

## Chapter 1

### "Caribbean Fire"

Shortly after dinner on a night in early March, the charred remains of a white-coated piece of metal floated onto the beach of Sandy Smack Island, stopping at the feet of a man in glasses. On any given evening, the man might've noticed the unusual placement of debris threatening his toes, as he was quite observant of things misplaced. But it took a young boy standing between him and an army of spectators to reveal its existence, for the fiery wreckage of the sinking ocean liner off the coast of South Island, a small landmass with large rock poking over the treetops just a mile away, stole his attention.

"Look, look," said the little boy, pulling at the man's shirt, eventually getting on his nerves.

The man followed the boy's finger toward the metal plate, obliging only to humor the boy, though not wanting to take his eyes off the ship. The object ebbed with the waves.

"It's burnt," said the boy.

The man was too distracted to respond.

A burst of flame from the rear decks blew upward like a geyser. More sparks the size of tennis balls, likely the flaming companion pieces to the beached plate, launched into the sky as a fountain of fiery splashes, careening into the ocean with the force of hail. The spectators shuddered—some of them blocking their eyes from the image—as the darkening sky flashed with light.

The man snapped to attention.

"This is no place for a child," he said. "Tell your parents to take you home."

The little boy smiled, almost uncertainly, and ran off into the crowd.

In his five years since settling this miniscule blob of beach off the coast of the Cannonball Strip, Dr. Robert Smack, founder and mayor of Sandy Smack Island, never had to witness such horrible disaster. For the first time since he took leadership, he didn't know the right decision, for each had potential consequence.

His indecision found support with his citizens, for most also didn't know how to respond. The low rumbling of shocking

words riding the crowd confirmed alignment with his state of being.

He pried the metal debris from the water, examining it. One of the corner edges had been blown off, most likely from a flying cylinder judging by the perfectly rounded edge. It was unclear if the damage occurred from something hurled in the explosion, or from the thing that sent the ship into its destructive state, but whatever collided with it, it decimated the missing piece. Such power destroying something so mighty, and the possibility of it happening again, threatened his will to move. He felt like a military general trying to decide which foreign city to bomb.

"The boats are ready," said a husky voice from behind. "We're just waiting for your go ahead."

Dr. Smack dropped the metal onto dry beach, pausing to catch his fading breath. The sand gave way, forming a trench under the broken edge.

He looked up the arching coastline, which disappeared into an oval, backward toward the cliff-lined forested regions of the Cannonball Strip. Docks populated the shore on all sides leading to the entry-bridge on the north side of the island, each with a speedboat bobbing at the end a rope. Every vessel had a man in the captain's chair waiting for instructions. The captains had radios in hand.

"You realize this is unfamiliar territory to us?" said Dr. Smack.

"Unfamiliar to you, maybe. This is dessert for me."

Fisherman Steve, the name by which the husky-voiced man was known on the island, stood at nearly six-and-a-half feet tall, with bald head, dark eyes, and a tattoo of a hawk on the nape of his neck. His sheer size threatened small children and intimidated grown men, but the mystery of his past somehow secured hope in each of them. He was a seafarer, certainly, with seaport connections all over the world, playing both a friend to merchants and a protector of islanders. But when the sun went down, his secret life no one knew, for he only came out when disturbances called for his attention. Dr. Smack trusted him, but only at arm's reach. Men of his stature proved dangerous in the past.

"If we're gonna go, this is the time to do it," he said.

"And you're sure this is the proper action?" asked Dr. Smack.

"Sir, if you don't mind my irreverence, you're a fool if you think otherwise. If there are survivors on the *Tropica Hardcore* at all, we're their only hope. Provided we leave now."

"Irreverence forgiven," said Dr. Smack.

Dr. Smack followed his maritime advisor to his private dock just outside the mayor's mansion. Two boats perched by the shore, each waiting for someone to unhook its ropes. Fisherman

Steve untied the line connecting the speedboat closest to the sea, a vessel which possessed an engine large enough to fit a drag racer. Dr. Smack took the boat closest to the shore, feeling inadequate with his smaller engine.

"Since the water is your domain, you lead the rescue party," said Dr. Smack.

Fisherman Steve hopped into the captain's chair and ignited the engine. Gallons of water droplets spat from the back as the engine spluttered. As he backed out, he spoke into his onboard radio, transmitting his words through Dr. Smack's speaker system.

"It's go-time, folks," said Fisherman Steve, through crackling static. "Remember, search for overboard passengers only. No one plays the hero to the ship itself."

Two minutes later, a fleet of speedboats, at least twenty in number including Dr. Smack's boat, glided over the choppy waves of the Caribbean heading south for the burning ocean liner. As the sun bottomed out to the east, the vision upon the water became limited only to the stars in the sky and the fire in the distance. And yet, the darkness between the shore and the *Tropica Hardcore* didn't stop them.

"Yee-haw!" shouted one boatman over the roars of engines and swishes against the water. Being the professional politician he was, Dr. Smack didn't want to admit he agreed with the adrenaline-soaked rescuer's cheer.

As they drew closer to the ship, the waves swelled in size, increasing to as much as eight feet from trough to crest. Dr. Smack pushed the throttle to maximum as he entered the disturbed areas, nearly jumping from one wave to another at the upturn of his velocity, spending almost as much time in the air as he did on the water. The intensity of his rise and fall, speedboat flying and crashing in ways it probably wasn't designed for, nearly hurled him from his seat. Crashing debris from the ship created ripple effects that altered his angle from all sides, threatening to send him into a barrel roll. But he pressed on, as did all his travel companions who suffered the same risks, facing peril to get within radius of the doomed liner.

Up ahead he saw a watery graveyard of cargo and scrap metal. The debris ranged from slivers of broken support beams to a minefield of floating crates. Fisherman Steve, at the front of the party, didn't seem fazed. He pointed his vessel toward a gap between two metal sheets and entered the graveyard at full speed—he had only a few feet on each side to spare.

Dr. Smack followed close, nearly sideswiping an approaching beam of wood. After barely dodging another chunk of debris, he spoke into his radio.

"Steve, shouldn't we slow down?" he said.

"Time is precious," said Fisherman Steve, over the crackling intercom.

"Somebody's gonna hit something out here."

"That's not my problem. If they can't steer, they shouldn't be out here."

Dr. Smack stole a glance behind him. Eighteen other boats skipped the waves into the graveyard rather seamlessly. One after another they dipped, flew, and dipped again into the watery peaks and valleys, swerving like stunt drivers amidst the floating junk. He was rather impressed with his citizens. If anyone didn't deserve to be out here, it was he himself.

When he turned back, a crash echoed from his stern and a broken chunk of wood flung upward and to the right splashing down next to a burning oil drum. The unexpected collision skipped a beat in his heart, forcing him to oversteer his boat. The vessel changed course, heading into the heart of the graveyard where lakes of metal and capsized escape boats waited to claim him.

Though the waves continued to undulate with uncomfortable heights, Dr. Smack pulled his throttle back until his boat reached a standstill. With his travel companions flying through the path behind him, he waited for his heart to decelerate, taking a breath to gather his senses. The salty air was thick with smoke; he could taste it now.

"If we're gonna find survivors," said Fisherman Steve, through the intercom, "we're gonna find them around here. Everyone start slowing down."

Dr. Smack looked to the south to see the fleet of speedboats drawing within the thousand-foot radius of the ocean liner, and him just outside of the thousand-foot radius of them. With his system returning to normal, he put his boat in reverse and coasted backward up the face of a six-foot wave and down again. He felt nauseous.

When he returned to the boat path in the middle of the wreckage, he pushed his throttle into "drive," taking it slow so as not to spin out of control in the turbulence. After coasting up a few rolling waves, he brought the engine to a healthy speed, this time keeping a better eye out for fragmented boards.

The sun had all but vanished, but the random pools of fire on the Caribbean's surface gave him enough light to see the clear areas in front of him. He launched his boat diagonally off a few waves as he maneuvered past a collection of kitchenware, landing in positions threatening the regularity of his heart. One landing almost dropped him in the middle of a burning oil spill, but he got lucky, falling just to the right. At that point, now that conditions had compounded danger and the search radius had drawn close, he decreased his speed.

His party scoured the areas in front of the cruise ship with flashlights peeking over the edges, but none whispered luck over the radio. He prepared his flashlight anyway, in case he was the first to find a survivor.

Then he nearly dropped it.



The loudest thing to ever assault his eardrums cracked the night with thunder. The brightest thing to ever fill his eyes flashed against the sky, nearly blinding him. The ship, though teasing with smoke and fire for the last half-hour, changed status, turning from a stagnant mess to a volatile reaction. Like a bomb it exploded, sending metal, barrels, crates, everything into the grease-soaked sky, raining a hail of fireballs into the ocean. The back end of the ship ripped apart, breaking from the front half, sending both ends into a climactic sixty-degree angle where each dipped into the chilling deep.

All nineteen speedboats in eyeshot scurried from the raining fireballs, each coming within inches of collision with another. Dr. Smack froze, still recovering from temporary blindness of the flash. His search party was too close to the destruction.

"Clear out," said Fisherman Steve, over the radio. "The ship will take us down with it if we don't leave." His voice was barely audible over the ringing in Dr. Smack's ears.

The fight to return to shore was a challenge of epic sorts. The composure each boatman had maintained since leaving the island had given way to chaos. Each man nearly crashed into another, zigzagging into neighbors' paths. Only Fisherman Steve seemed to have his head together.

When they returned to the island, most of them couldn't speak, nor look at the charred stains on their boats' hulls without shedding a tear.

"Sorry I lost control back there," said Dr. Smack, when he and Fisherman Steve sat under a pavilion by the shore trying to figure out what happened. "It's presumptuous of me to think this way, I know, but maybe I was the one light on the water who could've found a survivor had I just been there sooner."

Fisherman Steve rolled a can of soda between his palms—it was one of those colas that reawakened the taste of soft drinks after diet brands threatened to send them plummeting—then shook his head.

"There was no one out there," he said. "Whatever happened was deliberate. No one was supposed to survive."

Dr. Smack wanted to hope for the best, as his position of mayor demanded it, but in his core he believed his advisor was right.

"So what should I say about it at the citizen's council tomorrow night?"

Fisherman Steve stood to his feet and tossed the can of soda away.

"I've heard stories about things from the distant past, things that haunted our oceans for generations, and the thing that happened tonight resembles them," he said. "If I were you, I would tell them to leave and never look back."

This grieved Dr. Smack. Normally, his judgment was sound, enough to make the right decision, but this time he was torn.

"They've dedicated their lives to the growth of this island," he said. "I can't tell them to leave."

"That's your call, then. If you think they should stay, then the outcome will fall on your conscience. I've given you my opinion."

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Some distance away, just beyond the hump of Cannonball Peak—a single mountain protruding over the top of a series of forested hills standing along the shores of the Cannonball Strip—another mayor stood on the balcony of his residential penthouse, struggling to resolve a similar matter beyond his control.

"Is he coming?" he asked, speaking to a man through his cellphone.

"I don't know," said the man on the other end. "He's usually here by now."

Mayor Samson Applewhite paced between a potted plant and a wooden bench. His dinner party waited for him in the restaurant downstairs, and yet he was stuck. Attention beckoned from two angles—both requiring professional involvement. On the one hand, distinguished guests waited to kiss his hand. On the other, a serious crime threatened peace in his city. He moved to the

balcony railing, peering into the moistened night sky for a solution.

Street lamps dotted the avenues below like militant fireflies, while the beam of the Creature Signal carved a circle out of the moonlit rain cloud above. The pointed nose and angled cranium of the Mythical Creature's visage, contrasting the perfect shape of the spotlight, threatened to swirl the cloud like a blender.

The Creature should've entered the city line by now. He was never late.

"Can we just call him by phone?" asked the mayor.

"He doesn't have a phone."

The mayor dug his free hand's fingernails into his teeth.

"Where the hell is he?"

"If I knew, I'd have his attention by now."

The mayor massaged his temples. They were serving sushi tonight.

"Have any of the other superheroes responded?"

"Only the Pig Rocker showed up. Frankly, the situation is out of his league. The city is short on heroes these days."

The mayor stepped away from the railing, tramping across the wooden slats of his balcony. Lights from the apartment below shot through the cracks, splitting across his shins with each step. The faded scent of dew evaporated as the earthy aroma of damp wood took over.

"I have men at the bank's entrance," said the man in the phone. "They can stave the hostage situation. But we need the Mythical Creature. If you can't reach him by Signal, then you have to find another way to contact him. The city just doesn't have enough alternative heroes to quench this kind of frenzy."

"That's not the answer I wanted."

"That, unfortunately, is the answer I have to give you. Please, find him. Two officers have been shot already."

The mayor stopped at his sliding glass door, his face a ghostly reflection with the light of the Creature Signal glowing behind him. The pivoting spotlight, affixed to his balcony, given to him as a city service from the hero of whose face was carved in the lens, seemed useless now.

He disconnected the phone as he opened the door, uncertain what circumstances had changed to warrant the hero's absence. He had to find another way.

His penthouse, a direct contrast to his dampened mood, was wide and earthy. The living room, which carved into his wooden floor like a grotto, complete with plush sofas, big screen television, and cascading waterfall from two opposing walls, extended its arms to calm him down. Three floor plants, arranged at the point of a triangle, rustled under the soft breeze of adjacent wall vents, adding to the chorus of tranquility. Classical music of Eighteenth Century origin danced from his

surround sound speakers, reverberating off each stone setting along the artificial stream.

He took a breath as he closed the sliding glass door behind him.

In the corner of the room, an electrical panel ate up three feet of wall. In the middle of the panel, amidst several monitors and flashing lights, a red button dominated the surface. It glowed with liquid light pulsating under the casing. Pressed in, it powered the signal that failed to call its hero.

An ancient Rolodex set on a shelf next to the panel, the only object in the room to collect dust. The card flaps populating the interior cylinder held the names of every contact he neglected to put into his cellphone, carrying the information of those he hoped to never need to call. First on the list: Demo Man, the father of all heroes in Cannonball City. If anyone had an answer to this conundrum, it was he.

The mayor spun the dial until Demo Man's card emerged. Though his address was smudged with faded ink, his phone number appeared brilliant from permanent marker, highlighted in yellow for easier reading. The mayor punched the number into his cellphone.

The other line rung. And again. And again. Until—

"Yes?" said a man with a British accent.

"Is this the one called Demo Man?" asked the mayor.

"Depends who's calling."

"This is Mayor Applewhite of Cannonball City. I need your help."

Keyboard clacks echoed through the receiver.

"I'm kinda busy with a crisis at the moment."

Mayor Applewhite clutched a nearby bookshelf, invoking enough strength to transfer his stress, but not so much as to tear the structure apart.

"The Mythical Creature isn't responding to his signal," he said. "Our bank was attacked an hour ago and the police are no match for the people responsible. We need his help."

Silence. The mayor held his breath as he waited for an answer. The polished wood pressed firmly against his fingertips.

"All right, I reckon that's serious, too. Hold on. I'll check my monitors."

The line went dead. Then a click, some tapping on keys, a whir, and a buzz. Then more silence. Then a blast of static, followed by the grinding of an Internet phone connection. Then music. Demo Man returned to the phone after the first four lines of a Led Zeppelin song faded into an instrumental.

"He's not coming," said Demo Man, his breath labored.

"What do you mean he's not coming?"

"He's in hiding."

The mayor nearly planted nail marks into the shelf's wooden finish. His stomach churned, and not from lack of sushi.

"In hiding? Why would the Mythical Creature need to go into hiding? He's a superhero. And badass."

"To protect himself."

"From what? He's our lead protector. He's unstoppable. What could he possibly be afraid of?"

"It's not fear that drives this decision. It's wisdom."

The mayor finally released the bookshelf, leaving it free of further abuse. He paced down the steps into the furniture grotto.

"Can you patch me through to him? Is there any way I can speak to him myself? We need him here. Now."

"His decision is final."

Another labored breath on the other end. Then more static. Demo Man punched some keys into the receiver. Mayor Applewhite moved toward his four-cushion sofa.

"He just shut me out," said Demo Man.

"What?"

"My surveillance monitor for his hideout went black. I no longer have communication with him."

"Why would he shut you out?"

"To protect himself."

The mayor wanted to scream at this point.

"To protect himself from what?"

Something sizzled on the other end.

"Hold on," said Demo Man. "I got an email."



Mayor Applewhite sat on his sofa, placing his freehand between his thighs. The tension in his legs rose past his hips and into his ulcer. Any moment he would become gassy.

"It's from him," said Demo Man. "It says, quite plainly, that the trigger piece of our darkest hour has been launched. Though evil times will start slow, cropping up only in spurts, it will soon escalate beyond anyone's control. For us to have a chance, we'll need him during our darkest moment. Therefore, he will go into hiding for seven years, until the day he is needed most."

The mayor waited for a conditional statement to follow, but there was none. Another sound touched his ears, this one a beep, and then silence, save for the breathing of Demo Man's lungs. He collapsed to his knees.

"What does that mean?" asked the mayor.

"It means I'm gonna have to recruit a few more heroes for you," said Demo Man. "We'll be in touch. But you're on your own for now. I gotta crisis in Sandy Smack Island to address. Mayor Smack is in over his head."

And then the other line disconnected.

The mayor was left alone in his penthouse with a growling stomach, an upset ulcer, and still no way to handle the crisis at the bank. He called back the police chief.

"Speak to me," said the chief.

"You're on your own," said the mayor. He hung up.

The crescendo of the symphony playing in his living room nearly shattered the sliding glass door. Light bounced on its vibrating surface like shifting puzzle pieces. The beam of the Creature Signal continued to penetrate the clouds of the darkened sky.

Perhaps it was time, he thought, to power off the spotlight.