

STRANGER TIDES

-A *Stranger World* Story-

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“The Sea is only the embodiment of a supernatural and wonderful existence.”

-Jules Verne

P r o l o g u e

The Raft

A bright light assaulted his eyelids.

It was so intense he wondered how he could have stayed sleeping in the first place. Eyelashes sticky with the slumber of the dead, George Stapleton attempted to open his eyes. The blaring sunlight was so painful he immediately screwed his eyes shut again and shielded them with his forearm.

It was then he first felt the rocking motion beneath his back. *Am I on a boat?* Now that he was aware of the rocking motion, it was already beginning to make him queasy. Also, from the knee down, something crisp and cool enveloped his right leg. The rest of him felt like a piece of dried-out wood.

Shielding his face from the sun with his hand, he made a second attempt at just opening his eyes. Staring through squinted eyes he found himself lying on his back on a very small, wooden raft. The makeshift vessel couldn't have been bigger than a queen-sized bed, and the crude hacksawed logs were so hastily lashed together with thin strips of leather that water was seeping in-between each piece of timber.

Still lying on his back, George turned his head to the side. As far as he could see, all the way to the horizon, was nothing but endless ocean. Nothing. *Look the other way, the other way.* Turning his head, it was the same visage in every direction. Panic welled up inside him. *Am I lost at sea? How far out am I?* Fear fueling his dried-out body, he managed to pull himself up to his elbows. Looking down past his barely clad body he saw he was wearing nothing more than a pair of white shorts haphazardly cut off at the knees, and past his bare feet, he saw nothing but more ocean. This can't be. I'm in the middle of the ocean. He craned his neck to look behind him and found only more of the same. This can't be, this can't be. What happened to everyone else?

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Wait. A memory. He recalled how he, The Leftenant, and Dawson were holding off the R-Techs so Tessa, Maddie, and the other plane passengers could get away aboard The Dauntless but whether they succeeded, he was drawing a complete blank.

Then, he heard the sound of a motorcycle engine... far in the distance. It took him a moment to find it, but when he finally did he saw it wasn't a motorcycle but a bright red bi-plane, the really old kind, skimming over the waves, dangerously close to the surface.

Normally he would think, That's a short-range aircraft so I must be closer to land than I thought, but in this world, anything was possible.

Is that really a plane? He knew he had to get up, signal them somehow. This might be his only chance at rescue. He called upon his last ounce of will power and managed to slowly clamor to his knees. He lifted his hand high overhead and yelled out, "Hey!" but his voice was hoarse, and George doubted the pilot would have heard him at this distance, especially over the angry whine of the propeller's engine.

The plane suddenly veered off course.

He did hear me.

George's moment of hope vanished in an instant when the bi-plane flew straight up into the cloudless sky.

What's he doing?

A cloud of smoke suddenly began streaming out of the tail of the plane as though he had been struck by some unseen anti-aircraft fire. George couldn't find anything on the ocean's surface that could have caused it.

The plane reached its apex altitude, dropped down backward, flipped around, and began spelling out the letters...

S – O –

George read off the big, fat, puffy white letters...

-R – R – Y...

SORRY.

Word completed, the skywriter dropped back down to only a few dozen feet above the surface and flew by his flimsy raft.

George began waving at the man, but then slowed when he saw the pilot was wearing a Top Hat and a bemused grin upon his face.

The Lamppost Man.

George lowered his arm. The small biplane headed off into the sun now lowering itself beyond the horizon.

Still weakened, George collapsed onto his flimsy raft. One of his legs fell into the crisp, cool water as he watched the plane vanish into sunny oblivion.

He's gone. And what did he mean by, 'SORRY'? Maybe I should pull my legs out of the water before something...

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The jaws of an enormous Great White shark exploded out of the water. In one violent motion, it clamped down onto his leg and dragged George off the flimsy raft and into the murky depths of the sea.

The raft continued to bob upon the surface of a vast ocean as though George Stapleton had never existed.

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Chapter 1

The Factory

“MEAT-WAGON!”

“Coming!”

Henry, a slender teenage boy pushing a rusty, two-wheeled cart, ran as fast as his oversized clodhoppers could carry him. To do otherwise meant punishment in the form of a demotion. And if there was one thing Henry did not want out of life, it was to get demoted, because demotion in the “Factory” meant certain death.

He parked his meat-wagon next to the dead body; -a real fat one too. The man’s thin mustache was familiar, as were the bloodstains around his mouth and in the palm of his hand. *Aw shoot, I know this guy.* Fat boy’s name was Barnaby. *Well, it used to be Barnaby.* Despite the fact that he was always complaining about work, Henry kinda liked him. He

was always telling all those funny stories about fantastical places that obviously never existed. Fairy Mazes, jungles with Dinosaurs in them, rivers teeming with shape-changing water-nymphs and swamps filled with zombie-pirates. Henry wasn't sure if the old man was pulling his leg or not, but he knew no place like that could have ever possibly be real. Henry considered himself the practical sort. If he couldn't see it; it didn't exist. As far as he was concerned only two places did. The Factory where he worked, and the bunkhouse where he ate, bathed and slept. Other workers had told him about places above, where the masters lived in lap of luxury, but he had never seen it for himself so, ergo, it was just as mythical as ole' man Barnaby's fantasy lands.

A slightly older boy with platinum-white colored hair, eventually arrived behind him. He took one look at the body and asked, "Henry, you gonna stare at the H. R. (Human Remains) all day, or what?" This was Piotr. He acted like a "Floor-Boss", which he was not. He was only a Crew Chief, which was barely one rank above him. Henry didn't care so much for Piotr because among many other things, Piotr was a liar. For starters, he said his mother was a woman named Russia, but if memory served (and it really didn't) he was pretty sure that Russia was a place, and not a woman.

Henry wasn't entirely sure how he knew these things. He figured he must have gone to school at some point for he

knew other things too, like the solar system had nine planets and how photosynthesis worked, but he had no memory of actually going to school. Who was to say Russia was any more real than Barnaby's fairy maze, or the leisure palaces up above. He didn't know. Henry's ceiling was literally only as high as the grimy, smoke-stained roof seventy feet above him. The closest he had ever come to seeing anything other than the factory, and the bunkhouse where he slept, was the darkened clouds barely visible through the massive smoke-stained skylights above them. And even this was only when they had to open them periodically throughout the day to let out excess smoke.

He and Piotr both grunted as they lifted up the "H.R." and loaded him into the meat wagon. Piotr coughed into his hand from the exertion. They both froze while Piotr checked the palm of his hand. *No blood*. That was good. Piotr didn't have it. The *Black Lung* or what everyone else on the floor called it, the *Red-Hand*. Once you saw blood in your palm you pretty much knew you were *a Goner*. Sometimes the bigger men would last for a few weeks but rarely Henry saw any workers go beyond that.

Seeing Henry stare at his hand, Piotr asked, "Yeah, you'd like that wouldn't you?" he continued, his grin broadening like a snake ready to unhinge its jaw for a meal, "Maybe get a promotion?"

Henry shook his head. "No. I wasn't thinking that at all." He didn't know why Piotr was so worried. The Head Floor Boss had once explained it to them that they had nothing to fear. They were young, they were strong like bear. He explained that the black lung only took down the old and lazy workers. Even though everybody was coughing up blood and keeling over as Barnaby had, they had nothing to worry about.

Piotr lit up a cigarette, and through the corner of his mouth he said, "Better luck tomorrow, Probie." The platinum-haired boy took a long drag of his cigarette and then commanded Henry, "C'mon, let's dump this H.R. before he gets stiff."

Henry didn't talk back, instead, with gloved hands; he grabbed the handles of the meat-wagon and began to push. Piotr would only offer assistance when the wagon got caught on something, say a mound of dirt or errant piece of coal, or if a pit-boss was watching he might push as briefly as was necessary.

Their job was simple. Body disposal. Load body into wagon. Dump body into chute. Chute took bodies down to the furnace. As far as most workers were concerned a plump body like Barnaby's meant less coal for the leisure palaces to burn up above, which meant less coal to shovel into the fur-

naces. And someone as fat as Barnaby would burn a good long time.

Last week they had a record amount of bodies because there had been an uprising. *What fools!* They didn't last five minutes against the guards, certainly not against their guns.

Henry couldn't understand why so many workers had to make trouble. Why couldn't they appreciate what they had? The Floor-Bosses had explained it to them perfectly. You work hard –you get food, and even a warm place to sleep at night. Without this job they'd be tossed out on the street and starve to death and eaten by the wild packs of dogs that roamed the streets at night.

Besides, shoveling coal into furnaces to fuel the steam engines to power the city above was a good job. A noble one. Sure, the work was hard, molten burned and machines crushed. It's what kept wagon-runners like he and Piotr so busy. But pushing around a meat-wagon was a lot better than back-breaking labor like shoveling, or fishing glass out of the furnace where you could easily get splashed by molten lava or your lungs set on fire. Why, streams of hot metal poured down on the glass-retrievers all the time. And machinists sure as heck didn't fare much better. He had once seen an oiler get his clothes entangled in the cog wheels and drag him right into the machine. The poor unmindful sap was so mangled out of all semblances of humanity, his flesh is still

adhering to the cogs to this day. Such horrific accidents were of little concern to the management.

Henry was lucky to have survived both jobs with as little burns, scars and broken bones as he had. And if you didn't like your job, you could work your way up through the ranks as he did to get a better one, like wagon-runner.

They were about halfway to the chute when Piotr signaled for him to stop. Checking to see if anyone was watching, Piotr commanded, out of the side of his mouth, "Hey puke, go bring me that shovel."

Henry didn't really care for the way Piotr always talked down to him. He was only a few years older. Henry knew Piotr really didn't need the shovel, any more than they needed a machinist's oil can. It was just an excuse to give Henry something to do while Piotr rummaged through Barnaby's clothes for any valuables. Piotr would remove belts for the leather and anything else salvageable. Barnaby's shoes were worn out and his hat was far too big for Piotr, but he'd stuff both in his tattered coat and barter them off later. Piotr was always stealing off dead bodies; sometimes living ones too, when they weren't paying enough attention. That wasn't all, either. There were rumors that Piotr had murdered his last assistant. The official record was the ten year old boy had slipped and fallen down the chute into the molten lava. But the other wagon-runners had warned him to

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never turn his back on Piotr, which he almost never did, certainly never around anything as dangerous as the chutes or cog wheels.

While retrieving the shovel, Henry knew enough to take his time to allow Piotr plenty of time to steal from Barnaby. Again, he sure would miss the old guy's stories.

Henry wasn't sure exactly how long he had been there, the days had sort of all just ran together, but he was pretty sure it had been at least a year. So he was no probe, as Piotr said. The only reason Henry was so sure it had been at least a year is when he started the hem of his pants had been down over his shoes. Now they were nearly up to his calves.

Suddenly, Henry heard glass break.

As he spotted the tinkling glass slowly falling from the ceiling, a chrome-plated missile struck the ground with a loud SHRUUMPPPP, and crushed poor Piotr instantly.

The impact had knocked Henry to the ground. For a few moments he remained still, lying face down with his hands covering his head. When the dust finally settled, he flipped over to sit up. Where Piotr, Barnaby and his trusty meat-wagon had only been seconds ago, was now a large chrome cylinder, shaped like a giant dart. It must have been what smashed through the roof. Henry realized, if Piotr had not ordered him to fetch the shovel he would've been crushed too.

Is that a bomb? he wondered.

If it was, for some reason, it failed to detonate. It just stood there, sticking out of the ground on a slight angle, looking like a miniature Leaning Tower of Pisa with fins on the tail.

He covered his head again when the last of the broken glass dropping down from the ceiling reached him and crashed all around him. Distant alarms began sounding and soon the guards, with their heavy guns, began appearing on the upper catwalks.

Staring up through the broken skylights at the sky Henry saw a giant shadow, shaped like a flying boat, slowly move overhead. It began blocking out what little daylight there was.

Is that a ship? How is it floating?

Suddenly Barnaby's ridiculous stories had a bit more credence than Piotr's mother Russia.

Henry squinted up at the flying boat just in time to see figures leaping off to their deaths and came flying toward the ground at high rates of speed.

Why are they killing themselves?

To his surprise, the jumpers didn't go splat on the factory floor, as Henry suspected they would. Instead they stopped at the last moment before hitting the ground and stepped down from narrow platforms, about the width of a ladder

rung. In turn, the narrow rungs were connected to highly flexible, telescoping pipes that went back up to the floating ship.

Henry had heard stories of resistance fighters, but he had never actually seen one. He had never even spoken to anyone who had seen one with their own eyes either. So again, he thought it was simply hearsay, but he was beginning to wonder if these were them.

The nearest of them looked like a young girl, maybe fourteen. She had mounds of curly hair, welder's goggles over her eyes and a thick scarf over her mouth.

Probably can't handle the soot, he thought inwardly.

Suddenly, one of the guards on the catwalks opened fire on them. He tried to get up but the girl with curly hair and welder's goggles kicked him in the chest. And in a voice muffled by the scarf, she said, "Stay down kid."

She turned, drew a chubby, chrome-plated pistol from a worn, leather holster and squeezed the trigger. To Henry's amazement, a purple beam of light streaked out of the funny-looking ray gun and with a loud echoing sound, the beam hit one of the guards on the catwalk. The struck guard bounced off the wall behind him and then tumbled over the railing to his death.

Henry knew it didn't matter. In seconds dozens more guards with heavy rifles would take his place. Whoever these

people were, Henry could have told them, they didn't have a chance. There was no way they were getting out of the factory alive.

As if confirming these thoughts, nearly fifty more guards quick-time marched onto the catwalks along the walls and above them.

Instinctively, the girl ducked as bullets zinged over her head and ricocheted all around them. In response, she removed a cylindrical device out of one of the leather pouches on her belt. It was about the size of fat pen. She flicked off a clear-plastic safety covering with her thumb and depressed a round-blue button.

The chrome missile that had failed to detonate bloomed like a flower and Henry heard a whining noise building in octaves. The girl with mounds of hair and welders' goggles hit the floor and covered her ears. Henry figured he should probably do the same. But before he could, there was an explosion of blinding white light accompanied with a loud, deafening noise.

After the light dissipated, Henry was surprised to find he was still alive.

As his vision began to clear, he saw the girl standing over him with her hand extended toward him. He could barely make out the words she was shouting to him, "Come on kid,

not sure how long that E.M.P. blast is going to keep them off our backs.”

He realized the gunfire had stopped. And when he looked to the guards, he could see they were all doubled over, either unconscious or dead. Some of them even appeared to be emitting sparks, a few more on fire.

The guards are Robots?

A few minutes must have passed while he was waiting for his ears to stop ringing and for his vision to clear for he could now see other resistance fighters (for lack of a better term; - Henry really didn't know who they were), moving about the other factory workers. Each fighter was making little flag symbols over each worker's head. The flags they drew, magically floated above each person's head and were stark white.

“Check this one,” one of the fighters yelled.

Henry could see all the Factory workers were either splayed on the ground or kneeling with their hands held up overhead.

“Over here,” the young girl cried next to him. She had drawn a flag symbol over his head and when he glimpsed it, floating there, as if by magic, he could see that it was white.

That was when he saw the demon for the first time.

As it bounded over to him like a giant dog, Henry realized it wasn't really a monster. It reminded him of those statues

he had once seen in a picture once, they were mounted on a church in Paris, France. The Notre Dame.

Gargoyles, that's what they were called.

The gargoyle bounding toward him had lots of pointed teeth and taloned claws. Henry was fairly certain he only had a few seconds to live, which as it turned out, wasn't that much longer than Piotr. The gargoyle stopped just shy of devouring him, kicking up soot and causing Henry to cough. The stone golem, who really wasn't stone, was dressed in a butler's uniform. And, instead of biting him, it began sniffing him.

"Okay, thissthhhpp one's good," the gargoyle shouted gleefully.

Henry had just enough time to notice it spoke with a strong lisp before it bounded away toward another worker with a floating flag above his head.

The girl with the welder's goggles; the one who was still standing above him, touched the flag above his head again and this time the flag turned from white to a pleasant green.

"Can you stand? Are you hurt?" she asked him.

Henry didn't answer. He saw the gargoyle sniff other workers and once he gave the all clear, their little flags would turn green as well.

Henry wasn't sure he wanted to find out what would happen if the flag did not turn green.

The girl kicked him lightly with the toe of her boot, “Hey, I asked you a question, are you hurt, can you stand?”

Henry nodded.

“Okay, let’s go. I don’t have all day.” She leaned forward and helped him to his feet. He found that he could barely walk. Whatever the blooming flower had done to him, he felt sick to his stomach and he was pretty sure he was going to throw up.

“Can you walk by yourself?” she asked, half-holding him.

“I think so,” but when she eased up on her grip he nearly collapsed to the ground.

She sighed heavily. “Alright, I’m going to have to walk you.”

He had so many questions he wanted to ask, ‘Who are you people?’ and ‘What’s going on?’ but in the end he settle for, “Where are you taking me?”

“Just keep walking. You’re not the only one we’re here to save,” she said, and then commanded, “Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot.”

He lifted his chin from his feet and saw gilded, shark cages now in the middle of the factory floor. *Where did those come from?* He lifted his gaze skyward and saw chains on top of the cages that extended all the way up to the floating boat. Now that they were closer, he could just make out the letters written in bold letters on the side: **H.M.A.S. DAUNTLESS**

The girl shoved him inside the cage to join several other workers who were already inside. She took his hand and placed it on the bars so he could steady himself if needed, "Okay, stay put."

She pointed upwards. "We're taking you up. Just hold on tight. You got it?" When he didn't respond right away she repeated, "Do... you... got... it?"

Henry nodded in reply.

The girl jumped out of the cage, slammed the door, and the cage moved, seemingly toward heaven.

That's when it occurred to him; *-Maybe that missile hit me after all.*