

STRANGER DESERT

-A *Stranger World* Story-

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“All men dream... But not equally.

*Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their mind,
wake in the day to find it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day
are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open
eyes, to make them possible.”*

-Laurence of Arabia

“Without new experiences, something inside of us sleeps.

The sleeper must awaken.”

-Frank Herbert, author of Dune

P r o l o g u e

The Living Painting

“Ladies and gentlemen . . . honored and distinguished guests. May I have your attention please?”

The tuxedo-clad auctioneer waited for the murmuring masses to die down. As they did, he methodically removed his glasses from his yellow beak and wiped the lenses with a stark white handkerchief. If Benjamin Franklin and a woodsy owl had a baby, the auctioneer standing on the stage would be the result.

It was Friday night, and every Friday night there was always an auction in the city of Portlandia (*Gateway to the Stranger Worlds*). In fact, everybody who was anybody always-always came to the most famous of all galas in all the

lands. And why not? There were so many beautiful things to be had: Atlantean tapestries, ceramic tea sets from Lady Wellington's tables or even a living-breathing, two-headed What's-A-Muh-Doodle, and that was just to name a few. Each artifact had a story to tell. The auction wasn't so much a celebration as it was an international pastime, for these were dark times indeed, and time was a luxury the opulent masses present faithfully endured.

Now, all the way at the very back of the massive, crowded ballroom, at the farthest reaches of the room was a lowly janitor. He was an elderly man, standing quietly next to his cleaning cart. Almost nobody ever noticed the *janitor*, and the few that did, quickly averted their gaze for fear he might start up a conversation with them. One might think he didn't appreciate this, but in fact, quite the opposite was true. On any given *normal* day, the eyes of the world were upon him. So, moving amongst the masses without anyone giving him so much as a second glance was, simply put, delightful.

Tonight's auction was a particularly special one. So much so, they flew in only the very best auctioneer; for only the best would do. Now, certain that he had everyone waiting with bated breath, he decided to continue. "The next item up for bid, the piece de resistance, the one you've all been waiting for . . ." he held a feathery hand up toward center stage, "I give you, Lot# 52."

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A spotlight lit up an empty section of the stage. It was cordoned off by velvety ropes that were supported by stanchions made of solid gold. A trap door silently slid open in the floor and heavy clanking noises were heard as a pedestal began to rise up into place.

As the item continued to rise into view, a hush swept over the murmuring audience like a massive wave.

“Excuse me,” the janitor said politely, using his cleaning cart as an excuse to push his way through the crowd to afford him a better view, “Pardon me, janitor coming through.”

Squeak-it... Squeak-it... Squeak-it...

On the pedestal stood a colossal, eleven-foot-tall painting. Inside it, stood a man; one who was still alive, if only barely. He was dressed in an olive-green flight suit, complete with nomenclature and the appropriate number of military patches. His beard was grizzled and his hair a little more salt-and-pepper than the Janitor remembered, but it was still him.

“Oh, hello, George,” the janitor breathed.

The pedestal locked into place and the auctioneer suddenly raised his voice. “Ladies and Gentlemen... I give you... the infamous... Captain Stapleton of Her Majesty’s Air Ship... *the Dauntless*. Only 26 copies of the Captain Stapleton were ever made. And I have it on excellent authority that this is only one of two left known to exist.”

One audience member, a nerdy-looking fellow sporting an ashen goatee and scrawny ponytail, jumped to his feet and declared, "That's not true. Everybody knows that the Jungle-George body that was found in the underwater maze was actually a fake!"

The auctioneer gave the not-so-young upstart a belittling smile. "Oh please. Don't be so naive. That is merely a gelatinous rumor made up by the resistance to cultivate favor with the commoners." Certain that there weren't going to be any more disruptions, the auctioneer cleared his throat and said, "Let's start the bidding at one million, shall we?"

An overweight, middle-aged woman dressed as an opulent, roaring 20's flapper, leapt to her feet, held up her bidding paddle and shouted exuberantly, "I'll give you 12 Barnaby clones for it!"

The ridiculous bid got some tittering from the audience.

The auctioneer flashed the woman his patented patronizing smile. "Please Madam. What in the known Stranger Worlds would anybody do with a dozen Barnaby's? I, myself, threw out one just last week." To the audience, he added, "The slovenly thing was eating me out of house and home." This raised voracious laughter from the audience.

The janitor could see why they had flown in the auctioneer, he was good.

Gesturing back toward the painting, the auctioneer continued. “Rest assured, this *is*... the one and only, original Captain George C. Stapleton. Even if he were deceased, he’d be worth a thousand Barnabys.”

After only a second, a slender man wearing a flashy suit shouted, “A million, point five credits.” Another audience member added a quarter of a million to that, and a third doubled it.

The auctioneer smiled. He had them. It was only a matter of time now.

For the janitor, as interesting as the item for bid was (also the precise reason he was here) the bidding crowd was equally fascinating.

For example, the two men dressed as rustic traders were obviously with the resistance. The pistols cleverly concealed on their persons (that somehow managed to evade the magnetometers built into the entrances) was proof enough of that. The janitor knew he could join their fight, or simply out them for a reward, but neither plan served his ultimate end goal.

But why would they risk coming here?

Did they have some ridiculous delusion of grandeur in freeing today’s prize? Well that wouldn’t do. No, that wouldn’t do at all. Fortunately, one of them, a handsome lad in the final cooking stages of becoming a man, took in the

small army of gorilla guards clad in tuxes with the appropriate amount of reserve. Judging by the kid's sidelong looks of trepidation, there would be no rescue attempt today, at least not by him.

This was especially true considering there were esteemed members from corporate also in attendance. Staring over at them in their box seats, the janitor realized it was not just any corporate member, but Director Candace Kelly herself. She was easily recognizable as her hair was bleached so white it could have served as a landing beacon for ancient astronauts. Smartly dressed in a 1980's pantsuit, she moved through the crowd with the predatory grace of a lioness. Last year's fashion style had been the inquisition, but regardless of whether she was wearing priestly robes or a power suit, her lithe muscles were always apparent underneath. To complete this year's 1980's ensemble, she held a brick-sized portable telephone to her ear. Everyone knew Candace. Not because she was the most popular director with the masses—she wasn't, Candace was widely known for being the most cruel. Something many of her fellow directors discovered when they met with their untimely demise, which were often explained away as unfortunate "accidents."

Trotting behind Candice on stout, stubby legs, was a portly woman who was a complete contradiction to Candace's tall and lithe form. Most likely this was no accident as Can-

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dace probably preferred it this way. The trusty sidekick was not only short and cherubic, she was also dressed in a far less impressive power suit, sported thick glasses and unwashed black hair.

The janitor couldn't help but smile.

With all that power, it must have really irked Candace that she couldn't just nab George for Corporate. Not with the Free Trade Act they supposedly supported. If they wanted George, they had to bid on him just like everyone else. And no self-respecting merchant, prince, or affluent lord was going to give up a prize Corporate wanted for themselves, at least not without a fight.

Once the bidding finally slowed to a stop, the Auctioneer said, "I have 4.8 million. Do I have another bid?" Much to the chagrin of Director Candace, he added, "Then sold, to the cherubic man in the front row with the thin mustache."

Two gorilla ushers wearing tuxes, attached silvery devices to either side of the painting. This caused it to levitate in the air making it easy to shove offstage, and behind the curtains.

"And now... the next item up for bid... I must ask you this... who has always wanted to own their very own zombie pirate?"

Backstage

“Hello Georgie...”

The Janitor said, before pushing a metal staircase on wheels in front of the painting. In a move that belied his age, he climbed several rungs so he could speak to the entombed man, face-to-face. Taking a moment, he studied the painting’s captive a bit more closely. His face seemed older than he remembered, and yet, even in torment, there remained a fierce sharpness to the man. The way he took in his surroundings, always thinking, calculating. As if he might somehow escape.

Oh, if only we could have learned how to duplicate his tenacity. Alas, even if he couldn’t duplicate it, he would at least temper that steel and bend it to serve his next mission.

“How are we feeling today, George?”

In answer, George could only wince.

“Oh yes, it is my understanding the pain is quite unpleasant. But alas, you have so much work to do my boy. So much work to do indeed. And here I bet you were thinking your best adventures were behind you.”

The janitor’s brow furrowed and, “Now let’s see.” First, he tapped George on the forehead, “Here,” then on the throat, “here, and here,” and systematically poked George in several spots focusing on pressure points and vital organs. “I’ve just

given you several shots. You should be able to move your body again very soon.” When George didn’t respond, the janitor added, “You’re welcome.”

The drugs must have begun to work because George began to shift uncomfortably and glance about more alert than before.

“Now I’d love to give you a new body, but alas, I’m afraid those days are long gone. Corporate’s put a no-recall status on you. Besides, even if they hadn’t, the last several attempts to create more clones of you have been, how should we say, less than successful.” Pinching George’s shoulder between thumb and forefinger, “I’m afraid this old thing’s pretty worn out, but I guess it’ll just have to do, because, quite frankly, it’s all you’ve got left.”

In a voice barely above a hoarse whisper, George asked weakly, “Henry, you’re... you’re a janitor?”

Henry smiled slyly. “Just one of my many disguises. I quite like it.”

George tried to speak and found he couldn’t. He swallowed, then tried again, “How’d we get here?”

Replying quickly, the Janitor asked, “Don’t you remember?”

George’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then he shook his head.

Good, he’s starting to be able to move.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure it will all return to you in good time.” Then, flinging his head over his shoulder, he spotted Candace ascending the stage. She was speaking with the auctioneer and Henry knew it wouldn’t be long before she made her way backstage. Turning back to face George, he explained, “I’m afraid we don’t have a great deal of time.”

He pulled a clunky box-shaped device, seemingly out of thin air. Tapping its olive-green metal surface, he explained, “Now, this is a location device. I tuned it in with the Dauntless Emergency Locator Transponder. All hope rests with you now, my boy.”

George, holding back a cough, managed to ask, “How?”

“How are you going to get there? Oh, that is going to be an arduous journey indeed. One that I wish I could accompany you on, but alas, I’m needed elsewhere. Fear not, I’ve procured some transportation for you. It’s not much, but knowing you and your meat-and-potato tastes, you’ll like it just fine.”

Falling the rest of the way out of the painting, George’s knees wobbled for a moment before his legs promptly delivered him to the floor.

“Oh my,” the janitor breathed, then quickly descended the metal stairs. Shouting to the gorilla guards, “Well don’t just stand there gawking like a pair of stupid apes, pick the man up.”

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Two powerful gorillas, one on each side, easily hoisted George to his feet. He looked about sharply, as though in disbelief, certain he must be mistaken.

“These, ah, gentleman, owe me their lives at least a dozen times over. They’ll take care of you. You can trust them as you would me.”

George’s face screwed up into a frown.

Seeing this too, the janitor replied automatically, “Uh, okay... ouch.”

George then rolled his eyes to the side, swallowed hard, and managed, “Thanks.”

The Janitor’s head bobbed up and down, and thought, *Always so polite, this one.* “Think nothing of it, my boy. Think nothing of it, at all.”

Hearing Candace’s distant, no-nonsense voice growing closer by the second, he quickly instructed the gorillas, “Now hurry up. Get him out of here before corporate figures out what we’ve done.”

The gorillas in tuxedos grunted in reply and bore George away.

A third remained, his face stoic and staring straight forward as he awaited further instructions.

Watching George vanish from sight, the janitor suddenly became fascinated by his own shadow painting a nearby wall. A loud zipping sound was heard as an impossibly gaunt

figure, with a ratty tailcoat and worn top hat, pulled off the Henry man-suit he'd been wearing.

"Gross. As fun as that was, I'm glad to be out of that stuffy ole thing. After all, my hypocrisy only goes so far."

It was true, George had freed Henry Stranger from that underwater maze (or rather the last "Echo" of him, for the real Henry Stranger had been murdered by corporate so very long ago). Freed from his prison, it would have been only a matter of hours before corporate picked him up. Fortunately, he had found Henry first, sucked all the remaining information out of him and then used what was left of him as his latest and greatest costume.

Holding the Henry-suit between thumb and forefinger, as though it were soiled and smelly laundry, he outstretched the suit toward his gorilla minion, "Be a good fellow and dispose of this. Now that everything is back on track, I doubt I'll ever need it again."

With the last remnant of the old man out of the way, and George sent blindly onto his next mission, he added...

"Yes, everything is going to plan. Everything is going to plan, indeed."

CHAPTER 1

Finding (the) *Dauntless*

The rundown, barely-functioning, Hopper crested the ridge and stopped at the edge of a precipice overlooking a vast desert far below.

Once the driver inside switched off the loudly chugging engine, the all-terrain desert vehicle coughed and sputtered a few more times, belched out a cloud of black smoke, and finally died.

Seconds later, the sound of metal unlatching was heard and a circular hatch over the box-shaped cab lifted upward. A man wearing a desert cap and a drab-green, army field jacket popped out like a gopher on Groundhog Day.

Lifting his dirt-caked goggles onto the brim of his cap, he surveyed the wasteland below.

The desert floor appeared to be a dried-up lakebed, cracked in most places, tan and orange in color, and monstrously large, stretching without end, like a sand-swept version of the sky.

The driver pulled down the scarf covering his mouth and inhaled. Yep. Fresh air. This was no bio dome. Most couldn't tell anymore, but for him it wasn't the perfectly replicated sky that glitched on occasion and gave it away. Nope. It was the smell. No recycled air here. For better or worse, this was the real deal. This was the outside.

The driver reached down to grab something inside the cockpit and banged his head on the hatch's edge. Biting back a curse, he couldn't help but rub the *ouchiness* out of his forehead with his palm. Bending down again, (a bit more carefully this time), he grabbed a clunky, box-shaped device affixed to a loose-hanging leather strap. Like the ramshackle vehicle, the metallic box had seen better days. Studying the archaic gauges, he soon realized nothing was happening. So, he did what any self-respecting vagabond would do in his place and banged on the side of it with his hand. Despite his awesome display of technical prowess, still, nothing happened.

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He then tried sweeping it back and forth in slow moving arcs. Finally, the stubborn thing began to beep. Slow and intermittent to the north, and the same to the south, but due west (into an approaching sandstorm. Naturally, why would it be anywhere else) the signal began to beep steadily.

After nearly four years of searching, Colonel George Stapleton had finally found her.

“The Dauntless,” he breathed.

Four years. Has it really been that long?

During his original life timeline, the same trek across America would have been an eight-hour flight. However, such amenities were no longer afforded to today’s would-be traveler, at least not to non-corporate folk.

Instead of a quick flight back to *the Dauntless* (home to friends and family) he had to travel across thousands of miles of terrain, filled with every manner of creature anyone could *literally* imagine.

He was pretty sure he’d started off in central Florida. With only provincial kingdom maps to guide him, it was difficult to tell anymore. From Florida, he tracked the Dauntless’s transponder signal forty-five degrees northwest. As far as to what state of the union he currently occupied, he had nary a clue. Certainly, west of the Mississippi river. It didn’t really matter anymore, for the United States no longer existed, and if what he had learned was true, the good ole’ U.S.A. hadn’t

existed for nearly the two centuries he had slumbered as a corpse.

The journey had taken every survival skill he possessed. After spending nearly, a year in the Elvin dungeons of the Aurora Ice Mountains, and getting caught up in useless kingdom wars, whose outcome rarely changed little more than thinning out both sides (which was most likely Corporate's intention all along) he was finally here... only a few scant miles from his goal.

"Better check my tail," he told himself, as he was often prone to doing. After all, who else was he going to talk to.

Summoning up what little energy he still possessed, he climbed the rest of the way out of the cockpit. Crossing over the uneven roof of the Hopper to the rear observation deck, he used a pair of binoculars he'd absconded from a W.W. II tank commander to survey the road from which he'd come.

Staring through the lens, about half day trek down the mountain, he saw a crack of light reflecting off a windshield.

Yep. They were still following him.

The lead truck was grey in color and called a half-track (on account of the heavy-duty knobby tires in the front, and tank-treads in the back). A massive swastika was painted on the door. A squad of Nazi stormtroopers rode in back.

The man leading them George knew well.

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Franz Goober, a Colonel in the Faceless Nazi Army. Only unlike his men, Franz did have a face, one that was always painted in a permanent sneer.

For the record, Franz Goober *wasn't* his actual name. It was a play on the name of the nemesis of one of his all-time-favorite movies, *Die Hard*.

For two years, Franz had been trailing him. George didn't know why he was so surprised, Corporate still had a hefty bounty on his head.

In that time, George had thinned Franz's troopers out pretty well. Despite this, Franz still pursued him. *Dogged-determination; -that's what Tessa would have called it.* He supposed in that way, he and the Franz were a lot alike.

The last time he and Franz had a gone head-to-head, he had given ole Franz his knife by sticking it in the Nazi-biological's right eye. In exchange, Franz put a slug into his shoulder. George would've died that time were it not for an Elvin warrior princess who took pity on him, plucked out the slug and healed him up. *What was her name again? Oh yeah, Asha. She communicated through moving art tattooed on her arms, hands and face.*

Another time, George had absconded (a fancy word for steal) Franz's Mauser. It was the same pistol currently occupying the worn leather holster on his right thigh.

Undoubtedly, ole Franz Goober wasn't happy about the trade of his pistol for a knife in the eye.

Sorry, no backsies, George thought, then figured, *How about I give it back to you one bullet at a time? Yeah, that* might make for a better comeback. He imagined the ghost of his long-deceased wife, Tessa, rolling her eyes at him and telling him what a cheeseball he was. Gosh how he missed her.

Focusing the binoculars, George could see Franz clear as day. Like many times before, Franz seemed unscathed from their previous encounters. Either the Colonel was able to regenerate somehow or Corporate simply replaced him with a fresh model after every encounter. In Stranger World, both were possible.

Taking one last look through the binocs, he saw the newest addition to team Goober. A local desert scout dressed as a Medjai. Even now he was pounding on the side of the truck with his fist, signaling for the driver to stop. Once the driver did, the Medjai deftly dismounted over the side (his robes snapping in the wind like a superhero's cape) and unslung his rifle from his shoulder even before his boots touched the ground.

Dang, I must've been spotted.

As the Medjai bounty hunter focused in on him through the scope of his extremely long rifle, George thought, *He's*

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probably wondering if he could get off a shot. "Good luck buddy, that's got to be at least two miles..."

George heard the distant report from the Medjai's rifle and thought nothing of it until...

KA-CHUNK!

"Geez," he cried out, instinctively picking up his foot after the bullet had chunked into the back of the Hopper just below him. Calling up one of Rick's more crass collegiums, he said to himself, *"Well, shut my mouth and slap my Grandma, he nearly got me!"*

He imagined the Medjai sniper smiling in satisfaction in response to his reaction, but George would never know because he wasn't about to give the desert tracker a second shot. Jogging back across the roof of the Hopper, he put both palms to either side of the hatch and lowered himself back down into the cockpit. Standing on the short ladder, he pulled the hatch closed behind him like a submariner about to dive.

Flicking on switches even as he was finding his seat, he thought, *It took me nearly half a day to get up to this ridge, it'll take them a lot longer in that half-track.*

Turning the ignition switch, he smiled and said, "So long, Franz."

And... nothing happened.

Sure... why not? Makes total sense.

George tried the ignition again.

Still, the engine didn't respond.

According to the tracker, the Dauntless was only 4.8 miles away.

"Oh, C'mon! *We're so close!* Just one more time."

Nothing.

"You've got to be kidding me!" he roared, slamming his combat boot into the control panel.

A second later the console lit up like a Christmas tree, sparked in a few places and then, in an awesome crescendo of noises, the engine sputtered to life.

Gritting his teeth, George said, "Last time, ole girl," and shoved the throttle bar forward. "I promise."

After thinking about it for a second, the broken Hopper lurched ahead.

It reached the desert floor in only a fraction of the time it had taken to climb to the top of the mountain. Unfortunately, the strain had been too much because it hadn't even gone another full mile before the engine started clanking. George knew from personal experience it wouldn't be long before the engine seized up entirely.

A quarter mile later, it did just that.

Even if he had the parts, he knew he'd never get the chance to make repairs. Not with Franz and company so close on his tail.

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I suppose I should be grateful it didn't break down sooner.

Angry black and grey smoke began filling the engine compartment, so with little options, George shut it down and abandoned ship. It wasn't like there was a whole lot to take. Nearly all his provisions were used up in getting here.

The portable tracker was still necessary, as was the German pistol. With any luck, he wouldn't need them. According to the tracker, the Dauntless was less than two miles away.

Besides, even if the Hopper's engine hadn't seized up, the fuel tank was practically on fumes.

Another spark caused him to jump. Most people thought a full tank was the more volatile, but George knew the opposite was true. In a full tank there's no room for oxygen. However, a near empty one, well sir, that's the tank you want to watch out for; plenty of fumes mixed with lots of oxygen equals high chance of boom-boom. Thinking about this gave him an idea. Just a small going away present for Franz and his goons. As he took the time to rig up the trip wires to an ignition source, he said with a chuckle, "Wow, these guys must really hate me."

Gathering up his last few remaining things, he donned his army coat (laden with compass, flashlight and survival gear), carefully stepped over the trip wire, and leapt from the cargo door to the desert floor.

Taking one last look inside, he drew in a deep breath and sighed. His bunkbed, the collectibles, and every little piece of junk inside had a story behind it. It was a shame he had to leave it all behind.

Worth it, if it helps me get the last few miles back to the Dauntless... back to Maddie.

He was about to head out when he realized he'd almost forgotten his most valuable possession. Carefully negotiating the trip wires, he returned to the cockpit and grabbed the photo of Maddie taped to the dash.

Staring at the crumpled picture (slightly singed at the bottom right corner) he said, "Can't leave without this."

Jumping down from the Hopper's cargo bay and onto the desert floor once more, he tightened his coat around his shoulders for warmth, for it was surprisingly cold in the desert. He leaned into the buffeting winds and started to walk.

About another mile-or-so he encountered an oversized propeller sticking up out of the sand like a gravestone marker. He recognized it immediately... it belonged to *the Dauntless*. It was one of her guidance props.

What's it doing down here?

Farther on, he found a massive sheet of hull plating submerged in the sand. It was scorched, like from an explosion. The wind died down a little, revealing a massive wide-open area for only a few seconds. In that time George saw enough

wreckage to fill a junkyard. Whatever happened here, must have been bad.

Standing on the largest sheet of metal, he kicked sand away with his boot and then, as urgency set in, he fell to his knees and cleared more sand off with his hands. The pit in his stomach grew with each letter he revealed.

D... A... U...

Please... no...

“Dauntless...”

Rising to his feet, he began walking fast. After a few second of this, he began jogging, and then soon broke into a run. Stopping only long enough to inspect each piece of wreckage, he began to piece together the crash in his mind. The vast debris field must have been the P.O.I. (point of impact). What was left of the wounded ship began breaking apart as it sojourned onward, leaving behind this trail of wreckage in its wake.

It's like they were hit by a massive rocket or something, dropping off pieces as they went.

The wind picked up in intensity, forcing him to shield his face with his hand. Plodding forward, holding his scarf tighter over his mouth and nose, he continued onward for the last two miles.

Then, the edge of the sandstorm finally ended and swept over him like a curtain revealing a scene on a stage. Even the

wind had grown tranquil, as though in reverence as to what lay before him.

The Dauntless... at least what was left of her, lay belly landed on the desert floor. Abandoned and broken mid-beam, she was little more than a ruined hulk of her former self.

“Oh no.”

He should have known. After all the locator transponder had showed her position as fixed for nearly the last two years.

How could I have been so stupid?

He had gambled everything on getting here.

Gambled... and lost.