

## Stranded

At first there was only silence, the kind of silence one would expect when floating through the core of a black hole. The only thing Jim was aware of was his own existence. He reached out into the dark void searching for something to anchor himself to and found that he could sense his own heartbeat albeit barely. So he wasn't dead, well for that he was grateful. Slowly the sounds of his surroundings began to permeate through the clouds that filled his head. A steady rolling roar punctuated by a crash every thirty seconds intermingled with piercing shrieks. He felt as though he had been keel hauled ten times over. Out of the blackness before him, flashes of red and yellow began to form. He opened his eyes only to find the sun's brightness too much to bear. The smell of salt and dead fish filled his nostrils as he realized that the sounds he heard were the oceans waves perpetually climbing over themselves to reach him at the shore. The piercing shrieks were the seagulls circling overhead swooping down for a scrap of food now and then. His eyes adjusted and he took his first look at what surrounded him. Before him lay a great expanse of blue capped with tiny white peaks here and there. He scanned the ocean for a sail but none was to be found. Behind him a solid wall of green vegetation not twenty yards away stretched as far as the eye could see in either direction. In between was the white strip of fine sand upon which he had awoken.

The sun was edging along its arched path as Jim battled to remember how he had gotten here, where he had come from, and above all, who he was. One word, a name, emerged from the muddled pool inside his head, Jim. His name was Jim. He remembered a voice calling that name and for a second a face framed by dark hair began to form but then it faded and sank back into the depths. Beyond that he had no recollection of his life prior to this rude awakening in paradise. His clothes were a wet tattered mess of rags that barely shielded his already sun burnt skin. He glanced at his arm and noticed a tattoo, he recognized the seal of The British Nautical Knights. Was he a knight? Perhaps he had taken a blow to the head and that was why his memory lay scattered beside him on the beach. His proximity to the water led him to believe that he had been washed ashore. Had he been made to walk the plank of some trading ship? Had he been on a ship that had been attacked by foe or nature and wrecked? Was there anybody else stranded on this beach? Regardless of the answers to these questions, If he were to survive, he must find fresh water soon. He pulled himself up from the sand and set off to explore his new surroundings. He was not sure if this was an island or the shore of some huge continent. As he walked along the beach Jim began to notice debris in the

shallows that could only be the remains of a ship. Perhaps some useful supplies had washed ashore. After walking for a league or so, he rounded a small cape and came across a large section of the ship marooned on the rocks. The Foremast lay across the deck, shattered at the base, and the hull had been breached by canon fire in various places. It seemed the ship had been attacked but it had been a storm that had swamped it and washed her remains ashore. She could only have been there for a day or two as Jim began to notice the bodies of sailors floating in the surf. These were souls that had avoided the sharks but had succumbed to the elements. Down the beach he saw the aft portion of the ship up on the sand. The stern still bore the name of the ship although Jim could barely make out the words, *The Blue Lady*. The name of the ship stirred his memories but failed to uncloud his head. He felt as though he were trying to catch fish with his bare hands in a running stream. Each time he lunged and barely touched a memory before it slipped from his grasp and swam away with the rest, disappearing downstream into his subconscious.

Jim let his body go limp as he sank to the sand. What was he to do? Deserted somewhere without hope or identity. He lay on his back and stared at the sky. With no memories to dwell on and nothing to do but watch the clouds roll by each day, what was the point of living? Perhaps he could just drift away into an endless sleep. He turned his head toward the water and just as his eyelids began to sink, his eye caught something reflecting the sunlight. It seemed to be a bottle! He stirred himself and sat up as the prospect of sweet rum filled him with anticipation. Perhaps he could squeeze one more sliver of enjoyment before the end of his forgotten tale. He crawled over to the bottle only to be dismayed at finding it empty except for a single piece of rolled parchment. A message in a bottle, there would be no rum for Jim. He was about to cast the bottle back into the ocean when his curiosity got the best of him. Upon prying out the cork he found that the paper inside was dry and seemed to be freshly stowed in this glass capsule. He made his way to a nearby grove and sat in the shade to read the letter, which conveniently enough was written in English. It read as follows:

*To the finder of this bottle,*

*I implore you to please deliver this letter to the Courteney Estate, South Hampton,  
England. Care of the Lady Pimanis Courteney.*

*My sweet Pimanis,*

*If you have received this letter I am in dire straits indeed. I have kept this bottle by my side on this voyage vowing to cast it into the ocean only when seriously fearing my demise. I have missed you dearly these months and think of you every night as I gaze at the stars from the main deck. It is my duty to my country that keeps me sailing but my devotion to you that keeps me sane. On my voyages I have seen the most beautiful women, women that cause men to fantasize at the mere sight of them. But they are but pale reflections of the beauty I have left behind. Only a princess such as yourself could cause a man to fantasize about her when she is hundreds of leagues away. Only your voice could ride the winds and cross the seas to sing me to sleep each night. If I have indeed met my end, then I shall wait for you till the end of time. But If I am alive, somewhere, I vow not to rest until I am once again by your side. Neither distance nor death shall keep me from my princess.*

*Yours Forever,  
Sir James Tiberious Courteney  
Captain of The Blue Lady*

Jim let the bottle and letter drop as a flood of memories overtook him. The image of Pimanis came crashing through the curtain that separated what was real and what was forgotten for him. He closed his eyes and felt her dark curly hair on his chest as he held her. He could smell her womanhood and taste her on his lips. He remembered that last look back from the carriage as he left the estate to embark on this journey. She had stood atop the tower and watched him go with tears in her eyes as she waved her scarlet scarf in the wind. Whether it was minutes or hours before he opened his eyes, he didn't know. But when his eyes opened he was no longer Jim the common sailor, he was Captain James Tiberious Courteney and he would return to his princess. He no longer saw himself hopelessly stranded on some island. He saw only obstacles that had to be overcome. His mind was already prioritizing the things he had to do to get back to his princess. And the first thing was to survive. Jim pulled himself to his feet, grabbed his bottle with note enclosed, and made his way into the lush greenery to find water and shelter. Tomorrow he would begin to build a boat.

Many years later Jim sat in his parlor with a cigaro and his favorite rum. Over the fireplace was the letter that reminded him of who he was and had given him the strength to prevail. It had taken him almost a year before he had held his sweet princess again. Upon his return he had framed the letter and vowed

never to leave her side again. He felt ultimately satisfied with his life as the twins played before the fire. Pimani sensed his good humor and smiled as she held the little one. Her beauty had only blossomed with the years even though she had given him three children. From time to time the ocean still called to him, but as Jim sat there surrounded by his family, he took a pull from the cigaro and a swig of the rum, and knew that he was content.

A.G.