that deck had better be swabbed before we get going!"

Jake rushed out of the room, annoyed and disappointed. He grabbed a mop, thinking about how his captain was an idiot who insisted on talking like a pirate. His captain was the one who claimed they couldn't go around the Triangle, even though they had plenty of fuel and time to do so. His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a repeated clanging noise on the port side of the boat.

He looked over the side of the boat, spotting a yellow device repeatedly hitting the hull of the boat, being knocked backward, and hitting it again. He looked up and spotted a figure in the distance. A man. "Man overboard!" he called out instinctively. No response met his call. He grabbed the binoculars hung around his neck and looked to the man, squinting through the fog. Something rose out of the water. Another figure. It was a woman, her distinct figure clearly visible. She leaned in closer to the man as heavier fog drifted into Jake's line of sight, clouding his vision. He cursed under his breath as he lowered his binoculars and moved to the bow to evade the haze.

He called out once more as he walked. "Is there not another soul on this bloody ship?!" Yet again, no response. Raising the binoculars, he searched for the figures. He looked left and right, scanning the general area, then focused on the figure in the water. It was the woman, and the man was nowhere to be seen. She was facing the boat, but her head turned slightly. Jake felt her cold eyes pierce his. Another bout of heavy fog drifted in front of him, but this time he stayed frozen, glued to the floor. "Man... man overboard," he stated with uncertainty, leaning over the edge of the boat. When the fog subsided, the woman was gone. He looked around the deck, the other side of the 30-foot boat not visible.

He looked back at the ocean and jumped, clutching his heart as he gasped for air. The woman was hanging on to the side of the boat, staring at him with a toothy smile. Her mouth opened, and out of it came a beautiful symphony, the loveliest song he'd ever heard. She beckoned him with her hand, almost daring him to near her. He felt the beads of sweat drip from his face as he inched closer to her, no longer in control of his movements. She grabbed hold of his hand, rubbing it against her face.

She fell back into the water, calling him once again. Her song echoed in his mind, and the ship seemed to disappear, leaving nothing but the sea. He climbed onto the edge of the boat. His hands twitched as he braced himself to jump, tears now streaming down his face. His mouth stretched into a crooked smile as he began to chuckle. He slipped on the ledge but barely caught himself, now hanging over the side of the boat, his chuckle turning into a hysterical laugh. He looked down at the woman, still waiting for him to fall. He reached up to climb back onto the deck, but never got the chance.

He felt a sharp pain in his leg, still laughing, and looked down to see the woman, her mouth full of jagged teeth with half of his pant leg drooping down the side of her face. He began to slip, knowing he wouldn't regain his grip. "Please..." He tumbled to the waves below, not trying to float, sinking to the ocean floor, as any light from the surface was snuffed out by the shadow of a woman, followed by a short, sparkling fin.

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Chapter One

Henry wandered the portside market, navigating his way through street vendors and customers alike. The noise of bartering sailors and blaring ship horns overtook his ears and overwhelmed his senses, making him more irritable than his hangover already had. He shifted his cap and his sunglasses, trying to block what seemed to be another blinding sunrise from burning his retinas. As he did so, he bumped into a vendor carrying a crate of apples, spilling them all over the street. The man glanced at his apples, then turned towards Henry.

“What the heck was that? You’d better pay me for my merchandise!” He yelled, pointing a finger at Henry and attracting the attention of anyone that wasn’t already staring at them.

Henry pinched the finger and gently moved it down and away from his face. “Look, I’m just trying to get to the pub, so if you’ll just move out of the way, that would be smashing.” He flashed a pathetic smile, which was barely visible through his scruffy beard.

The man jerked his hand away. “Don’t touch me again or I’m calling the police. In fact, if you don’t pay for my apples now, I’m going to call them *anyway*!”

Henry’s smile faded. “I haven’t got any money on me. I’ll pay you back later.”

A woman put her hand on the vendor’s shoulder and shook her head. The vendor glared at her, annoyed, then looked back to see that Henry was gone. “Hey! Get back here!”

“You’d best not be doing that,” she said with an angry look on her face.

“The man destroyed my merchandise! How can I just let him go?”

“That there is Henry. Used to be in the army. A colonel, too. In case you didn’t notice, he’s not all there at the present moment, so if you’d like to avoid a street brawl, let him pay his debt another time,” she replied, and with that, she turned and walked away.

The man shook his head. “Bloody useless drunk.”

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Henry, finally making his way into the pub, found an empty stool to sit on in front of the bar. He looked around the establishment, as if anything would have changed since last night. It was still clean, tidier than any bar he’d been in throughout the States. Only four or five other patrons were there, all on the stools in front of the bartender, and some knocked out with their heads leaning on the counter. The decor and layout clearly gave away that it used to be some kind of house, and the bathroom even had a shower, though the water was cut off for “sanitary purposes”. The bartender, a short, stubby man with a thin mustache and lightly trimmed beard approached Henry with a hearty smile.

“What can I get ya today, Henry?”

Henry looked up and met the man’s eyes. “Good morning, Bill. The usual.” Even through his drunken stupor, his Cockney accent seeped into his speech. It seemed very slight, as if he was trying to mask it with the best American accent he could muster.

“Alright, Dos Aquis it is.” The drink in question was made up of equal parts cinnamon fire rum, horchata rum, and coffee rum. In other words, a triple dose of rum. And in even simpler terms, something to get you drunk after two swigs.

The bartender had walked away and checked a book, then walked back to Henry with the same book in hand. “Henry, will this be on your tab?”

“Yup.”

His eyes wide, he looked at Henry’s accounts and exhaled loudly. “Alright, but you’ve racked up quite a bill. I can make you this last drink as a favor, but you’ll need to cover the bill next time.” He walked away, shaking his head, and began preparing the drink.

“You’ve got it.”

Henry overheard two men talking in a booth behind him and turned his focus toward them. They clinked their beers together as the liquid spilled over the side of each mug. They laughed and took a swig, gulping down half of each drink in an inhuman amount of time.

“Boy, I tell ya, each one of those was about as stupid as a grade school cafeteria brawl. ‘Specially the Battle of Tallahassee.”

The other chuckled and took another sip. “Man, what a fiasco. Like the freakin’ Civil War all over again, ‘cept back then there was a reason we were fighting.”

Henry began chuckling to himself. The two glanced over at him, then returned to their conversation. The first man to talk reignited the topic. “Anyway, what were they fighting for in the first place? Somethin’ about a cure for some stupid disease. You remember that?”

“Yeah, I ‘member. I’d bet a hundred bucks that thing wasn’t even real. Just gave the government a reason to suck even more taxpayer money and pour it into the army.”

Henry burst out laughing. The two men turned to face him. “Something wrong, friend?”

He tried to calm himself but couldn’t help it. Finally, he quieted down, while still chuckling between his words. “No, everything’s fantastic! I just couldn’t help but overhear your conversation. It’s fascinating, how two human beings can have such an idiotic discourse. It just blows me away!”

The two became much less lighthearted. The one on the left side of the booth stood up, raising his voice. “Hey! You mind your own business and shut up! Why the heck do you care about what we’re discussin’?”

"It's just that you're horribly misinformed, and I'd like to rectify that. You wanna talk about the Battle of Tallahassee, you'd better get informed."

The man standing neared Henry, still yelling. "How 'bout I rectify your face? You wanna get informed on what a punch to the nose feels like?" He raised his fist, perceived by Henry as a weak attempt at a threat. Henry kept talking.

"I was there during the Battle of Tallahassee."

The man lowered his fist and slightly relaxed his tense facial muscles. "I'm sorry, I-"

"Listen up, boy. Now, first off, d'you know what were we fighting for on September 25, 2043 in Tallahassee, Florida? Hm?"

The standing man fell silent, but the man in the booth spoke up. "I- I think it was a cure for some virus, right?"

"You're half right. It was a cure, but not just for any virus. It was a cure for *the* virus. The one currently raging through the States, on top of the rest of the world. Now, it hasn't reached this dump yet, considering that not many people are eager to visit Cockburn Town. A company in Tallahassee *did* create a cure, but the people of Florida didn't deem it necessary to let the boys down in D.C. know. The CEO of that company, being the good Samaritan he was, sent a message to the president himself, letting him know of their current situation. He was found dead the next day. Still, the message reached the president. Days later." Henry stood up and continued.

"So we surrounded the factory, guns drawn, and waited. Suddenly, out of each and every window, from each floor, even from the roof, we started drawing gunfire! Immediately, a quarter of my men were downed. So, we shot back. I got a couple good hits on a man on the roof, and he went tumbling down, right in front of me. It was only then that I noticed his black and blue uniform. They were all cops. Not terrorists, not mercenaries out to make a quick buck, but cops. Americans with families.

"That was when it hit me. We were all facing the same threat, the same unstoppable beast, but every man in that factory was looking out for themselves and their families. I called back my men, but it was too late. Dozens of men were dead, with only a few of them left. So we fall back, fly home, and the next morning, what do I see? An article on my cell titled, 'Slaughter in Tallahassee as Government Seeks Cure to Nonexistent Virus'. I've never felt anger like what I felt at that moment at any other time in my life." He was now standing in front of the man, inches away from his face.

"They were misguided, uninformed. Just like you two. So now, tell me, was it all just some stupid brawl?" Neither man responded to Henry. He turned around and calmly walked back to the bar,

grabbed his drink, and downed it without flinching. He looked at the empty glass. His facial expression was unchanged, emotionless, cold. "It's rather sad, you know. Knowing that all of your friends are dead, hearing people go around calling the whole thing stupid, pointless, when you were trying to save lives yourself. And if you believe that yourselves, gentlemen, then I'll be an idiot if I'm going to let you set foot in this pub without giving you a piece of me. Or if I'm going to leave you two in one."

The man standing in the middle of the bar signaled to his friend. He grabbed their coats and stood up, then headed for the exit. One of the men turned around before closing the door behind him. "I-I'm sorry for your loss. We didn't know..."

Henry turned around with a slight smile. "Well, now you do. Next time, maybe you'll think before mouthing off about things you don't fully understand."

The man lowered his head and gave a small nod before turning and walking away. Henry remained at the bar, staring at the empty glass in front of him. His attention turned to something shining beside his hand. A quarter. He smirked and grabbed it, then nonchalantly walked to the jukebox next to the pub's entrance. He slid it into the small slot next to its glass display. He looked through the slightly yellowed list of songs under the display and found the one he wanted to play, then punched in the number next to the song's title on a number pad adjacent to the list of songs, 237.

"He watched through the glass as the machine flipped through its vinyls, finally selecting the one he'd paid for. It began playing with a bit of static, then came the classic Henry had listened to every day before his deployment, and each day after his discharge. First came the piano introduction, and gradually the orchestra joined, creating a beautiful symphony of sounds as Henry waltzed back to his chair. He ignored the noises of the market outside and the ship horns as he let his mind drift away, focusing on the age-old lyrics as he sang along in his head.