

STRANGER REALM

JACK  CASTLE

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“Who in the World Am I? Ah, that’s the Great Puzzle.”

-Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Prologue

The Zombie-Pirate King

Two undead crewmembers dragged a lump of badly beaten flesh down a set of rotten, creaking stairs. A most unnatural mist crept down the stairwell behind them, like a wedding train trailing behind a bride. The lower part of each crewmember’s trousers were soaked with algae from slogging through the fetid swamp water surrounding their lair outside. And yet, the captive’s clothes seemed untouched, as though the very swamp wanted nothing to do with the impetuous imp between them.

The soulless deckhands dropped the smartly-dressed man before the darkened throne of the Zombie-Pirate King. It pleased the king to see the imp this way, bound by wrist manacles and leg irons, all of which were interconnected by heavy chains to a thick metal band around his waist.

The king leaned forward on his throne. As he emerged from the shadows, his figure took shape and the phosphorus orbs he had for eyes dripped with a glowing-green haze whenever he moved. He wore a long, worn, and tattered red coat, and his bejeweled hands were as skeletal as his face was gaunt. Perhaps most peculiar were the shrunken heads interwoven within his black and smoke-grey beard--and legend had it that if one stared at their faces long enough, one might even see them blink, for the victims were still alive. Like any pirate Captain worth his salt, the Zombie-Pirate King had a wooden peg leg, but in place of a talking parrot, he carried around in his hand a skull with equally glowing-green orbs for eyes. "Lamppost Man," the Zombie-Pirate King growled, his voice betraying his vehemence. "You Netherworld scum. I'm going to grind your bones into powder beneath the heel of my boot."

The Lamppost Man weakly raised his head and gazed around at the dark, dank interior of the lair around him. The King now saw the ramshackle shipwreck through the imp's eyes: a torn pirate flag tacked to the wall behind him with rusty swords, cobwebs adorning every surface, leafy vines creeping in through every crack from the putrid swamp surrounding them. The treasure chest, spilling with gold coins and precious jewels did little to offset the grim setting.

The Lamppost Man's eyes skimmed over the crew who had fared no better: drowned seamen with decaying flesh, who appeared as though they had only just recently risen from their watery graves. One zombie-pirate wearing an eyepatch drank from a bottle of rum; most of its contents seeping out of his lower stomach. The Lamppost Man then raised his gaze all the way to where feral bats hung from the topmost spars of the wrecked ship. Yes, the ship, the crew, had always been wretched, dreaded pirates, but by the same token, they had all surely seen better days.

“Well?” the Zombie-Pirate King demanded.

A frail grin flashed across the Lamppost Man's face. “I simply love what you've done with the place.”

In an icy voice, the Zombie-Pirate King bellowed to his crew, “Boys, I say we tear the imp asunder!”

The crew thundered their approval.

As the echo of their reply died down, the Lamppost Man simply lowered his head back down and smiled smugly at the floorboards. In a quiet but firm voice he asked, “Do you know why they call me *The Lamppost Man*?”

The King's first officer, a bloated corpse, swollen with seawater barely encapsulated by liquefying flesh, barked abruptly, “I thought it was on account you are a light to the world.” As he said this, he painted the air with his palms and

the motley crew erupted in voracious laughter. Other zombie-pirates joined in on the mockery. One of the more decayed zombie-pirates, covered in faded tattoos, laughed so hard his lower jaw fell off, which of course only caused more bellowing amusement. The zombie-pirate, minus-jaw, was so irritated by his crewmates that he promptly withdrew the musket tucked in his sash and shot the nearest pirate. His target, an emaciated corpse smoking an opium pipe, flipped over the barrel he was sitting on and landed on the other side with his legs splayed up in the air. This only caused more mirth, which in-turn led to more fighting.

The Zombie-Pirate King ignored all of this and continued to stare at the prisoner who merely waited for the revelry to pass by taking in the rotten souls around him, each festooned with all manner of rusty weaponry and black powder guns. The King thought: *It's almost as though the imp is sizing us up. The audacity! As though he might actually have a chance taking them all on, and bound, no less!*

“Be silent, you scurvy dogs!” the Zombie-Pirate King roared, and the laughter stopped as abruptly as a screaming man beneath a guillotine.

What happened next was impossible.

The Lamppost Man stood up in the most unnatural way. His crumpled form unfolded as though an unseen cameraman had played the entire scene in reverse. Now standing on his feet, he lifted his hands up as high as his chains would allow, and like a Vegas Magician performing a neat magic trick, he brought his hands swiftly down, and all his metal bounds clattered to the deck boards.

Silence.

“Seize him!” the Pirate King thundered.

His loyal crew uttered a battle cry and attacked in unison. Before the zombie-pirates could reach the Lamppost Man, an umbrella appeared in his hands. He brought the tip of it swiftly down upon the ground.

The shockwave blew each crewmember backward to the farthest part of the cabin. Only the Zombie-Pirate King remained standing, as though the Lamppost Man had intended it that way all along out of some small semblance of respect.

The King, never one to back down from a fight, stepped down from his throne, his peg leg thumping on the deck boards. Unsheathing his cutlass, he spat, “If it’s a fight you want, Lamy, it’s a fight you will get. On that I guarantee.”

More zombie-pirates flooded into the room and those who had been stunned were already staggering to their feet the way zombies often do, slow but assured.

The Lamppost Man held up his umbrella in one hand as though it were a pin-less grenade that would go off the moment he dropped it.

This gave the pirates pause, and none dared move forward.

Dragging out the silence the Lamppost Man said, “The reason they call me Lamppost Man, the real reason, is because, like the vast number of lampposts of this world, I am many.” He allowed this to sink in before continuing. “Kill me, and I will only send three more. Kill those, and I will send hundreds; after that, thousands. I will never stop. Never. You see for me, time is nothing more than a luxury I have faithfully endured.”

The first of the crew took a step forward, but the Zombie-Pirate King held a hand up stopping him.

The room remained frozen.

The Zombie-Pirate King frowned, sheathed his cutlass, and in a cold voice asked, “What is it you want, demon?”

The Lamppost Man’s eyes brightened and his shark-toothed smile widened exponentially, far more than any mortal was ever capable of doing. He then clasped his white-

gloved hands together, held them in prayer to his lips before answering...

“You see? There you go. That’s all I wanted; to simply state a humble request.”

“Then get on with it!” the Zombie-Pirate King snarled, retaking his throne.

The Lamppost Man, still smiling broadly, raised his eyebrows a bit and said, “Quite right. Well then, I’m looking for a girl.”

A grin flashed across the grossly fat first officer’s face, but the Zombie-Pirate King shot him a look of annoyance, and the officer held his tongue. The King thought furiously, *That one has long outlived his usefulness*, and then a sadder, more sobering thought, *as have we all*.

The Zombie-Pirate-King dropped into his seat, threw his good leg over the armrest of his throne, and sighed. “Yes, we know all about the bounty on the girl. You and everyone else in the Twelve Kingdoms is looking for the little brat.”

The Lamppost Man took in a quick breath and smiled patiently. “Oh. No, no, no, no. It’s not the girl I’m searching for.”

“Spit it out then, you demon, I command you!” the Zombie-Pirate King roared.

The Lamppost Man stared at him with that smug smile of his.

“It’s not the girl I’m looking for. It’s her mother, Tessa.”

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Chapter 1

SEAT 19A

FASTEN SEAT BELT WHILE SEATED

These were the words George Stapleton first saw when he opened his eyes.

As he climbed the stairs of consciousness, and the insanely loud buzzing noises in his ears finally stopped, he felt a cool breeze flow across his stiff, inert body. Sitting up, albeit slowly, George found himself slumped against the window of a comfy passenger chair of a commercial jet.

Body still not quite responsive, his arms feeling as though they were attached to oars paddling a thick ocean, he pulled his elbows inward. Propping himself up a bit, which was all he could manage, he peered over the passenger seats in front of him. All he saw was a sea of empty seats in front of him. Although it was possible that the other passengers were slumped down in their seats as he had been. By his rough guess-timation, he was sitting in middle class, port-side, in the cabin of a commercial flight.

I'm on a plane? How'd I get on a plane?

By the looks of the interior, it had to be at least a 747 double decker. His elbow popped painfully as he extended his arm to pull out the plastic card in the pocket attached to the seat in front of him. According to the laminated cardstock, he was aboard a 380 Airbus that seated over eight hundred passengers.

Wow, this is a crazy big plane.

As he returned the cardstock, he drunkenly became aware of his own attire. He was dressed in his civvies: khaki pants, hiking boots and a t-shirt. He had been sleeping on his thick maroon overshirt, which was wrapped up in a ball and serving as a comfy pillow. That was the moment he realized... *It had all been a stupid dream.* His thoughts swirled about in his head like a Kansas tornado in the *Wizard of Oz*. The Lamppost Man, Lady Wellington, the hover barge, hologram Lieutenant, and that idiot, Barnaby, had all been a part of some elaborate nightmare. Maddie, his daughter, who hadn't really been his daughter, but in the end had become some sort of super biological weapon, had died saving his sorry butt. All of it had been nothing more than a dream.

Maddie wasn't dead.

She was home with her mom getting ready to celebrate her ninth birthday. Just to make sure, he turned his head to

the side. The pain in his neck was excruciating. He stared at the empty seat beside him. Regardless of these comforting thoughts, the absence of Maddie sitting next to him was still as solemn as any grave.

Head still turned to the side, and firmly stuck there for the moment, George could see an overweight man across the aisle with a walrus mustache slumbering soundlessly.

Barnaby!

Or was it? Steadying himself on the armrest George blinked several times, and Barnaby was replaced by just another slumbering passenger; this one wearing a bowler hat down over his scrunched eyes, a green plaid suit, and round-rimmed glasses. A black umbrella and brown leather attaché case that had seen better days, lay in the seat beside him.

Despite the odd appearance of a man George would quantify as an *English Gentleman*, the dozing passenger allayed his fears somewhat. *A dream.* One mother of a dream to end all dreams, sure, but a dream, nonetheless.

Where am I headed? A plane this large has to be a transatlantic flight. In the center of his mind, he began to grasp tidbits of reality. *I'm going home, from the war; which means Maddie isn't dead, and I didn't miss her ninth birthday after all.* As he thought of Tessa baking one of her famous themed birthday cakes, this year's theme was going

to be “Alice in Wonderland,” he was beginning to feel like Jimmy Stewart when he woke up at the end of, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” *What was Jimmy’s character’s name again? Oh yeah, George Bailey. Huh, what a happy co-inky-dink.*

The cool air from the vent overhead caused him to shiver. As fast as his stiff muscles would allow, he sat up a bit higher in his chair, shook the wrinkles out of his overshirt, and slipped it back on; the thick wool fabric warmed him almost immediately. From this higher vantage point he could see the other heads slightly above each headrest a bit more clearly; --all dozing as he had been.

The flight was quiet, and other than the strong hum emanating from the overhead air vents, he didn’t hear any other noise.

Dorothy’s tornado in his mind began to form once more.

George also noted the blinds were closed, all of them.

Why, there’s nothing eerie about that, Georgie-boy, Jimmy Stewart’s calming voice seemed to say. Of course Jimmy was right. Typically on long flights, passengers sack out after dinner and a movie. George’s mind wandered listlessly, the stewardesses, er... flight attendants... *isn’t that what they’re called now?* The year of 2012, when secretaries became administrative assistants, and janitors became

sanitation engineers. Any-who, the stewardesses... flight attendants... *darn it!*... would turn up the cool air after a heavy meal, dim the lighting, and watch all the passengers drop off to La-La-Land.

So what was bothering him?

Then it hit him. The plane...it wasn't moving. He would know after all, he was an Air Force Rescue helicopter pilot. Okay, okay, he was only a reservist who was normally a full time history professor, but still, he knew enough to know when an aircraft was grounded or not.

Although his body was slow to respond, George found if he concentrated hard enough he could move his head from the unoccupied seat next to him to the outside window. The blind was closed, as were the rest of them.

Still feeling sluggish, George focused, lifted his hand and grabbed the lip of the plastic visor covering the window between thumb and forefinger. He hesitated. His inner voice (a.k.a. Jimmy Stewart) started talking to him and said, '*Hey buddy-ole'-pal, sure you want to do that? Don't you want to enjoy the bliss of not knowing a little longer? Don't you want to wallow in sweet ignorance? What's the rush?*'

George *did* want to wallow in sweet ignorance a little longer. He did want to believe he didn't die in a helicopter explosion, and was, in fact, on his way home from

Afghanistan to his wife and daughter to celebrate Maddie's birthday in their little seaside cottage on the coast of Florida.

George raised the visor like a curtain to a show.

He'd hoped to see clouds floating languidly by...or maybe the runway of an airport--any airport would do. London, New York, D.C., he didn't really care, just as long as it was a normal airport, with planes taxiing down runways, luggage cars running to and fro, maybe even a passenger ramp extending toward the plane.

Unfortunately for George, he didn't get to see any of those things.

Instead, outside his window, the face of a giant, oversized sunflower leered back at him. The flower was so tall its face was level with him and the other passengers, and was about the size of one of those plastic kiddie pools.

"Has to be a fake," he mused aloud, and did not like the sound of his own shaky voice.

'I warned you,' Jimmy's voice said as it trailed away.

George peered around the giant sunflower. Hundreds more like it surrounded the wing and beyond, all of them swaying gently in a slight breeze. As disturbing as that was, the sunflower had a human face; one contorted in agony. It was as though some Medusian monster had placed a poor soul there to wilt for all eternity. Presently, Mr. Flower-face's

eyes were firmly closed. George was certain that at any moment its eyes were going to flash open. Before it could, his hand quickly reached up and pulled the visor closed.

The familiar nausea in his stomach returned. His head began reeling in Dorothy's tornado once more. Staring at all the slumped heads on the plane George was now forced to wonder if the other passengers were sleeping... or something else.

He was back. Back in a place where massive barges dominated the sky, back where gargoyles wore butler's uniforms and ate cats, and back where fake versions of his daughter were in actuality, deadly I.E.D.'s.

To stop his head from spinning completely out of control, he stared at the dead monitor imbedded in the back of the seat in front of him.

It seemed to help.

As the world finally began to slow down, letters began to appear, one at a time, on the blank monitor in front of him. They were two words that rocked him to the core.

H-I D-A-D-D-Y

Chapter 2

George Explores the Plane

“Maddie?”

George stared at the letters on the monitor in front of him, which even now were beginning to fade away.

Was it really Maddie?

How could that be? The explosion from Lady Wellington’s hover barge had been massive, there was no way she could have survived. But that little girl had been a fake Maddie. What if that message had come from the real Maddie? Whether either case was true, he had no idea.

George scanned the interior of the plane once more. Other than the Gentleman in the Edwardian suit sleeping in his seat across the aisle, he still couldn’t fully see any of the other passengers. So, he gripped the seats in front of him, pulled himself to his feet, and gave the other slumped-down passengers a more thorough look.

Are they dead, or just sleeping?

George studied the man across the aisle again and watched his chest rise and fall. *At least one of them is asleep.*

Taking his time to allow his stiff muscles to wake up, George slowly moved from the window seat to the walkway. He stared down the long aisle. One thing immediately apparent was this was no normal plane. It was ludicrous how big it was inside. For one, the aisle was far too wide for any plane he had ever been aboard or ever heard about. *No way this is a real plane.* Then again, this was a very strange world indeed, where literally anything was possible.

George eyed the strange man wearing the Edwardian suit again. Despite the man's obviously thin frame, he still had a hard and resilient look to him. A man who had been through many trials and tribulations, yet had somehow managed to persevere and survive.

He stared down the passenger compartment once more, and estimated about three-hundred seats, with only about a third of those occupied. In the far distance he could see a small blue curtain separating coach from first class. The only noise was the hum of the A/C gently blowing overhead. Turning around he checked the aft of the plane and saw more of the same; dozens of passengers for every hundred seats.

A million thoughts ran through his mind, but if he had learned anything about this place it was always about

choices. He began asking himself which choice would the designers of this place want him to make? *They'd want me to go forward.* Just like in grocery stores back home. By design, they make you go to the right by luring you with bright colors (like fruits and vegetables), and then the fun promotional stuff beckons you deeper into the store. Naturally the things you actually came in to buy in the first place (milk and eggs) are located at the farthest reaches of the store. That way you have to walk past all the candy, toys, and other junk you don't really need. Just like advertisers had learned how to lure people in one direction and not the other, George felt as though he was being led to go forward; 'Hey there, little mouse, we want you to go forward in the maze to the cockpit.'

So, being as stubborn as his wife would have everyone believe, George did an about-face and started walking to the rear. As he walked aft, he realized his original guesstimation about waking up mid-plane was fairly accurate.

Many of the slumped passengers were like people on any flight. As he studied each of them, he saw their chests rising and falling, so he could tell that they weren't actually dead, as previously feared. One big, bald fella was snoring so loudly George wondered why he hadn't heard it before now.

The first passenger of note was a heavily made-up, middle-aged woman, dressed in business casual. She had a pinched face and, even in slumber, was fiercely clutching her saddlebag-sized purse as if her life depended on it.

Moving past her, George got all the way to the back of the plane and found a man stretched out across three seats. He was dressed in a Civil War costume, and a fairly accurate one at that. George knew this because when he wasn't flying for the Air Force as a part-time reservist, his day job (as he liked to think of it) was working as a history professor at the local college back home in Pensacola. One of his favorite subjects was the history of the Civil War.

The man was obviously dressed as a Rebel Confederate soldier from the South—waist-length coat (cadet-gray and single-breasted), gray trousers, and a rebel kepis (cap) with an embroidered bugle-infantry insignia on top of it. The Rebel soldier couldn't have been older than twenty-five. He might've been considered handsome were it not for his scraggly beard, a black eye, and a mop of straw-colored hair spilling out beneath his cap. In addition to the Springfield musket leaning against the window, George also saw the man was wearing a holster. Given that the man was a rebel soldier, if the holster was authentic, the pistol inside it should either be a Navy Colt or a Cooper double action. George also

noted that affixed to the Rebel soldier's belt were three boxes of cartridges, and a fixed bayonet. *Wow, this guy could have walked right off the battlefield.* He even had a round-steel canteen slung loosely over his shoulder. This was the first man George considered waking up, but even in sleep the Rebel soldier wore a perpetual frown. *Let sleeping dogs lie,* came to mind. He thought about grabbing the man's weapons, but he was certain if he did, the man would wake up and attack. No, best to explore more of the plane first, and that was going to be a lot easier when he didn't have to watch his back at the same time.

At the very back of the plane, past the four bathrooms (two on each side), George found a circular, carpeted stairwell that went straight up into the ceiling. George had never been on a non-military plane that had a stairwell, especially one as lavish and wide as this one. Before ascending, he took one last look at all the sleeping passengers and thought, *Yep, all still asleep, air is good, and everyone appears safe from harm.* He lifted his eyes to the top of the stairwell and found himself wishing he was armed. Not that he would carry the weapon drawn; he'd keep it concealed, tucked into his belt, hidden beneath his overshirt. *Heck, I'd even settle for that rusty old flare gun.*

Despite not having any weapons to protect himself, he ascended the stairs as quietly as he could.

On the top level he found more sleeping passengers. The only difference between the top floor and the lower one was the top level had far fewer passengers. Down below he estimated close to two hundred people spread out over three-hundred seats, but up on the top floor there was barely a dozen.

Moving down the ridiculously wide aisle, he noticed each passenger wore a costume from a different time period. It was then that it occurred to him, *Are these people like me? Individuals plucked out of time?* In his case the year had been 2012. And his friend Barnaby had insisted he was from the year 1970. Was it possible these people weren't simply dressed in costumes, but actual people from various time periods? Maybe the young man downstairs in the Civil War costume *really was* from the Civil War. Maybe the designers of this place had dug him up from the grave, regenerated him, and put him in the last uniform he had died in. Was it possible all these people really were from different countries and different eras?

As George contemplated all of this, he passed a middle-aged woman who looked like a throwback hippie from the sixties. Sitting next to her was a much older, frail-looking

woman. The way the middle-aged hippie lady had her hand resting gently on the older woman indicated it was most likely her mom. Was this woman really from the sixties, or was she simply dressed that way? Or maybe they were like the hologram Lieutenant aboard the *Dauntless*, or some other form of solidified constructs. There really was no way of telling. Right now, he wasn't keen on waking anybody up without exploring the rest of the plane first.

Without even realizing it he had already walked almost the full length of the plane, and was fast approaching a small door with a little microphone on the wall next to it. It was obviously the cockpit.

Once more the mouse in the maze analogy crossed his mind, and he was fairly certain the builders had pretty much gotten him to go right where they wanted. With few options, he reached for the cockpit door. He fully expected it to be locked, but surprisingly there was a soft click as he turned the handle. George opened the door and peered within.

For some reason George thought he'd find the cockpit abandoned, so he wasn't prepared for what he found on the other side of the tiny cabin door.

Inside, what was immediately apparent, was the cockpit was far bigger than any commercial plane he had ever been

on. Most cockpits were cramped the moment you squeezed through the cabin door. This one was enormous.

Moving inside he stared out the windows. What he saw there made his blood run cold. Completely filling his view were more giant stalks of oversized sunflowers—all with human faces contorted in agony. Trying to see beyond the flowers he could only glimpse more of the same. As nearly as he could tell, the plane was drowning in an endless sea of them.

At the nose of the plane he discovered two occupants. The one on the left was dressed in a traditional commercial flight uniform (white dress shirt, black pilot hat). Even before George rounded the chair he could see the captain's hands were fake robot hands. As he cleared more of the seat it was even more apparent the pilot was, in fact, a damaged robot. For the pilot's head was hanging off like someone had struck it heavily with a pipe; only its internal wires kept it from falling all the way to the floor. George noticed a couple wires still sparking inside. The robot captain still had some juice left in him.

Checking the seat on the right, George expected another robot, or an empty seat. Instead, what he found was a small boy, about eight-to-ten, curled up fast asleep and snoozing comfortably.

The boy had a mound of black hair held up out of his eyes by welder's goggles on his forehead. The kid was dressed in heavily used overalls, with thick knee pads sewn into the knees. He also wore brown work boots that had to be two sizes too big for him, and encircling his small waist was a thick leather tool belt laden with various dangling tools and pouches.

So I'm on a plane, a giant plane, in the middle of a sea of oversized sunflowers with human faces. There are over two-hundred passengers sleeping on board, and the plane is piloted by a broken robot and a kid, who looks like he belongs on the cover of a Steampunk magazine. Terrific.

George sniffed. Something smelled bad, like a sweaty dumpster had just entered the cockpit behind him. George was about to turn around to locate the source when he felt the barrel of a gun pressed up against the back of his head. Mind racing quickly, he surmised it could only be the one person on board he saw with a weapon.

The Rebel soldier.

This was confirmed when he heard the man behind him say with a deep southern twang, "Hold it right there, Yankee, or I will put a bullet through your brain-pan as sure as yore standing thar."