

Chapter 1: Alan Turing

London—June 17, 1945

Rain had a way of making London glisten, even while the city still bore the scars of war. The cobblestones in the narrow street shone like slick, uneven mirrors, each puddle catching the hesitant sun that peeked through a slow summer drizzle.

Buildings leaned inward on both sides, their façades chipped and wounded by bomb blasts—reminders of the firestorm that Europe had only just survived. Everywhere, Churchill's stern face stared from posters, his fingers raised in the familiar V-sign of victory.¹

Laughter and music spilled through the half-open windows of a workers' pub, a place where sweat and soot mixed easily with the smell of beer. It was the sort of establishment one drifted into without thought and left heavier than before.

Alan Turing² stepped across the stones with a clinical gait, his eyes fixed on the ground as if calculating the friction coefficient of every surface. But the math was no match for the uneven reality; he caught his toe on a jagged edge and nearly pitched forward.

His arms flailed for a second before he regained his balance. He shot a quick, darting look around the street. No one was watching. He pulled the pub door open and ducked inside.

Warmth hit him first; the humid heat of packed bodies and cheap lamps. Then came the din: clattering glasses and voices overlapping in a constant roar. A thick haze of tobacco smoke hung in the air, softening the light and blurring the edges of the room.

Men huddled around the heavy wooden tables. A middle-aged waitress wiped down the bar, her movements rhythmic and weary.

Two men rose from a corner booth. Alan moved toward the vacated seat before the bench had even cooled. He caught the waitress's eye and gave a small, tentative gesture. His lips formed two silent words: *The usual*.

She nodded. "Tea for Dr. Turing," she called to a teenage girl weaving between the tables.

Moments later, the girl returned with the steaming cup. Alan murmured a thank you just as the pub door swung open.

A man stepped inside. He possessed a symmetry of feature and a physical ease that commanded the room without effort. His dark hair was slicked back, his coat cut sharp against his frame.

The teenage waitress paused mid-step to look at him; Alan found himself staring, too.

The stranger's gaze swept the room and locked onto Alan. Before Alan could find a reason to look at his tea, the man crossed the floor with a decisive stride.

"Why—you are Dr. Alan Turing!" he announced warmly, as though greeting an old friend.

Alan's grip tightened on his teacup. "Indeed, I am," he confirmed, his voice a fraction too high. "How... How do you know me?"

The man slid into the seat opposite him without waiting for permission. "You're the man who saved Europe," he said with a smile that suggested absolute certainty.

Alan blushed, staring down at the thin ribbon of steam rising from his tea. Compliments always felt like ambushes.

The waitress lingered, until the stranger looked up at her. "Tea for me as well, please."

She nodded and retreated.

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Alan swallowed, uncertain how to react. The stranger didn't waver; he studied Alan with a mixture of admiration and intense curiosity.

Alan attempted a smile, but it felt mechanical, a mere baring of teeth that didn't reach his eyes. "The press tends to embellish war stories, especially newspapers on the victor's side," he said.

The man leaned in. A faint scent of expensive soap and leather cut through the pub's smell of tobacco and damp wool. He sat with his shoulders squared, occupying the small booth as if it were his office.

"One doesn't win a war with muscles alone, Dr. Turing," he said softly. He reached out and tapped his own temple lightly. "You won it with this."

"I lent my mind," Alan clarified, his fingers tracing the rim of his saucer. "Other men lent their bodies. They deserve the credit."

"Humble and brilliant." The man held Alan's gaze with deliberate steadiness. Alan looked away, then back, unaccustomed to being scrutinized as something of value. "Your invention saved lives. That's something to be proud of."

"Pride is misplaced in times of war," Alan replied.

The girl returned with a second tea. As she leaned over the table, her blouse dipped low, a practiced bit of charm. The stranger didn't seem to notice. His focus remained entirely on Alan.

"But the war is over," he said.

"Not in Japan," Alan corrected gently.³

"Even so." The man's eyes brightened. "You invented the C.H.I.P.—an eight-bit *Compact Hydraulic Integrated Processor* with a memory of thirty-two bytes. Surely, you're proud of *that*."⁴

Alan's head snapped up. Very few people knew what the acronym stood for, let alone what its technical specifications were. At Bletchley Park,⁵ those details were buried under layers of "Top Secret" classifications.

"You seem to be well-informed," he said.

A raucous burst of laughter erupted from a nearby table. Alan flinched, his shoulders pulling inward.

The man leaned closer, dropping his voice to a confidential murmur. "I'm a devotee, Dr. Turing. I've read everything you've published. Everything written about you."

Something softened in Alan's chest. In his world, people either found him useful or found him strange; they rarely found him admirable.

"In that case..." Alan reached into his coat. He produced a small, rectangular object the size of a deck of cards. It was heavy, crafted with a precision that didn't belong in a pub. "I have something you might appreciate."

The man's eyes widened. "May I?"

Alan placed the chip into the man's open palm and pointed to the upper side. "These are the switches."

"Used to program it," the man said instantly.

Alan turned the chip over. "Thirty-two rows of eight indicators."

"Eight bits per row," the man replied. "Thirty-two bytes in total."

"Correct." Alan picked the device up, tilting it so the light caught the perforated edges. "Eight holes at the top and bottom."

"Eight bits input," the man said. "Eight bits output."

"Connect multiple chips," Alan continued, his voice gaining a rare steadiness as he entered the world of logic, "pump water through them, and..."

"You get a hydraulic brain," the man finished, "a computer faster than any human genius."

Alan allowed himself a small, genuine smile. "That's how we cracked the German Enigma⁶ code," he said quietly.

"And won the war," the man added. His admiration was disarming, almost intoxicating. "May I buy you another tea? I have a thousand questions."

He didn't wait for an answer and was already signaling the waitress.

The pub settled into a quieter rhythm. The girl returned with fresh cups, clearing away the old ones. Neither man noticed her. Their world had shrunk to the surface of the wooden table, steam rising between them like a veil as ideas passed back and forth.

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Hours later, the pub was nearly deserted, its patrons gone, its laughter faded. Even the teenage girl had gone home. Only the waitress remained, wiping down tables with the air of someone counting the seconds until she could lock the door.