

CHAPTER 1

BLACK BOX

Lieutenant Archibald Turner of the Royal Navy contemplated his options. Trafalgar Square lay dead ahead and on route for the shortest distance to his destination. He need only cross the square and turn left on Whitehall. His destination, Admiralty House, was but a short distance further on.

The mob was the complication. Thousands of men, working-class men with smudged faces glaring out from under rough and worn caps, milled about shoulder-to-shoulder, filling the square and spilling out into every adjoining street. In fact, Turner encountered the beginnings of the demonstration a quarter of a mile up the Strand as he approached Trafalgar Square.

He mounted a short wall to get a better look at the crowd. Placards hammered to ominously stout boards sprouted up from the sea of humanity. Nervous-looking Bobbies in their dark blue coats and tall helmets stood in pairs thinly interspersed about the periphery of the square. If he hugged that periphery he'd make better time than attempting to penetrate the middle of the mob.

Turner slid down from his vantage point and patted the left breast pocket on his jacket. The documents were still there. He glanced at his pocket watch. There was no choice. The First Lord of the Admiralty was expecting him, and to detour now would put him past his time. He'd press on.

As he worked his way through the mass, keeping his eyes down and ignoring the occasional sharp elbow jab, he mentally rehearsed the presentation he would give. The message must be conveyed perfectly. The plans in his pocket could change the path of history, putting the Royal Navy years ahead of the persistent Germans and saving countless British lives if His Majesty's Navy was ever put to the test. It all made perfect sense to him, but the First Lord must be convinced, and that would not be easy.

A disgusting smell caught his attention, something between burning sulfur, raw sewage, and a rotting dead animal. He reached for his handkerchief to cover his nose. Someone pushed him from behind. He staggered forward, tripping on a foot. As he extended his arm grasping for something to break his fall, a strong grip on his forearm pulled him back upright.

“Why, what ’av we ’ere?” the source of the strong grip inquired as he released Turner’s arm and began to brush and straighten the lieutenant’s jacket with one hand.

Turner turned to face the stranger and pushed his grubby fingers away.

“Now look here...” Turner’s protestations were cut short when he inhaled the putrid rotten-egg-smelling breath of his would-be savior. The smell came from a mouth full of brown, broken, jagged teeth framed by a flabby, unshaven face. The stranger grinned at him as he straightened Turner’s cap and continued his random tugging at Turner’s jacket.

“Why, it be a gentleman in distress, I believe. Now, ’av no fear, I be ’ere now to help you, sir.”

Turner pulled away, placing the handkerchief back over his nose. He took a harder look at the man. The stranger’s right eye was covered with a grey film, and his left eye drooped. He wore a dingy jacket that was too long for his arms, a battered and greasy cap, and trousers with rips over repaired rips. The man fussed about Turner’s person with one hand, but his other hand cradled something under the dingy jacket.

“Now look here, I don’t need your assistance. Be gone with you before I have a policeman take you in for theft and vagrancy. Go!”

“Theft and vagrancy, ’ you say? Humph. Think I’m a ruffian, do yer? Humph. No good deed goes unpunished.” The smelly stranger straightened himself, placed his free hand on his hip, and, hurling a last smelly “humph” in Turner’s direction, slipped into the morass.

Gagging and coughing, the lieutenant turned away in search of fresh air. He took a moment to get his bearing and instinctively patted his left breast pocket.

“No, that can’t be!” he exclaimed aloud. He felt the inside of the pocket. Instead of finding his papers, he pulled out a small card imprinted with a single word, a man’s first name. It made no sense. His mind raced. “No...the vagrant!”

Turner searched the crowd in the general direction the stranger had gone. He glimpsed a greasy cap headed for a side street. Turner pushed through the mob trying to reach him.

His movements were no longer polite as he jabbed, pushed, and fought his way forward. He ignored the shouts and curses from the men he shoved about. Someone poked him in the ribs with a hard object. His cap was knocked from his head. He kept moving forward, not bothering to stop to retrieve it.

As he worked his way down the side street, the crowd thinned somewhat. The rotten smell returned, lingering along his path. The man Turner was following turned suddenly off the street into a mews. A gap opened in the crowd, and he sprinted forward.

Arriving at the mews, he stopped and peered ahead. The contrast between the packed street and the empty mews was unsettling. There was no one to be seen along the mews’ entire length, just a spot of sunlight at the other side where the mews constricted to a narrow alley. The same stench hung thick in air. His man was somewhere in there, and so were his documents.

“Come out and make this easy on yourself,” the lieutenant shouted down the shadowy passage. “Those documents are of no use to you, but they are of great value to me. I’ll do you great harm to get them back.”

There was no answer. The disgusting smell seemed to build in waves. Turner put his handkerchief back up to this nose and entered the mews.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the lack of sunlight. To make matters worse, they began to water and sting. He spit into his handkerchief and applied the wetted portion to his nose. As he crept forward he methodically searched to his left and right, pausing every few steps to listen for any movement.

“This is your last warning...”

A shadow leapt toward him. A raised knife gleamed above the form. Turner reached up with both hands grasping toward the knife. The form grabbed the hair on top of his scalp. Turner held tight with both hands to an arm holding the knife before his face. In an instant his head jerked forward and the knife lurched at his throat.

The searing pain was fleeting. He heard a thud and crack against his neck. The world pitched downward until his eyes looked up at the sky. He felt nothing; he couldn't move.

A black, square object with a small hole in the middle advanced toward his face. His eye was drawn to the hole as it went from red, to purple, to white. A blinding flash filled his brain.

He blinked and looked around. He sat in a bubble of light surrounded by a shroud of pitch black. He felt his neck, smooth and normal, only a bit of beard stubble made any impression. There was silence all around. Where was this place? A dark cave of some sort?

The bubble grew, gradually expanding to illuminate objects, no—claws, no—creatures that appeared from the gloom. On the bubble expanded until all was light.

The creatures encircled him, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, in rings perhaps a dozen or so deep extended outwardly as far as the light of the bubble extended. There must be hundreds of them, cat-like with faces a mixture of animal and human features. They appeared to stand about four-feet tall, but slightly stooped on skinny legs, as if they were dogs that learned to walk upright. Behind them they trailed tails, mostly hairless but for a bushy end. Their bodies were nearly hairless too, except for a line of rough bristly stuff that started on the base of their tails, followed their spines, and ran to the tops of their heads.

Their faces were round and almost childish looking. Each had a generous mouth that revealed pointed white teeth when opened, and open them they did. Chomping ensued, each creature making a clicking sound as their jaws closed. At first they stood still except for the odd chomping. Then each one began to twitch. Drool dripped from their mouths. The encircling mass began to quiver and jerk. The clicking grew to a deafening continuous thunder.

Hundreds of shrieks pierced his ears. The creatures lurched toward him, hopping forward on hind legs while using clawed hands to help propel them in monkey fashion. Soon those claws were scratching and pulling at him. Pain erupted from the puncture of sharp teeth, his flesh ripped by the mouthful from his limbs and torso. He tried to scream but heard nothing over the frenzied screeching of the creatures.

All went red, then black, then silent.

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