

# Stranger Origins

-A *Stranger World* Story-

Jack  Castle

Castle Books, Inc

CASTLE

*The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. "Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?" he asked.*

*"Begin at the beginning," the King said very gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."*

—LEWIS CARROLL, *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*

P r o l o g u e

# Lisa Burton

"Would you please hold still?"

"I will not."

"You don't want me to carve your face off by accident, do you?"

Senior hologram-engineer, Lisa Burton, activated her hydrostatic-scalpel once more and resumed re-crafting the nose of her most favored creation. Just as the blade was

about to reach its target, her subject abruptly turned her face to the side... for the fifth time.

Lisa sighed, and switched off the scalpel. Removing her safety glasses, she asked, "Now what?"

In a crisp British accent, she replied matter-of-factly, "I dare say, I quite like my nose right the way it is."

Lisa hopped down from her high stool and said, "Well, there's been some uh," Lisa coughed into her fist, "...complaints."

The woman before her wore black knee-high boots, off-white trousers, and a navy-blue, nautical jacket. A black leather pistol belt with spare pouches ensnared her narrow waist. The taller woman arched a high eyebrow down at her and asked cynically, with only the slightest hint of curiosity, "Complaints you say, what sort of complaints?"

Not sure exactly how to respond, Lisa settled for saying, "*The guests* say that you think you're better than them."

Her subject adjusted her naval coat slightly, "I am a Lieutenant in Her Majesty's Navy and second in command of Her Majesty's Airship, *Dauntless*. So, one would think that those sniveling, puerile infants would mind their betters and be grateful every time I bring them back in one piece from another harrowing expedition."

She thought about this some more. “Furthermore, I fail to see what any of that nonsense has to do with the shape of my nose.”

Lisa knew she could easily have shut down the Leftenant’s programming to perform the cosmetic surgery, but in truth, she quite liked these little bouts of banter with the Leftenant. In fact, if an outside observer didn’t know she was a hologram, they might even say the two of them were best friends.

Without warning, a man with a contentious mound of bright-orange hair and a face with more freckles than skin popped up from behind the partition wall and announced, “Hey, Nerd-a-Saurus-Rex, the boss’s-boss’s-boss wants to see you.”

The carrot-top’s name was Cliff Munson, or as the gene slicers down on seventh called him, *Cliff Munchin*’. The latter was usually the more accurate of the two, as Cliff’s dumpy frame was hardly undersized, and he was always eating potato chips or some other vending machine related snack.

Normally, Lisa’s work and rank afforded her a minimum of no less than three floors, but due to last month’s attacks, she had been forced to share her office space with some of the other designers and creationeers.

If that wasn’t bad enough, Cliff Munson was easily her least favorite co-worker. Like most things in Stranger World,

Cliff was a perfect dichotomy in that his work was as brilliant as his lab was an untidy dung heap. He had several degrees from M.I.T., but he gave off the impression of a slovenly dimwit trapped inside the body of an overweight man nearing forty. Cliff had an almost childlike enthusiasm, yet also an incredible mean streak. He was like the neighbor's kid who liked to fry ants under a magnifying glass, all the while laughing about it.

*Still, why would Corporate want to see me?* she wondered. Typically, when a creationeer was called upstairs, it was for a swift termination. *What could I have possibly done?* She realized Cliff was still watching her with a bemused look upon his face.

Refusing to let *him* see her sweat, but failing to keep her voice from wavering, she asked, "Do you know what they want?"

Cliff must have picked up on her non-verbal cue, because he appeared more tickled than ever when he answered, "Dunno, lab-rat. They didn't say."

Numbly, Lisa nodded. "Okay, thank you."

Cliff was always calling her names like that: bookworm, lab-rat, Vampira. Unfortunately, most of them were fairly accurate. She almost never saw the sun, usually arrived at work long before everyone else, and left long after the sun went down. Also, she had taken her current employment

straight out of college eight years ago. The j-o-b was so demanding, she rarely had time for a social life.

Cliff shuffled around the partition dividing their workstations in his ridiculous foam slippers. "I don't know what you did, but it must be pretty bad for you to get called *upstairs*."

Munch-Munch-Munch

As usual, Cliff was loudly snacking away and leaving behind enough crumbs to fill a pastry shop. Deep down, what she wanted to say was, *Hey Cliff, in case you can't read the ka-bizillion signs, this entire floor is clearly designated as a clean and sterilized area. So, here's an idea, whaddya say, now and forever, you leave your germy crumbs out of the tissue sequencer?* But, because she had worked with Cliff long enough to know it would be only wasted breath, she chose to avoid confrontation, and settled for saying, "Okay, Cliff, thanks for letting me know."

*The Leftenant would've socked him a good one*, she thought, *and even now the Leftenant was arching an eyebrow toward her as if to ask why she wasn't doing that very thing.*

Lisa whispered to her creation, in reproach, "Not you, too."

The Leftenant straightened her nautical coat with a firm swift tug, stuck her untouched nose into the air, and re-

sponded in equal volume. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I didn't say so much as a word."

MUNCH-CRUNCH-MUNCH...

Cliff swallowed noisily, nearly choking, and said, "Hey, I've been meaning to ask you something."

*Oh goodie, look who's still here*, the Lieutenant managed to communicate to her with only the merest of glances.

Cliff must've missed it for he asked, "Why Lieutenant? That doesn't even make sense."

As Lisa returned the scalpel to its proper place, along with all the other tools in her tool tray lined up at precise right angles, she fought down a sigh and explained. "The word *Leftenant* is an archaic spelling of *Lieutenant*, which is actually derived from the Latin words, *locum tenens*. When literally translated, it means, *taking the place of*."

MUNCH-MUNCH-CRUNCH.

"Yeah... if that's the case, then how come that's not the way we spell it now?"

As Lisa removed her gloves and disposed of them properly, she replied, "The only reason we spell it wrong is Charles Merriam and Noah Webster, of Merriam and Webster Dictionary, chose the spelling that *sounded* more correct over the actual, original French word."

"Oh, alright, alright," Cliff said, and continued munching away like a dim-witted dolt.

Thinking about the V.P. waiting for her, she began switching off her work station, and thought, *I really don't have time for this.*

Tossing his reddish curls toward the Lieutenant, Cliff asked, "So how come she looks like you?"

This was preposterous of course. Lisa was well aware of how many creationeers would build biologicals in their own image, but Lisa refused to stoop down to such narcissistic levels. Firing back, she said, "What are you talking about? She doesn't look a thing like me."

Cliff was about to inhale another chip, froze, smiled and said, "Sure she does, she might be a little taller, a bit thinner, have perfect skin and corn silk hair, but in the end, she's still you."

Cliff was being absurd, and judging by the Lieutenant's face, she thought so too. The Lieutenant was 5'7," while she was a mere 5'3." The Lieutenant had long silky fibers of serene yellow hair, whereas hers was an ordinary dirty blond.

Lisa smiled politely and rose from her chair. "You're being ridiculous."

Cliff inhaled another handful of chips, and laughed, spewing crumbs everywhere. "Whatever you say, Lab-ra-doodle." He brushed the crumbs off his hoodie and onto the floor. Disappearing around the cubicle wall, she saw he left behind another trail of crumbs in his wake.



*Ugh. Where's my mini-vac?*

Realizing she didn't have time to clean up after Cliff now, she finished powering down her lab. After verifying that she had saved her work, Lisa turned off her primary monitor and on cue, the Lieutenant also vanished.

She was about to leave her station entirely when she noticed a framed black-and-white photograph hanging on her wall that was slightly out of place. The photo depicted the famous jungle explorer (and distant ancestor, thank you very much), Sir Richard Francis Burton. Sir Richard Francis had been a member of Britain's prestigious Royal Geographical Society. He had spoken no less than 29 languages, and was predominantly known for exploring Asia, Africa and the Americas in the mid-nineteenth century.

Straightening out the tilted photo with one forefinger, Lisa glanced below the frame at the antique knife displayed in a handsome glass case. The dull silver blade was about the size and length of a common English carving knife. It had a cylindrical-brown wooden handle, with a metal cross-guard to protect the user's hand.

"Better shake a leg, Lab-monkey," came Cliff's disembodied voice from his workstation. "Hell hath no fury like a V.P. kept waiting."

As much as she hated to admit it, Cliff was right; she needed to get moving. It wasn't every day a senior manager

wanted to have a little chat. Passing Cliff's workstation on her way out, she noticed he was performing another touch up on one of the *Fairy Maze* monarchs. "Hey, didn't you just give that model a refresh last week?"

Cliff snorted, "Yeah I did, but her Ladyship here thought she could use a little touch up. Can you imagine that? She actually found her way down here, and when security nabbed her on twelve, she demanded a..." he changed his accent to a haughty woman with a Scottish accent, "bit o' sprucing up, post haste."

Lisa studied the monarch sitting there poised and holding up one of those creepy porcelain masks at the end of a thin rod. The analytics in Lisa's bi-optics displayed the biological's designator in floating white letters over her head: LADY WELLINGTON. The way Cliff was always fawning all over her Ladyship, he might as well have been her personal manservant.

Still, Lisa was hardly surprised by her Ladyship's behavior. Lady Wellington was a top-of-the-line TK-12 series, and by design, she was programmed to be as narcissistic as she was cunning. "Yep. Lady Wellington is a wagonload of mischief-makers," she managed.

*See Lucifer, I can mix it up,* she thought inwardly.

Lucifer was Lisa's cat.

## STRANGER ORIGINS

He was so named for two reasons. The first being, he seemed to go out of his way to make her life a living *torment*: peeing on (and subsequently killing) all of her plants, shredding the curtains, scratching up the sofa and anything else he could get his wrathful claws into. The second reason Lucifer was so named, was because he didn't even like her, only allowing himself to be petted on the rarest of occasions.

Snapping her out of her daydream, Cliff complained, "They say it won't be long before these things are ruling the world. I say they're practically doing it right now."

At this, Lady Wellington's eyes opened abruptly, flicked over Cliff for a moment, as though processing what he had just said, and then, realizing she was being watched, immediately screwed them shut tight again.

Cliff, busy with his paints, had been none the wiser.

Seeing Her Ladyship's behavior, Lisa thought, *That was kinda weird*. Of course, she had bigger things to worry about than an eavesdropping biological. *Maybe I'll do a diagnostic on her learning behavior program when I get back*.

Lisa was about to ponder the incident further until she realized she had no idea where she was going. The V.P. responsible for overseeing her work was well known for almost never being in his office. "Do you happen to know where *he* is?"

Cliff smiled. It didn't look good on him, more like a dopey grin on an evil, yellow-toothed chimp. "I dunno. *He* didn't say. The usual place I suspect."

*Why'd I even bother even asking?* She tapped the control device placed inside the bracelet on her wrist. A map of all the park lands soon appeared in front of her. Of course, no one other than the wearer of her glasses could see the translucent map hovering before her. "Show me, Mark McCormick."

The ear implant in her ear commanded, "Please specify title."

Lisa pursed her lips. This automated request was obviously something Mark had programmed himself. He had been recently promoted to V.P. and no one could locate him by his name unless they specified his new title first. "Please locate Senior Vice-President, Mark McCormick."

Even before she completed her sentence a flashing yellow star appeared on the map.

*Of course, he'd be there.*

As she departed, Cliff sang, "Good luck, Burton."

Leaving Cliff, and his eavesdropping Ladyship behind, Lisa took the L-Tube beneath several lands, including Arctic Adventures, the town of Havenport, and the Zombie Apocalypse.

While traveling on the train, never once did she gaze up from her holographic data pad and notice any of the other passengers around her. The interior of the tube car could've been filled to the brim or totally empty, and she would've never been any the wiser. If the other passengers could see her holographic schematic (which they couldn't), they would see she was busy working on integrating the Lieutenant into the newly upgraded airship, *the Dauntless*.

Without actually hearing the stop announcement, she automatically departed the tube car and headed for the elevators, which would take her topside. She would have preferred to take the tunnels *all* the way to Mark's location, but after last week's terrorist attack, a large section of tunnels was still under repair. So, she had to cross through some of the park and navigate through throngs of park guests.

Glancing up from her holographic display with only merest of glances, she reached the elevator just in time to see it enclose a bunch of suits inside. Before the elevator doors closed completely, a slender man out in front (who liked to give his hair a little flip over to one side) mouthed the word, 'Sorry.'

"Thanks a lot, pal," she grumped aloud.

Spotting a stairwell nearby, she ascended it (in heels no less) and lightly pushed on the crash-bar that would transport her to the outside world.

## CASTLE

The blinding daylight outside washed over her, melting her eyes out of their sockets and consumed her human flesh right down to her very soul.

*Cliff's right. I really do need to get out more.*

JACKCASTLEBOOKS.COM

# Welcome to Atlantis

*Oh, pooper-scooper.*

Unfortunately, the particular door Lisa chose opened up into an Atlantean bathhouse. It was filled with elderly, half-naked men loafing around in bath towels, having a good steamy soak. As she made her way past the sweltering baths, she averted her eyes from their unmentionables. Unfortunately, when she did, her eyes came to rest on the *extremely* inappropriate reliefs on the walls, based on actual renderings found in the similar ill-fated city of Santorini.

*Gross.*

One of the hairiest patrons (a sweaty middle-aged man growing a roundish belly and ridiculous goat-tee) tapped his thigh loudly and bellowed, “Hey, slave girl, I think I need a

*massage.*” As she passed him, he sluggishly reached out to grab her, but she simply increased her pace slightly and avoided his meaty grasp.

*I really do loathe park guests, I absolutely do.*

Of course, Corporate was always eager to point out that without them, she (along with everyone else) would be out of a job.

Laying a hand over her souring stomach, she briskly exited the disgusting bathhouse in dire need of an eye-wash station.

*Fluroantimonic acid wouldn't be enough.*

Outside on the streets of Atlantis, Lisa's eyes were re-adjusting to the harsh sunlight when a wagon piled high with barrels of salt and fish nearly ran her over. As she leapt nimbly out of the way, the wagon's driver cursed in Atlantean, “Make way for your betters.” The made-up language was a combination of Greek and Italian, only simplified phonetically so guests could learn and assimilate it more quickly.

Traveling in the opposite direction was a passing patrol of Atlantean soldiers, who nearly trampled her beneath their sandaled feet. Dodging out of the patrol's way, she almost tripped over a brood of chickens that appeared out of nowhere, clucking at her feet. *Do chickens cluck when they're not laying eggs?*



## STRANGER ORIGINS

Moving further into the street of the busy little seaside town, she encountered the smells of fresh bread and searing meats permeating the air. Her eyes drank in the vast array of richly-colored fabrics: brightly dyed togas and cleverly-painted curtains hanging over merchants' tables. Exquisite tapestries adorned every wall.

The last time she had been inside the new park was a week before its official grand opening. Lisa had purposely avoided the opening months, knowing full well it would be crowded with only the wealthiest and most influential people on the planet, all of whom acted as such and demanded only the highest level of attention and service.

But now that she was completely immersed in this fully-functional world, brimming with the most cutting-edge biologicals (like the aged beggar on the street corner collecting alms or the dozens of merchants yelling for passing patrons to buy their wares), even she had to admit, it was easy to get caught up in the excitement of it all.

*Atlantis, of all the places we could have built. I guess Corporate was incapable of coming up with an original idea.*

This was true. The creationeers had exhausted every mythology and fairy tale ever written. *That's what happens when you have a theme park littering every city, continent, and body of water on the planet.* Point-of-fact, Stranger World owned more surface of the moon than all the other

## CASTLE

lunar property holders combined. Even though Lisa had never actually been to any of the theme parks on the moon, her work certainly had. So, with all that in mind, it was no surprise to Lisa that they had to *dig up* the ancient story of the doomed city, *pun intended*. Lisa smiled at her own joke.

Contrary to myth, the town was laid out in a traditional grid pattern, with the overall architecture being a mix of Mesoamerican and Greco-Roman. Themed houses, restaurants and shops lined both sides of the street. Marble statues of Olympian deities decorated every street corner, with lots of sea inspired motifs like seahorse fountains and dolphin statues scattered nearly everywhere.

It was easy to become lost in, and because Atlantis was the newest Stranger World theme park on the planet, the streets were so crowded with park guests, she could barely see the polygonal stone paved streets beneath their feet.

Fortunately, she had seen it all long before the first guests arrived to Stranger World's newest attraction; for she had personally known one of the senior architects (he always did loathe the designator "creationeer"). Even now, as she weaved her way through the town's bustling streets, it was easy for her to imagine him walking by her side, as he often did, regaling her with the island's infamous past.

"According to the Greek philosopher Plato, the fabled kingdom of Atlantis was supposedly a continent somewhere

in the mid-Atlantic. It was home to an advanced civilization and struck by a cataclysmic event that sank the entire island beneath the sea in a single day and night.”

During those years of the Atlantis creation, Lisa didn't mind all the scaffolding and busy work crews as they explored the large villas adorned with countless splendors and works of art. In a lot of ways, those years had been the happiest of her life, namely because of said handsome young architect.

Lisa slowed her walk as she passed the restaurant where they used to meet for lunch with their bagged lunches, as the restaurant had not opened yet. She then passed the Minotaur's maze that he had personally designed and was so proud of. The entrance was framed by two colossal statues of minotaurs, and the marquee overhead read, “The Minotaur's Labyrinth of DEATH!” Lisa knew she was far too timid to attempt such an attraction.

Even backstage, during the testing phases, the Minotaur biological was far beyond terrifying. She never did understand people's desire to have the beejezus scared out of them. When quickening her pace past the second Minotaur statue, she spied something farther up ahead that made her heart ache a little. It was the magnificently alive, ornately sculpted water fountain...where he proposed.

## CASTLE

*Nope. Stop it!* her maternal inner-voice chided her. *Don't do this to yourself, Lisa. This is why you don't come up here anymore. This is why you've buried yourself in your work and haven't walked these streets, not since...*

Lisa still tried to shake herself free of the past. *Besides, it's not like you were ever really interested in this place.* She really wasn't sure why so many people seemed to LOVE Atlantis. Of course, the tourists do partake in a lot more than marriage proposals.

Atlantis was a fascinating legend, on that she could agree, but archeologists had never found any evidence of an actual city with this name. She chalked it up to being in the same category as Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and aliens crashing in Roswell, New Mexico. Atlantis wasn't real. It was just a story told to a guy (named Solon she thinks), by a band of Egyptians, who told a guy, who told another guy, who happened to be a philosopher named Plato.

What Lisa did find fascinating, however, were facts. The fact was, many scientists now believed the source behind the legend was the remnants of a doomed little island named Santorini. In approximately 1620 BC, this tiny island in the Aegean Sea was devastated by the second largest volcano in history. Just like the Atlantis legend's cataclysmic demise, the major seaport town on Santorini (home of a thriving Minoan civilization) succumbed to the most powerful explosive event

ever witnessed. The eruption ejected up to four times as much ash fall as the well-recorded eruption by Krakatoa by in 1883.

As though reading her thoughts, a slight tremor rippled through the streets, nearly knocking her off her feet.

*Oh fudge. Is it Friday already?*

In the distance, a massive volcano loomed over the condemned city like an Atlantean Titan. Corporate had decided it was a Friday when the *real* Minoan eruption occurred for purposes of increasing weekend profits. Creationeers produced all the ideas for it, including when several million tons of lava to go spewing over the doomed denizens of Santorini, enveloping the bodies of nearly every last inhabitant, forever petrifying them.

Lisa quickly checked the courtyard calendar where the days of the week were listed: Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn and Sun. *Yikes, today is Venus, The Day of Reckoning.*

Her fiancée's ghost reappeared beside her wearing his lopsided grin and saying, "Better shake a leg, darling. You *don't* want to be topside when that thing goes off." She smiled inwardly at the recollection of other visitations. He was always saying goofy little colloquialisms like that.

Joshua's ghost soon vanished again. Funny, how she had been seeing him around the different parks more and more

lately. It was as if he was just keeping his eye on her. She had hoped the worst of her grieving was behind her.

*Maybe it's not.*

The attraction of Atlantis was designed to be a great deal more than simply visiting and living amongst the doomed citizens of the Atlantean colony. No, it was crazy more.

For the maximum experience, guests paid for the entire week, selecting one of several fees. How high their station in their faux life would be depended on how much money they wanted to spend. Lisa had to keep in mind this was the newest park, so prices were at an all-time record high. For example, for \$42,000.00, a man, or woman, could spend their week as a slave, a shop keeper or even an Atlantean soldier. They were expected to do menial chores and serve their masters, whether they were human guests, or biological characters.

At the opposite end of the price list, for a quarter of a million dollars, guests could spend the week as a senator, Atlantean General or some other high-ranking official. For a cool million, a person could be worshipped as a god.

When she had first heard about the prices, she thought surely no one would pay such ludicrous amounts. She was shocked to learn the waiting list had already surpassed five years out.

## STRANGER ORIGINS

Still, that wasn't the main point of the experience that everybody was talking about. The original idea was based on Dr. Elizabeth Meadow's famous theory that if you study a person for one week you can pretty much predict how they are going to live their entire lives. The goal was to examine your life in the six short days you have left to you in Atlantis and flourish and prosper as much as possible. Those who did their best and rose in rank, or collected the most money, or saved the most lives, were awarded prizes in the form of credits that could be redeemed at any resort, restaurant, or gift shop. Corporate had even come up with a nifty slogan: *"Our Theme Parks aren't just Themed. They're Therapeutic!"*

On the final day of each weekly guest's visit, instead of drowning park guests beneath a tsunami of waves, it was decided that a giant volcano would erupt and shroud the citizens of the entire town in hot molten lava and petrify them perfectly in place. This of course was an illusion created with special foam that hardened for only a few seconds. Before it dissolved, the guest's petrified form was scanned by multiple camera angles, so each visitor could go home with an extremely detailed replica of their own petrified corpse. Depending on their budget, they could purchase their petrified corpses in miniature, or all the way up to a life-size statue, or any size in-between. That way, they could stare at their statue on their desk, or in the corner of their house or

garden, and reflect on how they felt and what they had learned.

After being open for only three weeks, rich moguls and movie stars were already telling the world how their guest experience at Atlantis and impacted their lives forever. Of course, most of these claims were paid endorsements arranged by Corporate.

Lisa had never actually been topside during any of the eruptions, as all rehearsals had been conducted behind closed walls, and were strictly off limits to unessential personnel. Her understanding was that the special effects (FX) were quite good and most convincing. Ever since the new section opened, she stayed away and wanted nothing more to do with it for her own personal reasons.

“You there!”

Lisa lifted her gaze from the polygonal stoned street to an oafish merchant whose robes did little to conceal his girth. “Whence thou came?” *he slurred.*

Lisa didn’t need the optic scanners built into her glasses to know that the portly man before her was a human guest and not an engineered denizen of the city; his horrible Atlantean accent was more than proof enough for that. Lisa also didn’t need her optical-identifiers to know that the extremely beautiful and well-endowed servant girl hanging off his arm was a biological. *5<sup>th</sup> Generation. Hmmm... That’s pretty low*



*given that this is our newest park, she thought. Must've been a rush job to meet the demand.*

In perfect, classic Atlantean the woman asked, "What strange attire is it that you are wearing?"

Lisa gazed down and examined her own clothes. *Oh, farfegnugen! I forgot to change into a costume down in the tunnels.* As if she weren't in enough trouble already, walking around a themed land *not* in costume was about as serious offense as any employee could make.

"Excuse me," she said pushing past them, and then remembered the word for excuse me in Atlantean too late. Talking out of character was equally frowned upon. All employees were strictly forbidden from entering any land that they didn't have at least a rudimentary grasp of the language, even made up ones.

Checking her holographic map out in front of her glasses, she spotted Mark's location. Naturally, he'd be at the town's most important building, The Temple of Poseidon.

In a fusion of Greek and Atlantean architectural ideas, the temple itself was on a high podium surrounded on all four sides by a wide series of grooved columns. To gain entrance one had to ascend an imposing set of steps that ensnared a white marble altar on a travertine base that supported an impressive golden sundial.

Checking the time, Lisa thought, *Is it really 4 pm? Why did it take me so long to get here?*

As she climbed the steps, she heard herself huffing and puffing with exertion and thought, *I really need to work out more than three times a week.*

Reaching the top, she was forced to slide to a stop because a biological dressed as an Atlantean guard blocked the entrance. Spotting her, he fiercely commanded, "You there, halt!"

According to the script in such cases, Lisa had three choices before her: Bribe the guards with earned coinage, outwit them (which took too much time), or fight them.

Short on time, and checking to see no one was watching, Lisa field kicked the Atlantean sentry between the legs, and the man went down. Two other Atlantean guards stepped from the shadows, already drawing their swords.

Lisa immediately recognized the soldier's advance as stunt choreography programed by Billy Colter (the stunt coordinator assigned to Atlantis). Billy used to let her spar with the biologicals to work out any bugs in the fight scenes. For someone who had trouble finding time to hit the gym, it was not only great exercise, but it was also a wonderful diversion from work.

Remembering the fight choreography, and without even gazing up from her data pad, she easily stepped to the side

of the guard's thrusting sword. She then squatted down and ducked under a second brigand's blade swinging over her head from behind. When the first soldier went to shove his sword through her stomach a second time, she dodged nimbly out of the way, again without even looking up, causing the first guard to skewer his fellow soldier.

The optics in her glasses for the safety protocols were in place, but for some weird reason, they were set at the highest level (meaning the guards could still break her arm or stab her in a non-vital area of the body; all of which could be fixed in minutes with modern medical technology.) Lisa knew each guest could select their preferred threat level, which ranged from a rated yellow experience (no pain or physical injury), all the way to a rated purple experience (intense pain, and susceptible to an injury that could put a guest in the hospital for weeks).

Despite the higher combat level setting, Lisa wasn't afraid. She started to circle around the mortally wounded guard, when to her surprise, the stabbing soldier planted one foot on his dead companion's pelvic bone and pulled his sword back out of his abdomen. Blood now painting his blade, he came at her again.

*That's new*, she thought, but dodged a series of sword swipes that were another familiar combination. As she did

so, she noticed the first sentry, down with a field kick, was now climbing to his feet. *I really don't have time for this.*

As both soldiers encircled her again, she uttered the word, "Turducken," and both soldiers immediately froze into place. This was a stop-command the technicians had decided amongst themselves to program. More than any other reason, it was for saving time when moving across the parks. The *stop-word* only lasted a few minutes, so she quickly squeezed past them.

As she ducked under the angry-faced guard's outstretched sword, she said politely, "Excuse me," even though they couldn't hear her, and she remembered the words in Atlantean again too late. The guard, a bulbous-nosed fellow with a wicked glare, seemed none too happy about not being able to move more than his eyes at her.

Shuddering involuntarily, she thought, *Wow. That's a little too real, even for me.* Spotting the entrance to the temple, she steadied her nerves and, *Now, to find Mr. McCormick.*

She wasn't looking forward to the meeting. Unlike Mark McCormick, her last boss had been a great man, and an even greater mentor. He had personally taken her under his wing for the first seven years of her employment and helped her initiate the Lieutenant Program when no one else believed a young intern like her could accomplish such a daunting task. But like all the other good men, he had been drafted, and

## STRANGER ORIGINS

like all good soldiers, he had been killed in the stupid, stupid war that had already claimed over thirty-million lives worldwide.

JACKCASTLEBOOKS.COM