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“The Clockwork Trollop,” by Debra Doyle & James D. Macdonald

“The Drowned Man,” by Laura E. Price

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THE CLOCKWORK TROLLOP
by Debra Doyle & James D. Macdonald

It was on the eighth of September in the year 1893 that I received an unexpected communication from my learned friend, Professor William Haversham.

*My dear Archy,* the letter read, *if you would be so kind as to call upon me post-haste, I have something extraordinary to show you.*

I responded to the summons with alacrity. Haversham’s keen intellect was well known to me from our years at Oxford. When I first went up, I was a student of physical science, while he, being some years older, already held a chair in natural philosophy. A profound commitment to bettering the general condition of humanity drew us together, and we remained in correspondence during the succeeding years. Now I was eager to see what discovery or accomplishment could so excite him.

The summons had come in late afternoon, and the shadows of night were falling over London by the time I stood on Haversham’s front steps and plied the knocker. The door was opened by a maid in cap and apron, who showed me into the parlor.
“The professor is expecting you, sir,” she said.

“Archy, my friend!” came a loud voice a moment later from the inner doorway. “How delightful that you could join me.”

Professor Haversham swept into the room, a bottle of champagne in one hand, two flutes in the other. Placing the glasses on an end-table, he popped the cork and poured. “Success!” he said, and tilted back his glass.

Bemused, I echoed his toast. “I must confess,” I added, “that I am quite at a loss. Your request induced me to board the first train to town, and your greeting implies some celebration, but so far I have not a clue as to the cause.”

“I want you to witness something that the world has never before seen,” he said, pouring himself another glass. “A machine like no other.”

“You’ve invented the chess-playing automaton?” I asked—for such, indeed, was the challenge of the age. Modern scientific engineering stood poised on the verge of turning Von Kempelen’s Mechanical Turk from hoax to reality, and competition was fierce among the savants of the city.

“No, no, dear boy. Better. Come, let me show you.” The professor led the way, up two flights of stairs, to a combination workshop and laboratory under the garret. Boxes, jars, and tools filled shelves along three walls, while the fourth held a chalkboard covered with mathematical formulae and schematic
diagrams. Benches and tables were piled with papers, electrical apparatus, and chemical flasks. Notebooks, opened, lay scattered on the floor. A sheeted object stood on a pedestal against the far wall.

“Archie,” Haversham said to me, “have you any pocket change?”

“Yes, but what has that to do...?”

“Everything.” He whipped away the sheet to reveal what appeared to be a human arm and hand, attached to an iron framework. Pneumatic tubes ran into the arm, connected to pressure bottles and a baffling array of mechanical switches. Palm up, elbow slightly bent, the arm extended into the room.

“Here,” Haversham said. “I have no idea what money you have in your pocket, do I? No way of knowing in advance, will you grant me as much?”

“Yes,” I said. “I will admit the truth of that.”

“Place any coin or coins onto the palm of that hand,” said the professor.

I reached into my pocket and withdrew a shilling, then placed it as the professor had indicated. To my amazement, a woman’s disembodied voice said: “A shilling.” The voice was a husky contralto, with the faintest hint of an Irish accent.

Haversham smiled and said, “Try again.”
I did as he directed, pulling two-and-six from my pocket and placing it on the hand. This time the voice said, “Two shillings sixpence.”

I shook my head. “If it were not for your formidable reputation, professor, I should say that this is a conjuring trick. You can see what I am placing on this hand, and you might in some way cause this voice to correctly identify the coins.”

“I assure you, I am doing no such thing. Let me leave the room and you may try again.”

He withdrew, leaving me alone with the bodiless hand. Determined to test its capabilities as thoroughly as possible given the circumstances, I tried several coins in different combinations. All of them were flawlessly identified: “A farthing. One pound ten. Two bob. A sovereign. Half a crown.”

Several trials later, I abandoned the project. Leaving the laboratory, I found the professor on the stairs, smoking a cheroot.

“Well?” he asked.

“I am amazed,” I said. “How do you accomplish this seeming miracle?”

“A combination of techniques. Electrical inductance, a balance to detect weight, a few other touches; attach a phonograph geared to recite the appropriate phrases, and it is done. Do you like the skin?”
“I had wondered. It does feel lifelike, in a cold and unpleasant way.”

I thought he preened himself a little. “A combination of latex rubber and gutta percha, my own formula.”

“What do you intend to do with this?” I asked. “Such a device may well have an application in shops or counting houses. Or do you have some other purpose?”

“The ability to recognize and count money was the final problem of a work in progress, without which the rest would have been futile. Return in two weeks at this same hour and I will show you everything. It is more easily demonstrated than explained.”

Haversham knew well how to pique my curiosity; I remembered that slight vanity in him from our Oxford days, that he would never unveil a discovery until he judged his observers to be at a high point of anticipation. Time had clearly not changed that aspect of his character, and I found myself, as before, waiting in eagerness for whatever marvel the professor might choose to reveal. The glitter in his eye, the spots of color on his cheekbones, even the slight tremble in his voice, all hinted at a vastly greater degree of excitement than his words conveyed.

* * *
Two weeks later I returned. I found the door unlocked and a note affixed to the knocker, instructing me to come up to the library. I entered, and, since I saw no one else about, proceeded upstairs to a room just off the first-floor landing. Professor Haversham stood at the window, looking out upon the darkened streets of London. The lights in the room were all extinguished so that the only illumination came from the gas lamps in the street below.

He broke the silence before I could speak. “I trust you had no trouble seeing yourself in.”

“No,” I said. “Though I was a trifle startled to find your note.”

“I gave Molly leave to spend a week with her mother in Chelsea,” he said. “Come, join me.”

I went to stand beside him at the window. Turning from his contemplation of the street below, he gestured to the window as he addressed me, saying, “Tell me, Archy, what do you see out there?”


“A sink of sin and misery,” he said. “Here in this city, the capital of the greatest nation on earth, we have one prostitute for every ten adult males. Neither love of God nor fear of Hell, no law however enforced, no appeals to our better natures, has
wiped out this scourge, nor is anything more along those lines likely to do so. The trade in human flesh corrupts all who come in contact with it; not only the men themselves, but also the young women forced into the life by poverty, lack of education, or drink. And what a toll it takes! The degradation, the decay of civic virtue, the crime and violence! It is almost too much to be borne. And the gentlemen who patronize these trollops infect themselves with diseases which they bring home to their innocent wives.”

“The problem, while distressing, is scarcely unknown,” I said. “Mr. Gladstone himself has made a habit of rescuing fallen women from the streets.”

“With what effect we have seen. Are there not now just as many—more!—prostitutes than there were before?”

“I confess that it is so. But what are we to do? We are men of science, not of the clergy nor of Parliament; nor are we the police.”

“Aha!” he said. “But what if I were to tell you that science has provided a cure?”

“I should wonder what you meant.”

“Then observe.” He turned toward the interior of his library. “Janet,” he said loudly, “come forward.”

I heard a susurration reminiscent of silk. A young woman walked toward us from the shadows where she had stood silent
and concealed. She came to within three feet of us, then stopped.

“What does this mean?” I said. My friend had never been in the habit of inviting females into his lodgings, and I could not help but fear that he was suffering from some derangement of the mind and senses, to exhibit so marked a change in his behavior.

The professor ignored my protest in favor of speaking directly to the young woman. “Hello, Janet,” he said.

“Hello, sailor,” she replied. “Fancy a go?”

I had heard that voice for the first time two weeks before, counting coins. I supposed that I was meeting the actress who had made Haversham’s recordings.

“Janet, reveal yourself,” the professor said.

The young woman reached for the top of her dress. The deep neckline of the garment already showed her long throat and the tops of her bubbies to advantage; now she pulled down the bodice until she stood nude to the waist, her breasts snowy white in the reflected lamplight from the street, the areolae dark and the nipples shamelessly erect.

“Like a feel, sailor?” she said in her throaty, low voice. “Yours for a penny.”

I felt my face burning in the dark. “Professor!” I remonstrated, but my friend paid no heed.
“Would you prefer to see more?” Haversham said; then, addressing the woman, “Janet, expose yourself.”

Without another word, the young woman bent forward. Grasping her skirt and petticoats, she pulled them upward to the belly, revealing her lower body, entirely naked: white limbs bare above her buttoned shoes, the dark triangle at the juncture of her thighs, all.

“How about it, sailor?” the young woman said. “Only a shilling.”

“Professor Haversham!” I exclaimed. “What is the meaning of this vulgar display?”

“This,” Professor Haversham said, “is the clockwork trollop.”

He turned to the table at his side, struck a match, and lit a lamp. The young woman—Janet—did not react to the increase in light. Out of embarrassment, I averted my eyes.

“Clockwork?” I said, speaking to the ceiling.

“Yes. Springs, gears, cams, and levers. Observe.”

Haversham took a pace toward the young woman who stood, fully revealed, before us. Despite my good intentions my gaze went with him, and I saw that her grey eyes were wide and unblinking. The professor waved his hand back and forth in front of her face and snapped his fingers under her nose, but she made no move.
I dared to do the same, and likewise provoked no reaction.

“Go on, touch her,” he urged.

I reached out a tentative hand and laid it on her shoulder, then snatched my hand back a moment later. “She’s warm!”

“Of course she is,” Haversham said. “While the men of dockside are brutes, sunk deep in degradation, I doubt that many of them are necrophiliacs. The warmth is provided by a small steam-boiler located in her abdomen. That boiler is heated with raw grain spirits mixed with methyl-cellulose to make a solid fuel. But warming the skin is not the only use for the boiler. Between clients, the trollop uses that steam to eject the spendings of the men she has entertained from her nether passage, at once emptying and sterilizing the sheath in preparation for her next; thus she will prevent the spread of disease.”

“You cannot expect men to actually—mate—with this thing!”

“You yourself thought she was real.”

“Only for a moment,” I protested.

“Crude men far gone in drink, addled by lust and in uncertain light, will be ready to believe that she is Venus’s second self. That linguist fellow made the lords and ladies at Ascot think a street girl was a duchess. Far easier to convince a drunken lout that this is a street girl.”
“Hello, sailor,” Janet added to the conversation.

“But will she actually be able to—”

“Yes,” Haversham said. “And quite skillfully, if I may be permitted to brag. A German fellow, a gymnast, cataloged four hundred and fifty possible modes of congress, not counting mirror-images or reversals. I have extracted the common factors and cut them into a series of cams that mimic the acts of love in quite lifelike detail. The copulative motion of the client will, by means of a pendulum and escapement movement, rewind the trollop’s main spring. She will be able to couple for the entire night without tiring. Should she run low on fuel, she can call for gin, drink it, and use that to fire her boiler. By the end of the century, I anticipate, the clockwork trollop will replace the common prostitute, just as the power loom has supplanted the cottage weaver.”

“Unbelievable,” I murmured.

“Would you like to try her for yourself? I will retire to give you privacy. But be aware that she will demand payment in advance.”

I felt myself blushing again. “No, that will not be necessary.”

“I can hear you asking yourself, what of the women thrown out of work by this invention? Them, I will train as mechanics to maintain these machines. Every morning, when the
clockwork trollops return to their engine houses, the former prostitutes will clean them thoroughly with Lister’s solution, replenish the fuel and water in their boilers, check the tension of their springs, oil their clockworks, brush their hair, mend and launder their clothing, and perform such repairs as may be needed.”

“Don’t forget the gentry,” I said, entering into the spirit of the thing. “They could buy private copies; keep them in the lumber room and never again bother the tweenie, or wander alone through the East End where they are prey to footpads and blackmailers.”

“And the best part is that the whole enterprise will be self-funding,” the professor said.

My curiosity had by now outweighed my earlier reticence. I leaned closer to give the trollop a closer examination. “However did you make her seem so real?”

“I worked from a death-mask,” he said, “taken from an unfortunate young woman drowned in the Thames. The poor lass had not been in the water long; there was no wrinkling or bloating when her corpse was delivered to me, so I was able to cast her in every detail.”

“In every detail?”
“Just so,” he said. “From top to... ahem... bottom. I am quite proud of the lifelike nature of her skin; the hair, of course, is genuine.”

I stood in silent amazement for a few moments more admiring the craftsmanship. When I turned away from the machine I observed the professor had donned his coat and had his hat in his hand.

“Professor, do you intend...?”

“Yes. The reason I invited you here this evening. Tonight, Archy, we will take the clockwork trollop out for her sea trials, as it were.”

“Hello, sailor,” Janet said. “Buy a pretty girl a drink?”

“Ah... no,” I said to the young woman. I found it extraordinarily difficult to remember that I was addressing, not a living creature capable of independent thought and conversation, but a device no more human than my pocket-watch.

“Come,” said Professor Haversham. “Take her other arm, and we shall guide her between us to a cab and thence to the East End to ply her trade.”

* * *

The hansom cab deposited us in Wapping, not far from the London Docks. From there we set out on foot, to all appearances a pair of night-time carousers with a girl to share
between them. The neighborhood was dark and insalubrious; if it had not been for the sake of Professor Haversham’s scientific endeavors I would never have ventured into its foul-smelling streets in the daytime, far less at night.

My friend, however, appeared to have no such misgivings but looked about him with interest. “Now to find a public house of suitable character,” he said. “Not too difficult in this area, I should think.”

We proceeded along the filthy street, navigating with care over the slick and uneven paving stones. I saw that Janet walked always with her left hand brushing the wall, and I asked Professor Haversham why this should be the case.

“It’s how she makes her way,” he explained. “Later, I shall include a map of each girl’s area of operations among her cams. For now, our Janet must pilot herself by feel.”

The slight smell of alcohol that wafted from the clockwork trollop added an air of verisimilitude to her profession. At the professor’s urging, we slowed our pace to allow her to draw ahead; before long we were trailing her at a half block’s distance. Off in the fog, a ship’s bell rang the hour.

A man approached the trollop. She paused when he addressed her; I saw her cock her head as she answered, and I imagined that I could hear her saying, “Hello, sailor, fancy a go?”
Apparently, he did. Money changed hands. A moment later the fellow had the trollop by the arm and was leading her off into an alley.

“We should observe,” said Haversham, sotto voce. “For the sake of science.”

Quietly, we approached the mouth of the alley. In its dim recesses I could see the trollop leaning back against the alley wall, her skirts held in her hands at shoulder height. The man was embracing her, his trousers around his ankles.

“Pierce me to the very vitals with your manly rod,” Janet said in her husky voice. “Oh, sweet lubricity!”

The man said nothing, but pumped against her. In a matter of moments he gave a grunt and stepped back. The clockwork trollop dropped her skirts and, one hand trailing along the wall of the alley, returned the way she had come. I could imagine the small jet of steam that was rendering her once again hygienic. The idea both fascinated and disgusted me.

Professor Haversham had his notebook out. I heard him murmur, “With this fellow a single motion sufficed for the purpose.”

Light and music poured out into the street from an open door ahead. Janet turned in at the doorway and entered.
“Now for the real test,” Professor Haversham said. “Keep your back to the wall, and observe.”

The tavern, for indeed it was such, was slightly below street level and filled with mariners fresh from the docks. The trollop had maneuvered the steps leading down and was now accosting the patrons, one by one, with a husky “Hello, sailor, fancy a go?”

Before long, one of the tavern’s nautical patrons did indeed turn out to “fancy a go.” The sailor—a packet rat, by his close-cropped hair and woolen pea-coat—pulled a coin from his pocket, handed it to the trollop, then escorted her to a back room and closed the door. A rhythmic squeaking of bedsprings commenced shortly afterward, and, above the din in the tavern itself, came the sound of the trollop exclaiming, “Oh, for the love of God, faster, faster! Oh, sweet lubricity! I spend, I die!”

A pause; the door opened, and the sailor emerged, his brow beaded with sweat, followed a moment later by the cool and unruffled trollop.

“She is able to dress and undress herself,” the professor said in my ear. “That was a great technical challenge, but magnetic thread in her garments proved to be the solution.”

Despite the sordid nature of our surroundings, I could not help but marvel. “This is far beyond anything you have previously accomplished. Compared to this....”
“A chess-playing automaton is but a toy.”

As we spoke, another patron was accompanying the trollop into the back room. More squeaking noises soon followed, then a muffled cry and Janet’s voice exclaiming, “Oh, pierce me to the very vitals with your manly rod!”

When she emerged, she made her way to the bar—navigating by touch, as before—and with every appearance of lifelike animation, purchased gin, which she knocked back neat.

“Is she running low on fuel?” I inquired. “Should we take her back now?”

“No, no,” Haversham said. “She is merely replenishing the fluid for her cleaning apparatus, while adding verisimilitude to her role. Our Janet is indeed the perfect trollop: she cannot be threatened, she cannot be insulted, she cannot be murdered, and she does not tire.”

The professor spoke truth. Before long, two more customers had enjoyed the trollop’s charms in the back room. While she was entertaining the second, a group of clipper-ship sailors pushed their way into the tavern, calling loudly for gin and beer and greeting the barman with many rough jests. He in turn supplied each man with his preferred tipple, from which I judged that they were all known patrons of the establishment.
When Janet next emerged from the back room, she turned her attention to the newcomers. Instead of approaching the nearest with her usual “Hello, sailor,” she made her way directly to one of their number—a strapping specimen with a tarred pigtail, his muscular arms gaudy with oriental tattoos—as he stood by the bar. He turned at her greeting, but seemed momentarily taken aback by her appearance.

“How about it, sailor?” the trollop said. “Only a shilling.”

He hesitated no longer, but took her by the hand and led her to the back room, to the accompaniment of the raucous cheers of his shipmates. The door swung shut, and before long the bedsprings commenced squeaking in their now-familiar rhythm.

“You may think me foolish,” I said quietly to Haversham, “but for a moment there I thought I saw her smile.”

“A trick of the light, my boy,” the professor said. “I cast her features deliberately in a neutral expression, so that each customer may read into her countenance whatever he most desires.” He paused. “She still walks a bit mechanically, however. Her skirts disguise it, but that is something I shall have to work on.”

“Oh, for the love of God, faster, faster,” came the trollop’s voice from beyond the door. The bedsprings creaked and squealed, joined now by the sound of something heavy—the
headboard, I presumed—striking the wall with the same rhythm. The man gave a great cry.

“Oh drive your mighty engine into my mossy grotto!” Janet’s voice exclaimed in response.

“How do you make it appear that she breathes?” I asked, in order to distract myself from imagining the scene. Sailors in general were renowned for their prodigious reserves of amorous energy, but Haversham’s trollop, as the professor had described her operation to me, could match her partner’s stroke indefinitely.

“The appearance of breathing is accomplished by means of a simple bellows arrangement,” the professor said. “It also supplies air to her firebox.”

In the back room, the bedsprings squeaked.

“Oh, sweet lubricity!”

_Thump!_ went the headboard against the wall.

Outside, the church bells of St. George in the East tolled the coming of the day.

One of the clipperman’s shipmates rapped sharply on the back room door. “Tom!” he called out. “Come away from your doxy. We’re sailing with the tide.”

The squeaking of the bed springs continued without pause.

I looked at my watch. “The man must be a veritable Hercules,” I said. “He’s been at it for over a quarter hour.”
“Pierce me to the very vitals with your manly rod!” cried Janet from within the back room.

*Squeak, squeak,* went the bed.

Tom’s shipmate pounded again on the door. “Tom, are you deaf, man? Captain’ll flog us hairless if we’re on board a minute late.”

No reply; only the continued thumpings and squeakings. The sailor tried the doorknob. The room was locked.

“*I spend, I die!*” came the voice of the clockwork trollop from within.

The clipperman put his shoulder to the door. When it did not budge, he brought over two of his messmates, who lent their own force to the endeavor.

“Something is wrong,” I said, a cold feeling growing in my stomach.

Over Haversham’s muted protest, I joined the men at the door, determined to render them what assistance I could. I had scarcely joined the group when the largest of them broke open the door with a mighty kick and a splintering of wood.

The men surged forward—but rather than tumbling into the room, they stopped as if halted by an invisible wall. Then those rough sailors backed out, pale-faced and shaken, one of them making the sign of the cross as he did so.
Through the open door, I saw the bed, and on the bed, lying on his back, a man no longer recognizable as a man. His head had slammed—was still slamming—into the wooden headboard, so that the top of his skull was crushed and his brains exposed in a welter of ruined flesh and clotted blood. Had not the bright tattoos on his arms remained for the most part visible, I would not have known the gore-stained wreckage for the fellow I had seen before.

The clockwork trollop, naked, knelt astride him, her iron hips grinding down onto his flayed and splintered pelvis. A spurt of steam arose from between her thighs.

“I spend,” she howled, still pumping. “I spend, I die!”

In the distance, a policeman’s whistle blew. The shrill noise loosened my voice at last.

“Professor,” I said. “We need to take her away while we still have time.” The macabre spectacle threatened to close up my throat again, and I had to draw a shaking breath before I could speak further. “I fear that the police will not look upon tonight’s experiment with a sympathetic eye.”

***

Little left remains for me to tell. Those few of the tavern’s patrons who had not fled at the sight of the horror in the back room did so at the approach of the police. The professor and I between us threw a blanket over the clockwork trollop and
dragged her out through the now-empty tavern into the street and thence the short distance to the quay.

She sank like a stone.

The following year, Professor Haversham presented his mechanical chess-player at the Institute. Although the applause was polite, the academics concurred that the machine was not very lifelike and played but a perfunctory game.

A waste of his talents, they all said, and I agreed—and never confessed how grateful I was that this should be so.

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Debra Doyle earned a PhD in English from the University of Pennsylvania, with a concentration in Old English poetry. While studying in Philadelphia, she met and married James D. Macdonald, who was then serving in the US Navy, and subsequently traveled with him to Virginia, California, the Republic of Panamá, and far northern New England. James D. Macdonald, after his stint in the Navy, turned with Doyle to writing fantasy, science fiction, and horror for adults and children. Together and separately they have published over
sixty novels and short stories. Doyle and Macdonald are instructors at the Viable Paradise workshop.
THE DROWNED MAN
by Laura E. Price

The *Leucosia* had seen better days (much better, judging by the number of clockwork sailors aboard), and now, faced with the new Canal and the steam ships, her captain was reduced to running whatever passengers and goods he could contract. So it was a good ship for two young women who didn’t want to attract very much attention on their return journey. That said, the Misses Teachout—young and unchaperoned sisters, returning home from the once-lost island of Bilal—were still scandalous.

Corwyn’s wounded right leg meant they couldn’t hide in their cabins as much as she might have preferred; it needed to be walked. They expected chilly politeness from the elderly man with the military bearing and his granddaughter, and occasional looks from everyone else ranging from disapproving to downright lewd. But everyone looked *more* than occasionally: when they arrived on deck, when they entered the galley for meals, when they passed anyone not made of metal and gears and alchemy. It made them both uneasy, Corwyn perhaps less than Gwen, as to whether or not their cargo could
be kept safe, if it was indeed said cargo drawing attention to them.

Because it was at least partly the songs. The boy who lived behind the waterfall had warned Corwyn about them; he had given her a sticky gray wax to seal the seam of the box strapped to her right thigh, but the songs still seeped out and circled round her head. At first they were pleasant enough, but after two days of almost hearing music that clawed at her ears and attention, she got disgusted with the whole business. By the third day, she managed to ignore it.

They walked in the mornings along the railings of the ship, looking out over the water or staring back at whomever stared at them. That part was entertaining, anyway. Today it was two sailors.

“So much for our low profile,” Gwen said as they passed.

“Nothing to do about it now,” Corwyn replied, looking out to sea. They were in the open ocean. Every so often Corwyn saw something in the water: a ray, perhaps, or a dolphin’s fin. The sea smelled briny and sharp, and it undulated from blue to gray to, in some places, green.

“What in nine hells is that?” she asked, moving closer to the rail, squinting and wishing for the spyglass locked in the trunk in Gwen’s cabin.
Gwen leaned out, as well. She had the better eyes, and so she was the one who shouted, “Captain! There’s a man in the water!”

All hell broke loose: Gwen and Corwyn were shoved out of the way by the sailors—amusingly, the clockwork ones begged pardon—and by the Captain as the anchor was lowered, the ship was slowed, the man was hailed. Mr. Underwood, the elderly gentleman, joined with the crew, but Miss Tennyson, his granddaughter, joined Corwyn and Gwen near the back of the crowd. They watched as the crew tossed a life preserver out to the man.

“Is he unconscious?” asked Miss Tennyson.

“Likely he’s dead,” said Corwyn. Miss Tennyson gasped, then craned forward as one of the sailors dove overboard. Gwen elbowed Corwyn—who, unlike her sister, had a tendency to drop her well-practiced accent—but the young lady seemed too distracted to notice. The sailor reached the drowned man, dragged him back to the ship; the rest of the crew hauled them aboard. Water sluiced across the deck, soaking Corwyn’s hem.

“He’s not breathing,” said the sailor who’d swum out, and so the ship’s doctor, who doubled as the cook, kneeled down and began to attend to him. The drowned man’s skin was pale, waterlogged; he wore torn stockings and a pair of high-waisted pants that were so ragged they might as well have been
breeches. No shirt, no shoes. Corwyn had seen corpses whose flesh looked more lively.

With an enormous heaving cough, the man’s back arched, his head turned, and he spewed a gout of water across the deck. Miss Tennyson flinched violently backward. The Captain started asking the drowned man questions, but the man was too busy choking up more water to answer. The cook got an arm around him and led him below, the Captain on their heels. The crew went back to their posts. Mr. Underwood collected Miss Tennyson.

“I need to change,” Gwen grumbled. “These skirts are wet through.”

Corwyn only half heard her; her gaze had wandered back to the ocean. “Where did he come from?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ain’t land nor wreckage nor any other bodies out there, Gwen. So where the hell did he come from?”

“I don’t rightly care where he came from—he’s one more person to keep watch on.” She nudged Corwyn toward the stairs that led below. Her voice was dark as she added, quietly, “I am not fond of new wrinkles on a job.”

* * *

The sixth day out, they sat in Corwyn’s cabin, jammed together on her bunk with their skirts bunched up like
blankets. Corwyn stretched her bad leg out so her foot rested on the shelf that served as a bedside table. They played a hand of Dilly-O, a long and complex card game that Corwyn suspected had begun as War before being refined by successive generations of kids coming through Mrs. Simcote’s until it went more like a story than a card game.

“So if that box won’t completely contain the songs, how exactly is the museum planning to store it?” Gwen asked.

“I don’t know,” Corwyn replied, studying her cards. Gwen could be making conversation or trying to distract her. “I’ve got the wax stuff for the seams, so I suppose they can make sure to keep it sealed with that. ‘Course, it ain’t entirely effective....”

It also wasn’t infinite, and it wore out fast. But the amount of money the museum was paying was enough to keep the two of them for a while, without having to hunt down missing folk or toss drunks out of bars, so Corwyn refused to wonder if the museum directors really knew what it was they’d asked for. She put the Queen of Diamonds down, sideways, and drew a new card.

Gwen snorted. “I don’t hear anything, myself,” she said, studying her hand.

“Perception ain’t a prerequisite for something working,” Corwyn said. “You saw the readings on my resonance monitor. And remember that house in Cobbler’s Hill, where after that
girl disappeared inside nobody could get in? Everybody could see the door, but nobody could find it, yeah?”

Gwen blinked at Corwyn for a long moment, as she usually did when Corwyn talked like a teacher. Then she went back to her hand. “You think they’ll give us more work? The museum directors?” she asked.

“I hope so,” Corwyn said. “Finding things would surely be a change from finding people.”

“One with generally more pleasant results.” Gwen put down the Jack of Hearts, crossways, on top of the queen.

“Speak for yourself,” Corwyn said with a grin. “I’m still limping.” She looked at her cards, hoping she’d somehow missed a three or a King, then waved her hand at the pile in front of her. “Take them.”

Gwen scooped the cards up. “Evil adulteress,” she said fondly to the queen.

Corwyn flexed her thigh. It ached, but in the good way that meant it was healing. She didn’t want to hope for more work from the museum—this was only the sisters’ second job for them, and the first had been a bit of an accident—and yet. Her knack for finding didn’t extend to the not-and-ain’t-never-been living, but there were a fair number of ways to find things, and come to find out she was pretty good at those, too. Even the leg wound was, while not enjoyable, better than the smell of rot.
and crying families—which she encountered a sight more often than anybody would like.

Something hit the shared wall between their cabins, jolting Corwyn a bit from where she was leaning on it. They glanced at each other, and then, in one motion, were up and out the door.

In the corridor they found the drowned man—well, clearly not drowned, but Corwyn couldn’t remember the name he’d given—leaving Gwen’s cabin. Unsteadily.

“Why, hello,” Gwen said, “I’d not heard you were up and about.” She stepped closer to him, slowly; he stepped away until his back hit the doorframe. “What, pray tell, were you doing in my cabin?”

“I was... lost?” He had an accent—it surely must be an accent; he couldn’t really, as Corwyn fancied, be speaking through lungs full of water. He wore shoes and a shirt, now. His long, wetly black hair fell over his face; the veins showed blue under his skin like rivers on a map.

“Indeed,” Gwen said. Then, with a sharp jerk of her head, “Out!”

The drowned man brushed past Corwyn in his hurry to get away from her sister. He smelled salty, like brine and something unpleasant.
Their trunk had been touched. Corwyn kneeled next to it to re-set the lock. “Did you know that messing with this would send someone flying across the room?”

“Ioren did not tell me that, no,” Gwen said as she peered around the cabin. “Nothing’s missing.”

“He wasn’t looking to steal,” Corwyn said. “Not yet, anyway.” She slid the symbols on the lock around, creating a new combination and letting the metal drink her sweat and the oils from her fingertips. “He was exploring.”

Gwen sounded thoughtful. “But are we looking at a puppy exploring, or something else?”

The lock changed with a small snap; Corwyn stood up. “Damned if I know,” she said. She was suspicious by nature—or had been trained to be so from such a young age that it amounted to the same thing. “Though, looking at how he came aboard, that’s an elaborate plan for thievery.”

Gwen snorted. “Because we know nothing about elaborate plans.” She quirked her lips, considering. “I don’t want him getting near the trunk—I don’t care if Ioren swore nobody could get past that lock, there’s things in there nobody else needs to mess with.”

Corwyn was pretty sure they oughtn’t mess with some of the things in that trunk, but she just nodded. And decided not to unstrap the box anymore from her leg while she slept. And
wondered if maybe it wasn’t time to add a gun to the other hidden items on her person.

* * *

On the eighth day, the ship stopped moving.

Corwyn and Gwen walked the deck through the still, cool air. Corwyn felt that if they were becalmed, it ought to be hotter, but she hated the heat, so it was just as well.

The Captain looked irritated, though he did his best to smile at them reassuringly as they passed. The sound of their footsteps skipped flat across the glassy water, along with the ticking and pneumatic hissing of the clockwork sailors. Corwyn wondered if the salt air affected them, or if they had particular charms woven into their gears to prevent seizing up.

“Captain!” Mr. Underwood came up from belowdecks, his granddaughter following him a step or two behind. “I need to have a word with you about Mr. James.”

“Oh, yes, that’s his name,” Corwyn said. “I couldn’t remember for the life of me.”

“Knowing you, you’ll forget again in ten minutes,” Gwen drawled, leaning against the rail to watch the scene unfold. Corwyn joined her.

“—to her cabin! Had Mr. Quarrent not been there, he might have been milling around inside it when Larissa returned! I realize he’s not all there—”
Gwen pushed away from the railing. “I believe I shall go and add our experience with Mr. James to the Captain’s store of knowledge. Wyn, you’ll be all right?”

Corwyn waved her on, feeling absurdly relieved that it wasn’t just the two of them Mr. James seemed interested in. “Go on, I will endeavor to survive without your company.” Gwen started across the deck, with more bounce in her step than was strictly necessary, and Corwyn turned back to the water.

The ocean lay like mercury, smooth and reflective; the air settled lightly on her skin. Corwyn let out a breath. Her knack was such that she spent most of her time moving, either looking for someone or scheming to do so. As kids, before they came to Mrs. Simcote’s, she and Gwen had always been scrambling to find food and a place to sleep, away from feet, fists, and people who meant to do them harm. Even at Mrs. Simcote’s, Corwyn had scrambled to learn and test herself, to refine her knack, all the while jostling back and forth with the other kids. She and Gwen made more plans, now, but they were usually made on the run. It was a good life.

It meant, though, that Corwyn was rarely becalmed. And so she took long, deep breaths of the gauzy air, listened to the water lap delicately against the hull, and let the stillness soak into her bones.
A few minutes later, Miss Tennyson joined her. “I take it Mr. James went into your sister’s room, too?” she asked.

“Yes,” Corwyn said, minding her accent and not sighing. “And in yours, too, then?”

“Well, not exactly. He was at the door when I arrived. Mr. Quarrent—Grandpapa insisted the captain station one of the clockwork men to my cabin, like a chaperone. And so Mr. Quarrent was blocking the doorway. Mr. James looked very disconcerted.”

“Clockwork has that effect,” Corwyn said wryly.

“It’s the way they move, I think,” Miss Tennyson replied.

“And the masks,” Corwyn added.

“True. They look so sinister, don’t they, even the smiling ones. You’d think they could be made with more realistic faces.”

Corwyn didn’t think a clockwork man with a realistic face would be all that soothing, but she wasn’t interested in the vagaries of alchemical engineering. “Did Mr. James say what he was doing at your door?”

“He said he thought it was the door to his cabin. I suppose being nearly drowned might have addled his wits.”

“I wonder where he is now,” Corwyn said, glancing over her shoulder to where her sister and Mr. Underwood were still speaking to the increasingly beleaguered Captain. What was
the Captain’s name, she wondered. Good grief. “I would expect Mr. James to be trying to clear his name.”

“Oh, Grandfather was very upset,” Miss Tennyson said. “Which made Mr. James even more upset. One of the flesh sailors took him back to his room, and said he’d have the doctor slip him some laudanum to calm him down and let him sleep. Did you know Mr. James doesn’t sleep nights? The sailors say he wanders the decks.”

“Really.” Corwyn turned her attention back to the view, no longer reveling in the still air, her head full of dark thoughts of thievery and trespass.

* * *

There was something in the water.

Corwyn noticed it later that afternoon, far enough beneath the surface that she could only make out a long, dark form. “Now, what are you?” she whispered as it passed below her. She eyed it, leaning over the rail; it reached the back of the ship and disappeared around it. Corwyn settled back and looked astern.

Gwen returned from the privy and joined her. “There must be something downright fascinating out there, judging by how much time you’ve spent looking today.”

Corwyn could hear the grin in her voice but didn’t take her eyes away from the water. “Just wait. You’ll see.”
Gwen shrugged, and Corwyn was struck for a moment at the grown woman standing next to her. Gwen’s face was the very first Corwyn could remember ever seeing—red hair, freckles, brown eyes, and the softly curved cheeks and nose of a kid. That was the Gwen she saw when she heard the name, and, in a way, the Gwen she saw when she looked at her, too. But sometimes, especially now that they were making their way in the world, she was startled by her sister’s sharper nose and leaner face; even the scars along her nose and cheekbones were unexpected, though Corwyn knew where each of them had come from.

The light ripple as the form in the water came round the front of the ship pulled her away from woolgathering. “There,” she said, nodding toward it.

Gwen had already seen it; she went still before suddenly leaning over the rail to get a better look. “The hell are you?” she asked. Corwyn shot Gwen a grin.

“Can you tell anything about it?” she asked Gwen.

“Only it’s long. Nine feet? Ten? Apparently there are limits to even my eagle eyes.”

The thing passed directly below them again, and they leaned as far over the rail as they dared to peer at it. They fell back once it passed, out of breath, their boots thumping on the deck.
“Whiskers like a catfish?” Corwyn asked.

“Tail like an eel?” Gwen returned. “Water dragon, you think?”

Corwyn shook her head, considering. “Those are Chinese—we’re more than just a bit away from China.”

“It’s too small, anyway,” Gwen said, her eyes aimed upward as she thought. “And don’t they have legs? Hell’s bells, why didn’t we listen to Ioren more when he went on about all this sea stuff?”

“Because he was so damned dull about it,” Corwyn said. The sailors on deck had spotted the thing now; the Captain and his first mate were talking near the other rail. The Captain had begun to look downright haunted. Mr. Underwood and Miss Tennyson stood near the middle of the deck; they had noticed the crew’s behavior but had not yet traced it over the side of the ship. Mr. James was, presumably, still drugged asleep. Soon enough, though, everyone would be watching the creature in the water.

“Maybe when Bilal reappeared, it brought things back with it?” Corwyn mused. The stories she’d heard of Bilal’s return had mentioned that the waters close to shore had been purple for months, as the bit of bright-red sea that had come back with the island mixed with the blue water of this world. Surely something must have lived in that red ocean. Or something had
traveled away with the island and come back with it, changed by its time in the alien sea.

“God in heaven, does every place we ever go have to be so damned weird?” Gwen asked.

Corwyn didn’t answer. Whatever weird they didn’t carry around with them always seemed to end up directly in their path.

* * *

On the ninth day, in the morning, Corwyn re-sealed the box with the gray, waxy stuff the boy had given her for the task. It stuck to her fingers and smelled terrible as she gingerly filled the indentation where the old seal had shrunk, careful not to crack it, before placing the box on the shelf next to her bunk to dry. Then she changed the dressing on her wound. It was healing well enough, though the skin was puffy and she figured the bruising would be bright for weeks. The scar was going to be impressive: bigger than the one on her side from that Jersey Devil when she was thirteen—which until now had been her pride and joy—but harder to explain. People knew what a Jersey Devil was, but she wasn’t even sure what that thing had been that had wrapped around her leg and begun to chew.

“It will protect you from the songs,” the boy had said beforehand, the muted sound of the waterfall behind his voice. “Its venom will enter your blood and keep the voice at bay.”
“I thought that was the box’s job,” Corwyn had said.

The boy shook his head. “Nothing can contain it completely,” he said. “The box can keep it muffled enough to protect others, but it will want you to set it free. If you carry the box, you must be immune.”

Corwyn eyed the rough mess of scar on the boy’s arm. He was young; too skinny, too pale for a Bilali boy, and he looked haggard—like the young mothers Corwyn remembered from when she was growing up, trudging back from the market with three kids in tow and only half a bag of food. But there weren’t any kids here, just a temple made from a cave, with a long stone box atop an altar, a bed in a far back alcove, and a pool here at the front, filled with... things. Things with teeth and venom. The boy went to the pool, reached in, and pulled one of the grayish, bug-eyed creatures from the water.

The cave was cold. “Are you leaving here, once I’ve gone with it?” Corwyn asked as the boy crossed back and sat on the floor in front of her.

“No,” he said. Since Corwyn had come in, soaked from the waterfall, he had not smiled or frowned, raged or argued—he’d merely done, wearily, what Corwyn asked. But now a wide, giggly-cheerful grin stretched his face out, lighting his brown eyes. His teeth were crooked. “That’s not the only voice, you
know. The rest of them will still be here. And so I’ll be here, too.”

Corwyn had held her breath and gritted her teeth as the boy placed the thing on her leg. It wrapped itself, cold and clammy, around her thigh. She let a small, screechy wail pass between her teeth as the animal began to chew, then let out her breath and took another through her nose. It was a bit to get used to, but the thing, as the boy had said earlier, had a numbing agent in its spit; the initial pain eased off quickly.

Even now, she could feel its teeth gnawing her flesh.

* * *

The water dragon—that’d do for a name—swam past this side of the ship again; the sound of the water rushing outside her open porthole pulled Corwyn out of her woolgathering. She wondered, fleetingly, if the thing in the ocean and the thing inside the temple were related, at least by place of origin, or if they were monsters from this world that people had only just managed to notice.

And then she heard a sound. It was loud, nasal, unearthly—the sort of noise you got from a long Swiss mountain horn, mixed in with the noise from one of those big Australian pipes. Coming from outside the ship.

Corwyn quickly finished the dressing, then climbed onto her bed to reach the porthole. That position, hitched up off the
bed with an elbow and a grip to one side, wasn’t exactly ideal, but she could see the water dragon—because of course it was the water dragon, what the hell else would make that sound?—hauling itself partway out of the water and howling.

In the yellowy-blue light of the morning, the water dragon was colored gold. It didn’t look like a Chinese water dragon; it did indeed look like a catfish, one with whiskers and big black eyes, and very long teeth. It balanced, like a dolphin, on its tail, its front fins still partway in the water and paddling, then leaned its head back and howled again.

It was a sight to behold, all muscle and noise and streaming water; Corwyn marveled at it for a moment before her sense caught up to her. She dropped back on the bed, stepped off awkwardly, and knelt on the floor to paw through her rucksack. She hadn’t heard gunfire, so nobody above had shot at it. She *did* hear running footsteps headed past her room and into the cabins on both sides. She rummaged in her bag and came up with pants and a shirt, her mind running questions: planning to attack the ship? Planning to mate with it? All that howling, something was surely bound to happen, and the heart-pounding fear detracted a bit from her sheer delight at wearing pants again.

Scuffling noises and hurried thumps came from Gwen’s side of the wall; Corwyn yanked her boots on, slid the box from
Bilal into her trouser pocket, and headed out to Gwen’s door, which she opened without knocking. Gwen was grimly stomping into her own boots.

“They’re going to shoot it,” she said.

“I don’t know as I can blame them,” Corwyn said, climbing onto Gwen’s bunk and hauling herself up to look outside: the water dragon’s head was now barely above water. She dropped back down and crouched before the trunk, moving the symbols delicately, then spitting on her fingers before she twisted the mechanism. The lock popped; she and Gwen began arming themselves. Heavy, fast footsteps came up the corridor; Corwyn caught a glimpse of Mr. Underwood and the Captain through the half-open door as they turned into the stairwell. “Who’s going to play sharpshooter?” she asked.

“Underwood. He was a rifleman in the army during one war or another.” Gwen checked her rifle over and began to load it. Corwyn methodically filled her rucksack—made specially with padded pockets and compartments—with her instruments: astrolabe, ionization appliance, compass, locating mechanism, spyglass, electromagnetism scale, the three glowing rocks from their trip to Arizona, a dowsing pendant, a birch wand, and the things she and Gwen didn’t have names for but knew how to work. In a manner of speaking. She
secured her knife in her boot and her pistol on her hip as Gwen finished loading her own pistol and holstered it.

Lighter, running footsteps sounded in the corridor.

“I did not know Mr. James could move that fast,” said Gwen.

“Come on. Let’s see what’s happening.”

When they came on deck, they found the drowned man hanging on Mr. Underwood’s arm, yanking him back from a rifle braced across a tripod. Two clockwork sailors were moving to grab the drowned man, who was pleading a mile a minute: “Please, you cannot do this, please do not shoot her, she means you no harm, she just wants me—”

“Why does she want you, then?” Corwyn asked.

The drowned man’s face lit with hope. “She’s my wife. She’s calling for me.”

Without thinking, as she banished the alarming images his admission brought to mind, Corwyn asked, “And how did that happen?”

“She saved me.” The drowned man turned from Mr. Underwood, who looked on with a decidedly nonplussed expression, and took Corwyn’s arm in one cold, oddly flabby hand. “She saved me from drowning. But there was a storm, and we were separated—she’s looking for me. She took the
wind away to catch you, to find me. I’m what she wants. Please, 
please do not kill her.”

“Will the wind come back? If you go to her?” asked Gwen, 
hers tone suspicious.

“Now, wait a moment,” said Mr. Underwood. “He’ll drown 
out there.”

“She keeps me safe,” said the drowned man. “She’s... 
suited me, to my life with her. I’ll be fine. And yes, she can 
return the wind to you as soon as she and I are reunited.”

Another strange, nasal call echoed flat over the glassy water. Corwyn looked at Gwen, who gave a small, one-shoulder 
shrug. He wasn’t telling the whole truth, for certain, but the 
sun was going down; soon they wouldn’t have light enough to 
shoot the dragon.

“You aren’t her captive?” the Captain asked, speaking 
slowly.

The drowned man drew himself up straight and said, 
quietly, “I love her, Captain.”

Corwyn thought, but did not point out, that this was not 
rightly an answer to the question; that said, the man did seem 
determined to join his hulking bride in the water. Whatever 
else Corwyn was, she wasn’t one to stand between a man and 
his lover, however... unique that lover might be.
Apparently no one else on deck was, either. They all stood back, and the Captain, the crew, Mr. Underwood, and the sisters held their collective breath as the drowned man stripped to his waist and bare feet, revealing the gills along his sides and the webbing between his toes. This left Corwyn disturbed but not certain that it was the gills or the webbing that bothered her. The drowned man climbed onto the rail and balanced for a moment, smiling broadly at the water dragon before diving over the side with barely a splash.

The group moved to the rail and watched as the drowned man swam to his lady-love. The dragon had receded into the water until only her eyes and top of her head showed above the surface. The water darkened as the sun set; there was enough light to see when the drowned man reached her, smiling still, but not quite enough for Corwyn to be certain that the dragon’s whiskers stroked his face, or if, when he dropped his head, he actually kissed one of them. The pair swam away together, the dragon doing most of the work.

“Delia will be sorry she missed this,” Mr. Underwood murmured.

Poor Miss Tennyson, banished to her cabin. “Is she a romantic?” Gwen asked, not taking her eyes from the diminishing forms in the sea.

“Morbid,” Mr. Underwood replied.
They stood there, silent, until the pair disappeared from view, waiting for the wind to come back.

* * *

Corwyn sat in her cabin, trying to read. It wasn’t her favorite pastime, but she’d taken to carrying a book with her on trips because, as Mrs. Simcote had pointed out, sooner or later she got bored and fidgety and got herself into trouble. The book was good, an adventure set out West, but she couldn’t shake the idea that something was wrong. Well, something was wrong—the ship was still becalmed—but she had the feeling that was part of a larger wrong. Too many things didn’t make sense, and maybe some folk had to live with questions that were never answered, but the Teachouts rarely got that lucky.

She was lying in her bunk with her feet propped up on the wall, but when she heard the splashing sounds just outside her porthole she pulled her legs down under her—the thigh wound was healing, she noted—to stand on her bed. She reached up toward the porthole to haul herself up to see out and so was completely unbalanced when the ship was rammed.

She stumbled backward out of her bunk, arms pinwheeling, and landed on the floor. She wondered if it was called a deck when it was in a cabin as she scrambled to her feet, casting around for her boots in the swinging light and shadow of the lantern above her bed. The door slammed open;
she saw something that looked half-dead, with dark eyes and pale skin tinged yellow-orange by the lantern light, shadows caught in the gill-slits along its sides. It was man-shaped but had catfishy whiskers and too many teeth to fit properly in its mouth.

They stood staring at each other, then Corwyn lunged for the shelf by her bunk and the creature grabbed for her with webbed hands. She turned, pistol in hand, and shot it in the head even as it recoiled from her.

“Corwyn!” Gwen’s voice was muffled by walls and the ringing in her ears. Corwyn made out the sound of running above her cabin, then a thud like a door being forced. She heard another gunshot as she maneuvered around the sticky, black blood oozing from the dead thing’s head. Shouts from above, screams from down the corridor, and a smell of salt water tinged with metal began to fill the cabin when Corwyn found her boots. By the time she’d tied them, Gwen was at her door.

“Nine hells, Wyn, answer when I yell your damn name!” She spotted the corpse. “I wouldn’t have thought your crap-ass pistol could have done that.”

“Close range,” Corwyn said. The ringing was receding. “And don’t poke fun at my gun.”
“Mine was a girl,” said Gwen. Gwen never liked killing women, though it had never stopped her. Corwyn had no such qualms. “Come on. We need a better look.”

The deck was chaos: sailors, flesh and clockwork alike, ran past them; creatures of many different shapes swarmed. Not all of the things were man-shaped: some of them resembled eels; some walking fish and some frogs. Most were a mix. Corwyn glanced over the rail and saw other things just under the surface of the water, some surrounding the ship and some rushing toward it.

“Hold on!” Corwyn shouted, grabbing the rail. The ship rocked again as the creatures rammed it. People, and some of the monsters, went skidding across the deck; Corwyn and Gwen hung on grimly as their feet jolted underneath them.

“They could sink us if they all rammed us together,” Gwen mused. “What the hell are they doing?”

“Keeping us off-balance,” Corwyn said.

The creatures used teeth and claws on the flesh sailors. The crew were largely unarmed, and the clockwork sailors, being heavier and harder to move, were faring better on the whole. Gwen grabbed a flesh crewman as he scrambled past her with a length of wood studded with hastily hammered nails. He would have nearly brained her with it, but Gwen got
hold of his arm before he could rear back. “Where are your weapons?” she yelled.

“Overboard!” he shouted back, and Gwen let loose with an oath that brought into question the parentage of a number of divine beings, then handed the sailor her knife. He headed aft, where most of the creatures were still more or less contained; Corwyn thought he’d have been better off with his piece of wood, but the knife probably made him feel better about his chances.

Gwen half-turned after him, straining in a familiar way. “Go on,” Corwyn told her.

“What are you going to do?”

Corwyn felt her knack pressing against the back of her skull, making a knot in her stomach. “I’m going to get into trouble, and then scream for you to come get me out of it.”

“So our usual plan, then,” Gwen said with a grin, and then she was gone, lightning fast away to dance with the mayhem.

* * *

The times Corwyn hated were the times she didn’t know who she was looking for. There were times her knack left her a clear, shining path; other times it ignored her. But many times it yanked her along like she had a leash attached to the front of her head, and she never knew if she’d be brought up short in
front of a living, shattered person or just the bodily remains of one. It was not a comforting way to live.

She worked her way around the fighting, squirming through spaces between, staying in the shadows, shooting occasionally when she needed to get something out of her way—the creatures of the deep could take a punch, but they were just as vulnerable as anyone else to a bullet in the knee. Belowdecks she went, and found herself drawn into her own cabin, where the man she’d been looking for was kneeling next to the dead thing Corwyn thought might be his son.

The drowned man looked up; he was crying. And laughing, which gave her pause.

“I told her to leave this ship alone,” he said, cackling like the witch who had lived on 34th Street when Corwyn and Gwen were kids. “I knew as soon as I saw the lock on your sister’s trunk—but you all have such marvels, and she must have them for her hoard... it is the nature of her kind, they are greedy beggars, and she would have a clockwork man, and that trunk, and whatever might be in it—”

“So you’re going to kill us all for a clockwork man and a trunk full of clothes?”

The man laughed again, wet and choked and scornful. “That’s not a lock for a trunk of clothing, Miss Teachout. And no one is supposed to die. You are supposed to be frightened.”
You are supposed to be grateful for your lives, and carry back the story of the sea serpent to your homes—she wants the stories as much as she wants the things.” He sagged, shoulders and chest, toward the bloody dead body by his knees, but he never broke Corwyn’s gaze. “It worked before. I told her it wouldn’t work this time, but listening is not in their nature.”

“Ain’t no plan works forever,” Corwyn said. “She had to learn that sooner or later.” She took a breath of the saltwater-bloody air. “Look, we ain’t set on killing you lot—” Well, likely she could still talk Gwen down, anyway—”Go swim out to your dragon and tell her this was more than you bargained for, and we can go our separate—”

The drowned man shook his head and smiled at her, either pleased or pitying; Corwyn couldn’t tell which. “Oh, no. You’ve spilled her blood, Miss Teachout. She’s coming. She’ll be here soon, and she will rend your bodies and eat your souls.”

“So you’re saying she don’t listen, and she’s got herself a flair for the dramatic. All right. Let her come.”

She left the room at a walk, but she picked up her pace on the steps to the deck.

***

Gwen could never hide from her.

Not that she was trying to, but Corwyn emerged onto the deck of the Leucosia into a writhing mass of chaos that could
have hidden an elk, and only her near-constant knowledge of where her sister was got her under, around, skirted and ducked to the place where Gwen was dumping an either dead or unconscious something-or-other overboard. And still Corwyn’s clothes and arms were spattered with blood and black, sticky, not-quite-blood when she arrived.

“Any of that yours?” Gwen asked, grabbing her arm and yanking her into a darkened corner near the pilot’s house.

“No,” Corwyn said. “And it appears you and I have turned a train robbery into a blood-feud.”

Gwen sighed, irritated. “Ain’t that just us all over? And they keep on coming.”

A sudden chill breeze over her sweaty neck and forehead stopped Corwyn’s answer. “There’s wind,” she said. And then the ship rocked violently with a hollow booming, knocking them both off their feet. “Hell and damnation,” she said as Gwen hauled her up, but then she heard it: for a moment, every being on the ship paused as the uncanny wail of the water dragon echoed around them.

“Hell, hell, *hell*,” Gwen swore, peering over the rail.

“It seems she eats souls,” Corwyn told her, feeling she was keeping an admirably mild tone, considering their circumstances.
Gwen snorted. “I guess it’s a good thing ours are so black and withered, then.”

The fighting began again with an almost-literal crash.

Corwyn was not immediately and intimately familiar with whatever weapon she happened to pick up, like Gwen was, but Gwen could teach the things she learned from her knack. Thus Corwyn, despite Gwen’s disdain for her choice of weapon, used her pistol to work her way through the fishy children of the drowned man and the sea monster, though with the nagging feeling that she was missing something. Something important would come to her if she could just take a minute to think about it. She shot a frog-faced creature and another one with a human face and catfish eyes, then found a halfway quiet spot to reload fast.

Her right leg was making its opinion of the situation known—it was stiff, it hurt, and it was surely not responding as fast as she needed it to. A thing that looked like an eel if you squinted the right way darted into her alcove by the mast and yanked her arm. Cartridges scattered across the deck; she was off-balance; her bad leg, overtaxed, let go under her. She could feel the thing’s breath on her neck, and possibly the tips of its teeth. It smelled of salt and brine but also of unwashed human flesh and something odd; not quite sulfur, not quite stagnant.
mud, but just as unpleasant. Its breath wheezed in and out over her ear.

She slammed the butt of her pistol into the side of its head. It staggered and let go of her arm, then came toward her again—she put out the foot on her bad leg and tripped it up. It still lunged for her, but she straddled its body, pinning its arms with her knees. She considered her knife but decided against it as she didn’t know how tough its flesh might be. She scrabbled some cartridges, reloaded the pistol, and shot the eel between the eyes. Gore spattered across the deck, into her face; she got up and wiped her eyes with a sleeve. Blood pooled underneath the body from another wound. And a good thing, she thought, because she’d never have pulled any of that off if it’d been stronger.

That was enough. Time to see if she could climb.

Corwyn shoved her pistol into her trousers and started hauling herself up the rigging toward the crow’s nest. It was slow going but uninterrupted; nobody seemed to be looking up. The muscles in her bad leg were loose and wobbling in a fairly nerve-wracking manner as the wind pushed and pulled at her. She was not above cursing the thing she’d been hoping for not five hours earlier, particularly when it kept her from imagining herself falling to the deck, and so she swore softly and hauled herself up farther.
The water dragon rammed the ship again.

Corwyn got her arm and left leg hooked into the ropes but still swung out over the deck and then back into the mast with a head-jarring thud as the ship rocked. “Yeah, all right,” she muttered, arranging herself somewhat more securely. This left her with only one arm free, but right now it didn’t seem like she needed more.

The setting sun sparked off the choppy water. Purple and black spots floated in front of Corwyn’s eyes from the glare, but she saw the crew and passengers fighting as best they could. Miss Tennyson was using one of her grandfather’s rifles as a club. Mr. Underwood lay on his stomach on top of the pilot’s house, picking the creatures off with another rifle. Gwen, knives in hand, spun and danced with—or on—the chaos. She was frightening; it was beautiful.

The wind smelled sharper, now, skimming cold across her neck like it was bringing a storm with it. Out over the water, she saw large black clouds pulling together behind the dragon, who watched, unmoving, surrounded by more of her children. Maybe Gwen could make that shot, but it was out of Corwyn’s range. God in heaven, that was an astounding number of spawn. Surely the drowned man couldn’t be her only mate; he wasn’t that old and that was just too many kids. They could just keep coming. And even Gwen would get tired eventually.
A shout from below snapped Corwyn’s attention back around—Mr. Underwood, a group of things closing in on him.

Corwyn knew what she would have to do, suddenly; the idea falling into her head whole, along with a sense of inevitability and relief. And irritation.

“Hell and damnation,” she hissed, fumbling around one-handed for the icy box in her pocket. The movement made her swing a bit more; the box slid from her fingers as she pulled it out, but she kept her grip by gritting her teeth and pretty much willing the thing to stay in her hand.

The box shone, glowing with its own light and also, Corwyn thought with a bitter whimsy, her dreams. She sighed and began working at the seal with her thumb. It didn’t take as long to break as she had expected, but then, she likely oughtn’t have been surprised that it wanted to open. The wax sucked ineffectually at the seam as she pried the lid up.

The sound that emerged was not what Corwyn would have termed “singing.” It was a bit like the sound the water dragon made but more familiar; not as alien. It resonated, was certainly a voice, even if that voice was in no way human. The song seemed to wind its way up around the sails and masts of the ship, then wafted down like mosquito netting around the Leucosia and the surrounding ocean.
For a moment, Corwyn worried that it might not work on the sea-things, or their mother. Then the fighting drifted to a stop. Everything flesh on the ship looked upward toward the source of the song. The clockwork sailors paused, as well, awaiting orders. The creatures in the water poked heads out, drew closer to the ship, and listened. The ones that could, climbed aboard. The ones that couldn’t got as close as possible.

She climbed down to the deck carefully, holding the box aloft. Everyone watched her—or, rather, the box—with jaws slack, eyes wide, as she moved through the crowd. She placed it on a barrel near the stairs that led below, holding her breath as she took her hand off it, but nobody moved toward it.

“Keep an eye on this, please,” she said to the clockwork man nearest her. “Don’t let anyone touch it, and keep it open.”

“Yes, Miss Teachout,” he said, his voice nearly lost in the song.

Corwyn raced down the stairs and into her cabin. The corpse was gone. She slipped on a long streak of watery blood that swept across the floor to the door, but kept her balance well enough to get to the bed and her rucksack. At the bottom of one of the pockets was the rest of the sealing wax. She kneaded it in her hands then pulled two globs off, working them in her fingers as she shoved the rest into her back pocket.
She retrieved the box and made her way, followed by the clockwork sailor, to where Gwen stood, entranced, among the monsters. Strands of hair blew across Gwen’s eyes as the wind picked up.

She carefully filled Gwen’s ears with the gray wax, then took a step back. “Can you hear me all right?”

Gwen blinked, tilted her head, and spoke just a bit too loud. “Yeah. I can still hear the song, too, a little—but it ain’t bad. That was good thinking,” she said. “You got more of a plan?”

“It ain’t one I like, but yeah.”

Corwyn gave Gwen half the wax and the two of them—she didn’t quite trust the clockwork men to have the delicate touch needed—set about finding the rest of the crew and passengers and plugging their ears.

Two of the clockwork sailors were missing. Mr. Underwood was dead, as were a half dozen flesh members of the crew. Two of the men were wounded and unable to walk. The doctor was blood-stained but not bad off. Miss Tennyson had a lot of long, bloody scratches along her arms and legs and a nasty gouge out her left cheek. She had staunched the bleeding with ripped bits of skirt and seemed fine, which made it plain she wasn’t. The Captain claimed he wasn’t wounded; Corwyn had her doubts, but she wasn’t going to rip the man’s
shirt off to prove herself right. Once the song from Corwyn’s box was muffled and her plan laid out, they set about getting the ship ready to sail, moving between the tranced monsters like cautious dancers.

Corwyn and Gwen took Miss Tennyson and four of the remaining clockwork sailors to toss the dead creatures overboard. Corwyn secured the box in an alcove near the helm and tried to ignore how her wounded leg didn’t hurt. It felt decidedly odd, almost like she was walking on a dream of a leg as opposed to an actual working limb. She was half-afraid it would dissolve underneath her like mist; she found herself using it more tentatively than she had when it was aching.

It was full dark when they had all finished. Corwyn stood with Gwen at the rear of the ship, facing the ocean and the creatures looming in it. She could feel the rest of them behind her, as well as the eyes of what was left of the passengers and flesh crew, in the itch and tickle between her shoulder blades.

The box was still singing; she didn’t dare close it. Her thumb rubbed at the ragged edges of the broken seal as she thought over all the hopes she’d tried not to have, the dreams she’d avoided looking at; all of them centered on this one small thing and what it could have meant for them.

“I hope this works,” Gwen said.

“Me, too. Dammit, Gwen, I wish I didn’t have to do this.”
Gwen’s face was sympathetic, but all she did was shrug. Corwyn’s hopes pulled at her a little, but she threw the box as far out over the water as she could. It sang as the shadows swallowed it; it sang, distorted and waterlogged, as it sank.

The creatures surged to the rear of the ship, slamming into Corwyn and Gwen and knocking them to the deck. Corwyn thought she’d be trampled; she curled into herself, arms over her head, to wait it out. Things tripped over her, kicked her in passing. She heard the near-constant crashing splash of bodies hitting the water and found herself reciting “Ride of the Hawk in the Netherworld,” the longest poem she knew, under her breath while she waited for the tumult to subside. She hadn’t had to do that in years, not since before Mrs. Simcote had taken her and Gwen under her wing. But there it was, waiting for her when she needed it.

Finally, eventually, there was silence. Corwyn unwound herself with care for the new bruises and aches, along with the returning ache of her right leg, and stood up. The passengers and crew were doing the same. The deck was empty otherwise. The ocean looked deserted, though in the dark it couldn’t be seen very well. Gwen’s lip was split and bleeding, one eye blackened, and Corwyn couldn’t tell if her nose was broken or if the shadows were only making it look that way. Still, there she was.
“There’ll be other jobs,” Gwen said, as if they hadn’t been interrupted by a stampede.

“Clean ones like this?” Corwyn asked, matching her tone.

Gwen snorted. “This one didn’t work out so clean. Or did you miss all the gore I’m covered in?”

“You know what I mean.”

Gwen was quiet for a while. Then, “Probably there will be. But who cares if there ain’t, Wyn? We’ll find something to do if we don’t like what we’re given.”

Corwyn didn’t respond, just reached out and pulled her sister close. The Captain shouted for the crew to take their stations. The Teachouts hung onto each other, careful to avoid their wounds, and made their way to the rail as the Leucosia re-started its journey toward what they called their home.

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Laura E. Price was born in Florida, went to school in Indiana and Louisiana, and was drawn back to Florida where she lives with her husband and son. Her stories have appeared in Cicada, On Spec, and Strange Horizons.
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COVER ART

“Marching Off,” by Maciej Wojtala

Maciej Wojtala is a Polish concept artist who works in the video games industry. For the last seven years, he has been working at People Can Fly, the studio responsible for Bulletstorm and Gears of War: Judgment. He creates environment concept art, prop designs, illustrations, and graphic design elements. View more of his artwork at www.wojtala.com.