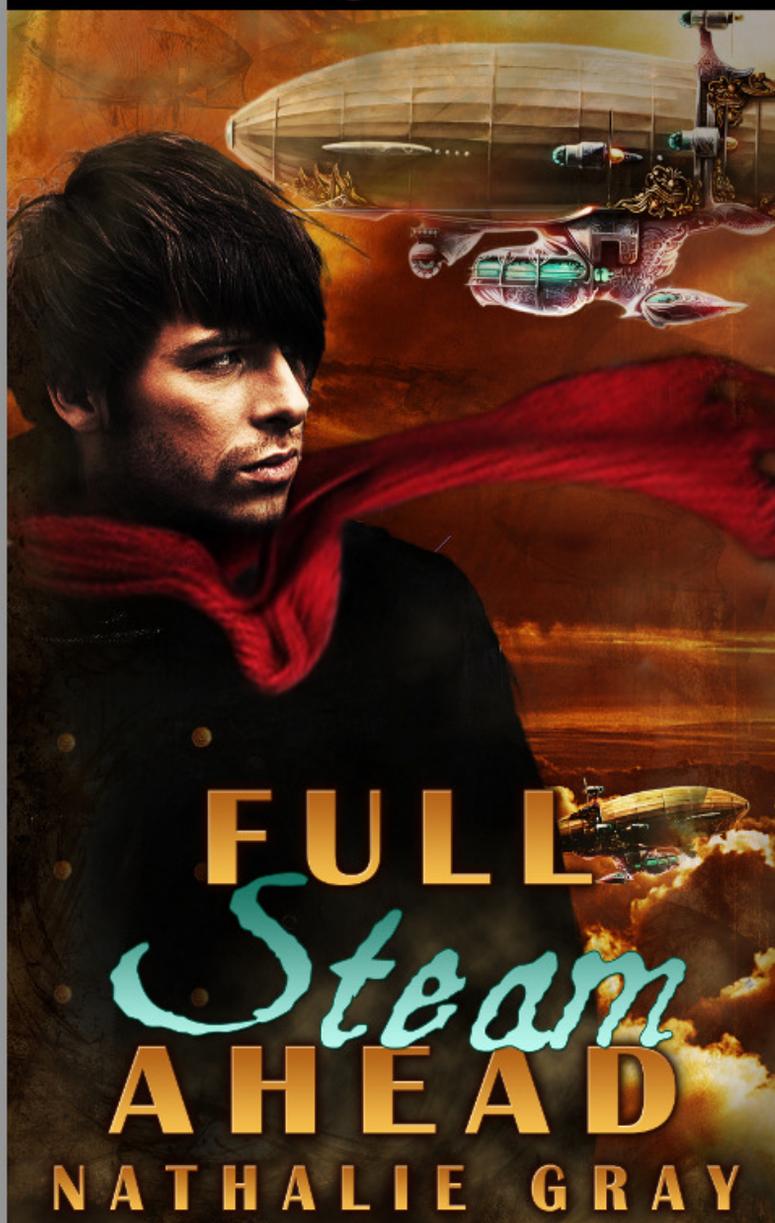


Red Sage Presents



FULL
Steam
AHEAD

NATHALIE GRAY



An eRedSage Publishing Publication

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Information:

Red Sage Publishing, Inc. P.O. Box 4844 Seminole, FL 33775
727-391-3847 [eRedSage.com](http://www.eRedSage.com)

Full Steam Ahead

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Full Steam Ahead

By Nathalie Gray

TO MY READER:

Dashing pirates, odious villains and mouthy heroines fight for survival in this momentous steampunk story. I pulled out all the stops for this one. For those unfamiliar with this awesome genre, steampunk is a delightful mix of Victorian aesthetics and oh-so-shiny fantastical machines. If you enjoy a good historical romance mixed with an action ride that never stops, or a romance that will sweep you into a fantasy world of petticoats and steam pistols, armored dirigibles and floating fortresses, then **FULL STEAM AHEAD** is for you. Strap on your brass goggles, my lovelies, we're weighing the anchor and hoisting the mizzen. Ahoy!

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 1

Clouds massed like god-fists low over the horizon, which only the peaks and dips of the restless ocean broke. Brown and gray slashed the purple sky. The temperature had dropped. High noon felt more like dusk. The sun had risen and then disappeared an hour later, going back to bed with the petulance of a moody teen, and Laurel had not seen it since. According to the met reports, she would not for several hours. Days, even.

She rubbed her hair back into her baseball cap and then screwed it on low. She was only a couple hours ahead of the other sailboats and couldn't afford to lose a precious minute or make a single less-than-optimum correction. The lone female among the twenty racers, she had more to prove than any of them. Plus, she had to prove something to *herself*. She'd sacrificed a lot for this, had fought and trained and worked hard for more than three years. But she was here now!

A sense of exhilaration took her. She grinned despite the spray hitting her in the face, despite her lips cracking from weeks of wind and sun exposure. Or perhaps because of it. An adrenaline junkie at heart, she did not mind the conditions, quite the contrary. She'd always been this way, the reckless "stuntwoman" diving down the basement stairs with her big brother's too-large hockey equipment taped on tight. Or a "pilot" at the command of her retrofitted pedal bike, complete with wings made of old umbrella parts. The bump on the bridge of her broken nose gave her a bragging right she still used at family gatherings.

This race was just a normal continuation of the life she'd led so far. The *Vendée Globe*, the most grueling singlehanded yacht race

Full Steam Ahead

around the world, had never been annulled for bad weather, even if the sixty-foot open sailboats took water in by the gallons. Below the whistling of the wind, the bilge pump's rumble whirred beneath the deck. It had held so far. She closed her eyes to savor the sounds—the various metallic clings and clanks as rings and cleats struck the aluminum mast. A soothing rhythm.

A slap of wind strained the mainsail. Laurel snapped out of her luxurious five minute break and leaned on the satellite dome, looking up. Dizzying, the tip of the mast swerved left and right against the darkening sky, forward and back with each wave while telltales and reef lines angrily flapped in the wind. The white and red hull—her main sponsor's colors—glistened with the waves' increasing intensity and force.

“Benson!” crackled the radio.

One gloved hand on the tiller, she stretched to reach the small handheld VHF radio strapped inside the instruments niche. Another couple inches to her five-foot-nothing frame would be nice sometimes. She dislodged the handheld from its Velcro straps and brought it up to her mouth.

“Benson here,” she snarled with her lips against the radio. A wave forced her to make an adjustment, which slowed her down. She felt the boat sink deeper into the water, the mainsail sagging, beginning to luff. Every second counted. Shit.

“If yoo vaunt to go beck home,” the man said. Swiss, maybe? Austrian? “No one voot say anyssing.”

“You have a question or not?”

She heard the mocking laughter. Moron kept his finger on the transmitter so she could hear his laugh. “Only one? Oo is in your kutchen while yoo are out playing vith saw boys?”

Funny how anger dissipated the wet cold sneaking into her many layers of clothing. She reached for the whistle tied to her

Full Steam Ahead

PFD, kept her thumb on the transmit button and blew a nice and loud tune into the moron's ear.

“Asshole,” she snarled after she spit out the whistle.

Sexist jerks.

She checked her watch. Damn. Her last correction would cost her a couple hours. She felt winds shifting again. Her uncanny skill had earned her the nickname *la sorcière* from the favorable French crews. She was no witch. Just a regular racer who had a knack for wind shifts. She felt the minute changes on her face and in the way the mainsail strained from the bottom part up instead of the other way around. Laurel shifted on the narrow, molded fiberglass seat—more like a ledge—to face starboard instead of port.

As if she'd tuned it with a remote, the wind altered slightly by a few degrees. But she was waiting and she harvested each iota of energy by winching hard on the line and anchoring it into the clam cleat. The mainsail strained against its lines and moorings. With a sound like a giant water hose, the force of the wind pushed against the sails. The boat leaned portside. Laurel let out a whoop of thrill when the angle forced her to her feet. Above, the sky seemed to become a tableau from a mad painter. Slashes of gray and brown against purple. Temperatures dropped further. She shivered despite the nylon jacket, polar fleece sweater and Nomex undergarments. Because of her French Canadian father's work as merchant mariner, she'd lived in Montreal for several years yet had never, ever been so cold. To her shock, she noticed ice forming on the glistening bow. What the hell was going on? Ice meant added weight to her boat, which could cost her more than just hours.

“Benson,” the radio sputtered.

“Oh, what now, you annoying prick!” She didn't get up. Screw them. Screw their sexist jokes.

Full Steam Ahead

“Benson...weather reports....” The radio spattered and fizzed, lost the channel, and then picked it up again. She recognized her shore crew manager’s voice. He sounded worried. Himself a seasoned seafarer and father of five girls, *nothing* fazed Jacques Durand. “Benson...sat phone....”

She’d stuffed the satellite phone in the cabin earlier because she’d been in a hurry. She couldn’t put the autopilot on right now, not with the kind of weather presently assaulting her boat. Plus, she was having a riot of a time. This was true freedom. Alone on the open sea. Standing, she strained against the wind, mouth stretched in a wide grin, eyes set on the prize. Always on the prize. She could do this. She’d done this before, if never in this particular race. The boat responded by cutting the waves like a knife would meringue. The raging sea tried its best to suck her boat into the water. The mast quivered and bowed. The sails shivered. More ice accumulated on the bits and pieces of aluminum moorings, on a section of exposed lines she hadn’t touched in a while, on the bow. It even crystallized the water dripping off her cap.

“Benson!” the radio clamored.

“Argh, goddammit, all right!” She reached for the radio. Just as her fingers touched it, a blue arc of electricity linked her to the radio, which fizzed and went silent. She brought it up, mashed the button. “Benson here!”

Nothing. Not even the deep-fryer sound. Laurel gave it a good shake, her usual way of fixing things. Still dead.

Ahead, waves reached proportions she’d never encountered. The radio slipped from her hand.

“Holy cow.”

The size of that thing.

Ragged scuds and vortices lined one of the biggest shelf clouds she’d ever seen. The large wedge-shaped cloud, low over the

Full Steam Ahead

horizon, looked ominous enough for Laurel to zip her jacket all the way up. A sure sign of trouble. She was headed straight for a massive storm. No wonder Jacques had sounded worried. Her shore crew must have been going nuts trying to contact her. And the sat phone nice and warm in the cabin.

The Swiss team's sexist jokes had suddenly become the least of her worries. She had work to do and needed all her neurons. She'd call the team as soon as possible. For now, she was about to enter the ring with the deadliest of all fighters—the sea.

“Here we go!”

She released the line from the cleat, let it out a bit as she nudged the tiller, just a tad, enough to angle her boat at the massive series of waves coming dead center. The first, she crested diagonally, rode it up like a Russian Mountain and could almost hear the *clack-clack-clack* of the initial lift hill. High. Higher still. The boat crested the giant wave. A split second of quasi-zero g. Exhilaration. The thrill of anticipation. Laurel spread her feet wide and wedged her butt into the seat's corner. Then descent.

She yelled the whole way down.

Shitloads of joules of potential energy transferred into the kinetic kind, propelling her downward at rates she'd be hard-pressed to gauge. *Crazy Fast*, if she were pushed to name it.

The second wave, she didn't take so well. Still winching in lines and keeping the tiller put with her knee for a hard tack, Laurel didn't have time to adjust before the monstrous wall of water rose in front of her bow. A Hoover Dam made of liquid emerald. The sea was such a beautiful, beautiful bitch. The veritable mountain of water hit her boat slightly tighter than forty-five degrees to portside. The hull moaned, as did the mast. One of the instruments niche tethers snapped, which released the fire extinguisher to roll all the way back and stop between her feet. She couldn't anchor it

Full Steam Ahead

back into its place. It was all she could do to keep her boat from pulling a cartwheel. She crested just in time to see the third wave.

“Damn.”

She was *so* toast.

But instead of slamming into the liquid version of Mount Fuji, her boat decided to do its own thing and swerved right. Before she could pull back from this demented course, the bow had already engaged three-feet deep into water, only to emerge and start to cut the base of the wave. Like surfing. On a sixty-foot open sailboat. Jesus!

What the hell’s wrong with this ship!

A sort of tunnel of water opened up in front of her. Water changed colors. Even the sky at the other end looked different. But it was better than taking a nosedive into unfathomable depths. Cursing and winching as hard as she could, Laurel aimed for the sky at the end of the tunnel. The mainsail strained. The very tip of the mast raked the ceiling of water. Spray hit her like hail. She could barely see. Salty water stung her cracked lips.

But she made it! She all but exploded out of the dip between the two waves like the proverbial bat out of hell.

Now that she had a second to breathe, Laurel couldn’t explain it, but she felt as though she’d just passed *through* something. The same feeling when entering a large room seconds after a crowd had left it. The resonance of past events, of people gone by. She shook the bizarre notion away. *Jesus, Benson, focus.* The sky changed. Even the water didn’t look the same. Deeper, darker. There was a smell, too. Like ammonia but subtler.

Wind turned again, tried to push against her. Grunting with the effort of keeping the mainsail from taking all the line available, Laurel slipped and was dragged the short distance to the base of the mast. She lost her footing, slammed hard against the aluminum

Full Steam Ahead

construct. That had *never* happened. She might be short but she had the grip of a pit bull, or so had declared a former boyfriend who'd tried to wrestle her into bed. Too bad he hadn't been able to keep her there. She *loved* sex Greco-Roman style!

Wind swelled and howled. Deafening, almost loud enough to make someone mad. Cringing with her eyes squeezed shut, Laurel hung on to the line with both hands. The boat was tossed back and forth like a bit of cork. Smaller than the three monsters she'd just left behind but drastically more violent, the waves crashed against the hull like slaps of thunder.

A distant sound caught her ear. It came from all around her. Voices?

The radio crackled again. It was back on? Someone was calling for help. She would've gone to see if she could do something but could barely hang on to her own life as it was. After a long male howl of fright, the radio was silent again. Shit, that was no dignified way to go.

Shadows flashed across the bow of her boat. She blinked the rain back as she floundered up to her knees. There it was again. Something flew across her bow! What the hell was that?

Her gaze caught it before her ears registered the sound. Dropping out of the sky, an articulated *thing* landed on her bow and crashed through the carbon-Nomex compound as if it'd been a tent. The sound was lost in the wind. Laurel held on to the mast with both arms as she craned her neck to see what the hell had just punched a hole in her boat. The thing glimmered wet and black.

A grappling hook! One the size of an umbrella.

“Hey!”

There was no one to talk to. Pure adrenaline. She crawled on her belly. Sparing a hand, she grabbed the flare gun and pocketed it,

Full Steam Ahead

retrieved the emergency axe from the niche, unclipped it, and then kept on crawling until she'd reached the bow.

Rain slashed across the sky in thick ropes. Speaking of which, whoever had sent that grappling hook was starting to reel it back. A line attached to the thing twanged taut. Not nylon either. Old-fashioned hemp rope the thickness of her wrist. Carbon and Nomex splintered when the hook pulled partly out of her hull. But it was stuck. Laurel yelped when the boat started to rise at the nose. Higher. Waves tossed the aft end back and forth while the front hovered a couple of feet above water.

Working fast now, Laurel clambered over to the hole and started to hack away at the rope. If that thing pulled any higher, it'd force her boat straight up. Any loose bits—herself included—would slide back into the raging ocean. In these temperatures and unchained sea, she wouldn't last an hour.

Whatever system was winching the line let go for a few feet then tried again. Like someone dunking a teabag in a mug, dipping a couple of times. Then it hit her.

The rope. It was coming straight from *above*.

Laurel raised her face to the elements but couldn't see a thing for the thick cover of clouds that looked about fifty feet above her head. She'd never seen clouds so low. The sky basically sat directly on top of her mast. The rope vibrated with the strain of yanking the hook back out. Whoever pulled at the other end must have been having a cow about it. She sure was! The line slackened once more, tightened. But still the hook remained stuck in the opening.

Kneeling up, she hacked with renewed energy at the hemp rope. Barely managed to make a few dents. It'd been well oiled, like in the old days. She'd been trying to save her ship as much as possible but gave up and just went at it with a vengeance. To hell

Full Steam Ahead

with her gleaming, brand new finish! Her sponsors were probably already looking to finance a new racer.

A noise stopped her. Axe poised above her head, she froze to listen. A voice? There it was again. The rope began to quake. Laurel backpedaled furiously. Someone was coming down.

Through the roiling clouds above her head, she spotted a pair of brown boots crossed over the rope. They belonged to a man, judging by the size. Laurel crouched low and held on with her free hand to one of the horn cleats. Waves hit her boat so hard the man was sometimes *dangling* from the rope more than climbing down. But he finally reached her boat and landed nimbly.

Had someone told her the boom had hit her over the head and that she was presently hallucinating, she wouldn't even have argued. A feat in itself because she tended to argue and do it loudly whenever she thought she was right.

The smallish man who stood on her bow, yanking on the grappling hook to work it out of the demolished bow, wore the strangest clothes—a burgundy buttoned coat cinched with a wide belt holding various metallic things that could've been weapons or tools. He crouched with his back to her, obviously as pissed as she was about the turn of events. Well, he was about to get even more pissed.

Laurel charged.

Somehow, he must have heard her because he whirled around and only good fortune saved him from having his skull cleaved right open by the axe. He floundered to his feet, reached to his belt. Laurel didn't wait to see if those were weapons. She attacked again, but she might as well have been trying to whack at a piñata while hanging on to a merry-go-round. The axe thudded harmlessly against the hull. But she had the man's undivided attention.

Full Steam Ahead

“Get off my boat!” She cocked her arm back for another swing. Waves forced her to make her stand kneeling. She still had an axe and was going to use it!

He gripped the rope above his head. “Bring me up!” he roared.

Someone up there had a damn good ear because the rope tightened once more. But it didn’t stop when the hook remained stuck in her hull. It kept hoisting.

“No! Stop!” Laurel put one foot against the base of the mast. With the angle, she could’ve *stepped* on it. “Stop! Dammit!”

But the man had started to climb back up the rope. Her hull wouldn’t be able to take the full weight of the boat. It hadn’t been designed to hang by the nose! Axe in one hand, Laurel clambered and floundered and managed to get her hand around the rope as well. Above her head, the man’s boots were pushing hard. She swung and caught him on the heel. He yelped and climbed faster. He was *good*.

Now that she had a few feet of vantage point, Laurel noticed her hull didn’t seem as smooth as it usually did. In fact, it looked pitted. As if some corrosive chemical was slowly eating away at it. As the rope and hook continued to lift her boat out of the water—it was now almost completely upright—she saw that the keel and both daggerboards had all but been eaten away. What was in the water? A chemical spill? Something biologic? There’d be nothing left soon. Renewed adrenaline and survival instincts fired her muscles, and Laurel began to climb the rope as well. Her foot on the ring holding the hook to the rope, she swung her axe as high as she could and caught nothing but rope. Still, the man must have felt the tremor because he looked down over his shoulder. No triumph on his features. Nothing but fear. And *horror*.

A long groan forced Laurel to look down below her feet. Something was going on. With a moan like a dying beast, the mast

Full Steam Ahead

bowed under the weight of the water-logged sail and the angle. The mainsail shredded around the low cabin, tangled with the spreader and forestay while every single line holding it secure snapped like sewing thread. A sudden clack made her stand with both feet on the wide iron ring. A violent wave tossed the aft end of her boat far to the right. Splitting like celery stalks lined one after the other, her hull finally gave and released the grappling hook. Its many barbed branches still held scraps of her boat as it snapped back into the water. The force was enough to break the hull in two. Laurel could only watch as her sixty-foot open sailboat—and her lifesavings—rolled onto its broken side and sank in the murky water.

“No,” she breathed. *No, no, no.*

A whiff of ammonia tore a groan from her. She turned away, faced upward. Now that it was free of the dead weight her boat had represented, whatever had been trying to winch the hook back up could finally do it. She heard the man above calling for help. He spoke English with an accent she’d never heard. A bit British, a bit continental Europe, a bit strange.

Clouds engulfed her. She could barely breathe for the moisture hanging in the air. She squeezed the axe between her knees and held on to the rope with both hands. Clouds thinned from dark gray to spotted white fluff like cotton balls. She would’ve expected to see such clouds at much higher altitudes.

“Hurry!” the man above her yelled. “There’s one right behind me!” The panic was palpable.

There was one *what* behind him? Laurel frantically looked down below. Saw nothing. What did he mean?

When she looked back up, she spotted vague shapes through the thinning clouds. They were high now, with wind slapping her around at the end of the rope. The hook underfoot felt slippery.

Full Steam Ahead

She made sure not to lose her precious weapon because, as it stood now, she had nothing else but the flare gun in her jacket pocket and the short emergency axe tucked between her knees. Her boat was gone. Her sanity, too. She'd probably been hit by the boom and fallen overboard to sink to a cold and dark death. Jacques would have a cow. She should've called, should've kept the sat phone closer, if only she'd known. Should have. Could have. Ifs. The French had an expression that maintained one could put Paris in a bottle with a bunch of *ifs*.

A large shadow stretched from left to right. Laurel spotted the underside of a huge wooden hull shaped like a banana, completely dry and held together with copper rivets. The rope kept climbing, higher, breaking through the last shreds of clouds and surfacing in a sky that was blue enough to blind her and a sun that was all wrong for some reason she couldn't explain.

She hung level with a ship's portside main deck. And what a ship it was. Laurel had her proof then. She was dead. Or in a mental institution somewhere painting the walls with poop from her diaper. Because what spanned a good two hundred feet to her left couldn't exist. It just couldn't.

There were no part-wood, part-metal airships floating in midair, with propellers on the end of long *things* that looked like flying buttresses on Gothic churches. There couldn't be airships with giant articulated sails deployed like Chinese fans on either side of a monstrous superstructure hanging over the inflatable part and which made it look as if a dirigible had been encased in a sort of catamaran of wood and metal. It looked part dirigible, part pirate ship, part Gothic citadel of metal. This thing couldn't *exist*. It'd never fly. Let alone hover. The props' roar was deafening. Sun reflected off its many metal parts. Implausible. Impossible.

Full Steam Ahead

Above her, the man nimbly climbed off the rope as soon as he could reach the handrail. But she wasn't so lucky. By the time it was her turn to reach the handrail, the crew had gathered behind it, some of them with weapons leveled at her. Combination of crossbows and guns, slingshots and pistols, knives and scifi machetes.

She was going completely *insane*.

The person at the winch decided she was close enough and stopped. The jolt tore a curse from her. Cold and fear deadened her. But she rallied her wits. One hand on the rope, she reached between her knees to get at the axe. If they wanted her alive, they'd have to earn every bruise.

"We have no time for this! Just kill it, would you!" a man shouted from the superstructure. The voice cut the wind like a dorsal fin. A trace of irritability made the command sound as though he were asking someone to please turn off the annoying radio.

"You can't do that!" she yelled. To her undying frustration, the hook rotated on itself with the wind. She was forced to twist her neck this way and that to keep facing the dangerous crowd. And a strange one, too, with colorful garments fit for Victorian times yet equipped with tools and weapons that clearly didn't come from any era she knew. Jesus, she really was in a hospital somewhere. These hallucinations had to be the drugs' effects.

The crew, both men and women dressed in strange period clothes same as the one who'd climbed down the rope, approached the handrail to get a better look. She felt like a fish on a hook. "Get me off that thing! You can't do this! There are laws, dammit!"

Amongst the group stood a short-haired older woman who embodied the classic British Headmistress from Hell. She wore a green jacket and gold buttons, aviator leather hat and goggles, and

Full Steam Ahead

cocked her head as if she couldn't understand. "What did you say?"

"I said I'm going to sue you! You destroyed my boat, ruined my race!" What did these cretins wait for?

"Your boat?"

"It was on the *water*," said the smallish man who'd come to her boat. A collection of shocked faces turned to him. He seemed to shrink from the attention. "It's true!"

"What do you mean, *on* the water?" the older woman demanded. Clearly, she was in charge. Of something, anyway.

"Could we argue about this when I'm not hanging there like fish bait?" Laurel swung the axe for good measure, managed to make a complete rotation so that she faced away from the ship. Her PFD got in the way when she tried to twist around. Jesus.

"Get the captain," she heard the older woman say.

By the time Laurel had twisted around to face the ship once more, the crew had parted to let a man approach the handrail. Dressed in a tailored blood-red, double-breasted greatcoat crisscrossed with bits of leather armor and belts, he wore his long dark hair loose around his face and shoulders. A cowlick split his bangs on one side. The captain—or so she surmised—hovered close to the six-foot mark and carried himself as though he could break someone's head with his stare alone. He didn't need the wicked assortment of weapons strapped to his slim frame to intimidate her. And unlike the others, he didn't seem impressed or even interested in their catch. In fact, he looked at her as one would a somewhat intriguing but utterly useless garden gazing ball.

When he leaned an elbow on the gleaming wood, she noticed he wore only one glove, a supple-looking, black leather affair that

disappeared into his sleeve. He gave her a long look. “Who sent you? Thorne?”

A slap of wind hit her and forced her to hold on to the rope with a death grip. Her cap was ripped from her head. Like live snakes, her overgrown bob whipped in thick strands around her head. She shook it out of her face. “Who?”

“Clearly, she’s one of them,” he declared. She recognized the voice that had earlier cleaved the air like a knife. His upper lip curled in disgust. “We caught a live one, it would seem. And female. Rare.”

“One of what?” she countered. Fear crept up her spine. “I’m not one of nothing! But you, you’re in deep trouble!”

A dark eyebrow arched.

“She’s one of them,” declared Climber. He nodded solemnly. “Look at her hair.”

Her hair? Laurel noticed only then everyone except her had dark hair and eyes. She was the only blue-eyed blonde she could see.

“Impossible. She is much too small,” countered the older woman. She gave Laurel a penetrating look. “And too shrill.”

Shrill?

Laurel pretended to throw the axe. “Hey!”

“See? She *is* one of them. She attacked me! All I wanted was to get our hook back!” Climber and a couple others nodded and crossed their arms. She’d get no help from them.

Someone shouted that they thought they saw something in the clouds. Everyone began to talk at once. The captain raised his hand and triggered instant silence before calling for a man named Virgil to confirm the sighting. A negative created a general sigh of relief.

Suddenly, wind hit her so hard she almost lost her footing. Her hand was numb from cold and lack of circulation. She’d have to either tuck the axe between her knees again or risk falling into the

raging sea below. And somehow, the sight of a hull eaten away didn't bode well for a human body. There was something going on with the water.

"Come on!" she called. "You destroyed my boat, the least you can do is let me come aboard! Radio for help! *Something!*"

The captain cocked his head the way the older woman had. "Why? So you little traitor can snoop around and tell your masters all that you saw?"

"Traitor? Masters? What are you talking about?" Her hand began to slip. Teeth gritted, she tucked the axe between her knees then held on to the rope with both hands. Her forearms and shoulders burned. "Please, take me on board," she snarled. "I'm not going to last long!"

The older woman rocked back on her heels, clearly stunned. Even the captain seemed taken aback. Eyes narrowed, he studied her from wind-blown hair, canary-yellow nylon jacket to dripping Gore-Tex boots.

"What did she say?" someone asked from behind the first row of onlookers. "Did she say please?"

"She cannot be one of them," an unseen woman offered gently. "They never plead."

"You didn't hear right," replied another.

Dissenting murmurs rose until, after a nod to the older woman, the captain straightened. "We shall see. Reel her in."

"About time," Laurel muttered.

And "reel her in" is exactly what they did. Instead of letting her clamber onboard as Climber had done, they kept her well away from the deck and the opening in the handrail into which the man had slipped. With a pole that looked a lot like a harpoon to her, a man hooked the rope and pulled until the mechanism at the end of the boom clicked. With a yelp of fright she quickly subdued,

Full Steam Ahead

Laurel slid along the rail and thudded against the hull. There, several pairs of hands gripped her by the PFD and jacket and hoisted her onboard. Someone hurriedly yanked the small axe from between her knees while another pulled the flare gun from her pocket. Under the pitiless sun, the metal things leveled at her that looked like pistols gleamed menacingly. She didn't care. She could've kissed that deck, beautiful, polished thing that it was.

Laurel climbed to her feet under the watchful eyes of a dozen men and women. From this angle, the dirigible part looked as if it carried a sort of pirate ship underneath its belly, with a superstructure stuck to the top of the balloon. It was so implausible that she rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn't seeing things.
Still there.

Around her were all sorts of fantastical machines that ranged from boilers to stuff that looked like giant radiators and long narrow water tanks. Steam was omnipresent. It jetted up and billowed, rose in thin spires and whistled out of brass tubes, curled like pigtailed and twisted in long ribbons, hissed and wailed and rumbled. Nothing like this existed. Did it? It couldn't.

Her heart beat so fast it hurt. What the hell was going on? Where *was* she?

The older woman came to stand directly in front of Laurel, who, for once, wasn't the smallest person in attendance. Except for the captain and one or two other men, the rest were pretty short. "Name yourself," the woman demanded.

"I don't have to do—"

The woman shrugged. "Toss her back overboard."

"Wait!" Laurel spread her feet and hung on to the portion of handrail closest to her, which made one of the men holding the pistol click something back. She may not know these particular

Full Steam Ahead

weapons, but she could tell the thing had just been armed. They meant business.

“My name is Laurel Benson-Desmarais. My boat just sank and I need a phone to let my shore crew in Les Sables know where I am because they’ll send a rescue party after me, you can be sure of that, so I wouldn’t try anything if I were you.” She’d never been known for her economy with words.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, someone in the crowd muttered, “What did she say”?

A young woman dressed entirely in red, from split long skirt to cropped jacket and frilly shirt, smiled. “Definitely not a Varangian.” Laurel recognized the gentle voice of earlier.

“A what? I’m not a what?” Her hand shook when she raked her disheveled bob back from her face. Nerves were rapidly taking over the rest. Unusual for her. She wasn’t used to going into full panic mode, but it was close. Pretty damn close. Did that mean she needed a paper bag? How did one deal with this? Should she put her head between her legs? Unless that was for nosebleeds? Man, she wanted a drink. Anything strong that’d dull her senses. Maybe even put her out for a month. Her head hurt like damn.

Then it came to her. “Of course.” She smiled in relief.

A movie set. She’d fallen on some elaborate movie production. Or maybe some enthusiastic reenactment troupe. It *had* to be a movie set. The morons had almost killed her.

“Who’s in charge here?” Laurel demanded. “Who’s the director? I want to talk to that person.”

The older woman curled her lip and opened her mouth but snapped it closed again when the captain approached. The crowd parted and held a respectful distance so that a sort of bubble was created around him. For a reason she couldn’t understand, Laurel thought he looked forlorn. Alone in a crowd. The one who’d taken

her flare gun gave it to the captain, who slid it into his belt without even a look.

He rested a long hand, the one without glove, on the pommel of a glistening silver pistol-looking thing. The blood-red of his greatcoat created a sharp contrast to his pale skin and loose dark hair. Come to think of it, he was hot as hell. If a bit on the taciturn, brooding side.

“So, Laura—”

“*Laurel*,” she cut in.

The lady in red hid a smile behind her hand.

A look of vexation flashed in the captain’s dark eyes. He sucked on his teeth, eyebrow arched. “*Laurel*. What were you doing to my ship?”

“I wasn’t doing anything to your ship. You’re the one who dropped a grappling hook right in the middle of *mine*.” She hooked her thumb at Climber, who narrowed his eyes at her. “Then he came down the rope and boarded my boat. What was I supposed to do?”

“Your boat that floats on water, yes,” added the older woman, clearly unconvinced. Sniggers rose from the crowd.

They’re completely nuts. All of them.

Planting her fists on her hips didn’t seem to sit well with the ones holding the pistols, so she let them drop and took a deep sigh. “Look, whatever you’re doing, movie or fair or whatever, it’s none of my business, so just please get me to a radio, or a phone so I can call them and have—”

“See,” Climber cut in. Triumph tightened his narrow mouth. “She wants to contact them. I’m telling you, she’s one of—”

The Headmistress raised her hand. “Nonsense. Look at her. She is no more Varangian than I am. But she is not one of us either. So,

Full Steam Ahead

the question is..." She turned her penetrating gaze to Laurel. "What *are* you?"

The last time Laurel had cried in public was when she'd broken her nose on her eighth birthday. Her brothers had tormented her with the momentary weakness for years afterward. So when her eyes started to sting and her chin to tremble, Laurel frantically tried to control herself. If she let them see her blind spot, they'd go for it. She'd learned young not to let anyone see her weaknesses. She had them, she was human. But she didn't want people taking advantage.

"Get me a radio, okay." She cleared her throat. "Please. Let me warn my crew."

Approaching despite calls to be careful, the lady in red pulled a neatly folded pink handkerchief from her skirt pocket and passed it to Laurel. It felt crisp in her hand. That thing was *so* girly. "This is all very silly," the girl commented in her gentle voice. "She is cold and alone and we destroyed her boat. We should send a bird back to—"

"You know what traitors do and have done to us," the captain cut in. "Tie her to the mainmast until I figure out what to do with her."

"What?" By pure instincts, Laurel smacked the closest hands down even if she knew it probably wasn't a very smart thing to do. "Don't you *touch* me."

The captain and the Headmistress left, the first unperturbed while the second spoke animatedly in his ear. Laurel could defend herself but had no chance against half a dozen armed people. Despite her punches and kicks and general thrashing, she was dragged across the deck and, with a thin silvery cord, they tied her by the ankle to the base of the mainmast. Her attackers quickly backpedaled when she lunged at them.

Full Steam Ahead

“You just bought yourselves a suit,” she yelled at their retreating backs. “You wait. Whoever you are. I don’t care if you work for Universal Studios.” Her voice broke.

She yanked on the cord but it wouldn’t give. She’d never seen anything like it. The thing resembled a silver silk cord but felt cold like metal. With one last threat, she dropped to her butt, leaned back against the thick mast and cradled her drawn-up knees, fuming and about to hit the panic button. She’d wake any moment now. This just couldn’t be real. It was too.... Just too...outlandish. Crazy. Ridiculous.

This can’t be a movie set or a fair. I’m going insane.

No one paid her any heed. Only the lady in red stayed, looking apologetic, before she turned and climbed the short ladder to the quarterdeck. Laurel turned to watch the captain, the older woman and the lady in red engaged in a conversation. Clearly, both women disapproved of his decision. He turned a hard gaze to her, shook his head. Because it was all she had left, Laurel flipped him the bird and looked away. Asshole.

Then she did what she hadn’t done in public since her eighth birthday. She started crying.

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 2

Whatever she had just accomplished with her jerky gesture and erect middle finger, it did not seem to make her feel much better, for the woman hid her face between her drawn knees and by the quivers of her shoulders, Phineas knew she was crying. Not his proudest moment. But that could not be helped right now. Still, Miss Carmina was right. They should send a bird to Orabilis, if only to warn them he had caught a traitor and would be looking for a fair price. A live traitor. A rare opportunity to get a glimpse of their formidable enemy. It was not like the Varangians to leave one of their human pets unguarded. Unless the woman was bait. The fiendish fleet that had tailed them for days and nights must have been lying in wait somewhere in the low-hanging clouds. The precious cargo in the *Brass Baron's* holds—and in their guest cabin—had made them an instant target for other privateers, human and otherwise. His ship had had to divert course several times to avoid battle. Loaded with valuable spices and cloth as he was—and transporting one of the richest and most influential men in Orabilis—he could not afford a fight. And now this collaborator showed up.

Phineas's hackles rose at the thought. He *hated* traitors. How could someone turn so vile as to go over to the Varangians, knowing the sort of monsters they were? To betray one's own species. Despicable.

Phineas cut a glance at his prisoner. His rage wavered. She was not much to look at, frankly. Thirties, freckles and a twinkle in her pale eyes that spelled trouble. Traitors usually were not women because the crude giants kept their female prisoners for amusement

more than intelligence gathering. But if she lacked their height and mass, she shared their hair color and eyes. A hybrid, perhaps? Born in captivity and did not know any better? He still would not let her roam his ship.

“You are overreacting, you know that,” his second-in-command whispered through tight lips painted the color of red wine. Dame Augusta usually reserved that tone for when they were alone, plotting a course or debating a strategy. Arguing was a form of recreation for her. “That girl does not have a drop of Varangian blood in her.”

“We do not know that.” He gripped the wheel, if only to give his hands something to do. His left arm throbbed, as it always did in times of stress. The enemy fleet could be anywhere. They had lost a lot of time sending out one of the boarding parties to scout the clouds below. Phineas shook hair out of his face.

“You are confusing the peculiar with the menacing,” Dame Augusta went on. “And present with the past, as always.”

“Thank you for your opinion, madam. As always, I shall keep it in mind while you transmit *my orders* to the crew.”

Augusta blew air through pursed lips as she pulled her gloves on with brisk, angry motions. “Do you think, *sir*, they would have let her live with such a temper?” She stormed off the quarterdeck to put the fear of the divine into the crew.

True. The prisoner’s small frame belied the temper of a dragon. He turned to look at her, only to catch her drilling holes in his back. Those pale eyes flashed like stars. Killing stars. She did that gesture with her middle finger again. He wondered what it meant.

So be it.

No one would catch him unawares again. In his thirty-four years in this world and twenty-five on this ship, he had lowered his guard once. For his brother. How could one be expected to distrust

Full Steam Ahead

even his own blood? He should have known better. Never again. Phineas rubbed his gloved hand against the wooden handrail. The old wound flared and stung. He was considering going down below to run cool water over it when a cry from above made his heart squeeze.

“Port side!” The vigil’s clear voice sliced the air. “Four of them!”

Four?

Damn. So they’d been found.

He kissed the tips of his two forefingers in quick prayer and then hollered orders that his second-in-command relayed to the rest of the crew. Everyone was on their feet. Like a well-oiled machine, every member had a post to handle and a task to accomplish. He ran the best crew in the privateering business. But if the tiniest complication happened while his important passenger York was onboard, then Phineas could kiss his business goodbye. No one would ever hire him again. Such was the passenger’s reach and influence over the freight industry.

At the news of pursuit, even his prisoner leaped to her feet and strained to see over the main deck’s handrail. Her nose was red but her eyes clear. Despite her pale hair and eyes, she was sort of comely in her own way.

“What’s going on?” she yelled up at him.

He ignored her as he went about his tasks. Dame Augusta was right. It was implausible—but not impossible—the woman had ever been a captive of the Varangians. They never would have tolerated such attitude. She also lacked the obsequious ways of one of their pets and was *obviously* used to being in charge because she repeated her call several times, each louder than the one preceding. The woman had a voice!

Full Steam Ahead

“Boarding party!” Phineas yelled into the brass cone running the length of the quarterdeck. The sound of his boarders getting ready echoed out of the voicepipe. Thrill seekers. Their raucous enthusiasm made him grin in spite of the dire news. Four ships. With any luck, only one would be a drekkar.

Below his feet, the narrow door leading down below burst open and out trooped his boarding party. Dressed in brown padded leather armor from hats to boots, they literally stampeded to get to the ladders, arguing over whose turn it was to be launched first. Dame Augusta put an end to the festivities with a sharp command to “shut up or scrub the heads for a week”. Barely restrained, the young men and women clambered up the ladders leading to the skydeck above the dirigible. There, more crew already waited to strap the boarding party with steampacks and catapult them at the incoming ships. If they were lucky, this time they would hit the aerofoils on the first shot.

“Excuse me!” his prisoner yelled. “What’s going *on*? Is someone attacking us?”

Was she pretending to be this ignorant to convince him she had no part in any Varangian scheme? No one could be *that* uninformed. It had to be a ploy. The timing was perfect for the enemy horde to attack. He had never believed in coincidences.

“Shut up!” he yelled back when her demands drowned what his engines crew said in the voicepipe. “Engines. Repeat.”

“We’ll be at half capacity for about five pulses, sir. Then the shields can be deployed.”

Five pulses. An eternity with four Varangian ships closing in.

“Vigil,” Phineas hollered. “How long?”

“Five pulses and a half, sir!” replied the man’s clear voice. Someone had once told Phineas the secretive man used to perform in operas. Who knew what had brought him to the privateering

Full Steam Ahead

business? Phineas was just glad to have the sharp-eyed vigil aboard, even if he was a bit eccentric.

“Any drekkars?” he asked.

A short pause, then the vigil called back. “All of them, sir!”

For a short moment, everyone froze in place as the news sank in.

Then the flurry of activity picked up again, with renewed energy. *Four* longships. Filled to the gunnels with fiends. Phineas raked his hand back in his hair and swore. York would undoubtedly—

Perhaps merely thinking of him had triggered a manifestation of the man himself? York calmly climbed out of the narrow staircase leading to the passenger cabins. If Phineas had to guess, he would give the man thirty, maybe thirty-two years. If that. But what York lacked in experience, he more than made up for in shrewdness and connections. Everyone who was someone wanted him as associate. As did Phineas.

He rearranged his black tailored coat as he joined Phineas at the wheel. The man’s dark, almond-shaped eyes narrowed in study. “Varangians, I hear? Four longships? Is this something that has ever happened before?”

“Yes,” Phineas lied. “Those situations are common.” Turning to the voicepipe reserved for his navigator, he added, “Miss Carmina, a course, please.”

“Working on it, sir.”

“What do you intend to do with her?” York pointed a manicured finger at the prisoner, fuming as she enthusiastically tugged on her bonds. “She seems unmanageable.” That seemed to please him as he moistened his lips and grinned.

The thought flashed across Phineas’s mind that should they be boarded, she would not stand a chance to even throw herself off

Full Steam Ahead

the ship and would have to face the hordes of enemy. She would be caught *alive*. The things they did to their female prisoners....

But she was already on their side, was she not? A traitor sent to infiltrate humans and make them turn on their friends. On their brothers. He refused to believe otherwise, even if his suspicions made little sense. Old habits.

Phineas checked port and starboard as the shields waited to be deployed. Five pulses. Not enough steam to fly the *Brass Baron* while simultaneously unfurling the mammoth, articulated screens of braided metal. They had to outmaneuver the barbarians long enough to store steam for the shields. Damn. *One* longship was hard to outgun. But four?

“I shall deal with her when the time is appropriate,” he finally replied.

“When we dock, I could speak to a friend at the Admiralty. She would fetch a considerable price.”

“I shall think on it. But for now, Mr. York, may I suggest you go back down below? It’s not safe up here.”

With a nod, his passenger clambered down to the main deck and walked by the prisoner, who stared daggers at him until he had disappeared down below. For the first time since Phineas had known York, the handsome man cracked a rare smile when he didn’t receive the usual admiring gaze from a woman. She seemed more inclined to wring his neck than have tea with him. For a reason Phineas couldn’t fathom, a smug sort of satisfaction filled him before he pushed the ludicrous notion away.

“Three pulses!” the vigil called. “Two ships to port. One dead ahead. One is dipping below cloud cover.”

Phineas’s glove creaked when he gripped the wheel harder. The enemy was splitting ranks. “Battle stations!”

Full Steam Ahead

Section heads began to report in the different voicepipes. In her crystal-clear voice, Dame Augusta dispatched the deck hands. The wind picked up and forced Phineas to adjust the plan forming in his mind. If they dropped into the clouds for cover, long enough to at least lose the drekkars coming at their vulnerable flanks, they might have a chance to store enough steam to deploy the shields around the dirigible. If not, well, he could always use his last bullet, which he kept around his neck at all times. As per their agreement, he would *never* let the immoral enemy take Dame Augusta alive.

Sliding his pistols along his belt until they hung behind his back, Phineas gathered the two ends of the tether straps bolted into the wheel's base and clipped them around his waist. Below his feet, his prisoner spied his every move. She must have realized what was happening.

Beyond the bowsprit, which glistened in the sun with its brass studs and polished wood shaft, the first drekkars came into view. Each was four times as big as his own, black like night, two-masts, blood-red square sails, with a long and wide hull that tapered to an upturned bow—perfect for ramming human ships. All pointed straight at the *Brass Baron*. Thanks to the vigil's eagle eye they had a bit of forewarning. Phineas pulled his timepiece from the pocket inside his greatcoat. Two pulses before the enemy was close enough to engage. But he did not intend to just sit there until they did.

He slipped the gold item back in his pocket. "Vigil!"

"They're getting ready to—"

A loud *thwoop* drowned what the man said. The leading drekkaar had just fired its ballista.

"Incoming!"

Full Steam Ahead

Phineas did not need the vigil's warning to start spinning the wheel. The tree-sized javelin arced harmlessly in front of the prow. The Varangians must have known they could not hope to hit the human ship but still wanted to make sure its crew realized what awaited them.

“Cannons. Make them count.”

“For god's sake, cut me loose,” his prisoner pleaded. She tugged on her bonds, one foot against the mast. To his frustration, she crouched and started to remove her boot. Had Ian tied her properly? A bare foot poked from her pants as she fiddled with the silvery cord.

“Dame Augusta,” he shouted. “Keep an eye on her.”

Another *thwoop*. This time, the Varangians' shot arced closer on portside. Phineas even had time to see the barbed, black-metal head when it flew underneath the hull.

Above his head, the boarding party's taunts echoed as they prepared to be catapulted at the enemy ship's aerofoils, hooks at the ready to tear long slits from top to bottom. Armed with his infamous speaking trumpet, Ayer let out his first insult. Wounded during a boarding, Ayer could no longer perform his former duties, but he had discovered a second career as official insult-slinger, which he performed admirably and to general delight. Below Phineas on the main deck, Dame Augusta shook her head when Ayer's first tirade blasted out of his customized speaking trumpet.

“*The Varangians are coming! Hide the beer for surely their vile faces will sour it!*” His voice took on dragon-like proportions. On a recent night of drunken revelry, Ayer's trumpet had been tested for reach. The thing could be heard five nautical miles away.

“Captain,” Miss Carmina called through the voicepipe. “We don't have enough steam for a lengthy battle.”

Full Steam Ahead

Four drekkars by definition *meant* a lengthy battle. Phineas cursed under his breath. “How long to Orabilis?”

“If we maintain speed, twelve cycles.”

That meant they would probably still be engaged with the monsters when night would fall in a couple cycles. Damn.

“Keep plotting courses. I shall keep you advised.”

“Boarding party, ready,” Ian, his expert climber, said in the voicepipe leading up to the skydeck. He still sounded miffed from his run-in with the prisoner.

“*Spongy featherbrains!*” Ayer’s speaking trumpet informed the Varangians.

“Wait for my signal.” Turning to Dame Augusta, who gave him a small nod that looked a lot like one of farewell, Phineas gripped the wheel and widened his feet. “Engines, drop us by one hundred and fifty feet.”

He groaned against the sudden change in altitude as the *Brass Baron* decelerated and began to turn into the wind. Phineas waited for the right angle.

“Fire!”

The hiss of steam collecting in the brass tubes surrounding the cannons drowned the crew’s voices. With a whistle and a blast of thunder, the two fore cannons fired. Black dots and heat vortices trailed in the two cannonballs’ wakes. Up ahead, the giant enemy ship began to maneuver away. Too slowly. Twin puffs of smoke against the aft portion of the hull indicated two hits.

“Direct hit,” announced the vigil. “Rudder.”

A collective cheer rose on the *Brass Baron*. Ayer let out another inspired insult. “*Spider lickers! You smell like old cheese!*”

First shot and they had maimed the ship’s steering capability. Perhaps good fortune was smiling on them that day.

Full Steam Ahead

A trio of *thwoops* announced a sharp riposte from the enemy ships. Three ballista shots. Two flew right over the deck, notched the handrail on their way out. The third thudded against the armature holding the starboard side shield to the ship and then fell into the clouds below.

“*Ha! Maggot-pies!*” Ayer taunted. “*Couldn’t aim their own piss!*”

Phineas hissed a curse. “*Dame Augusta.*”

But she had already dispatched one of the mates to check the shield’s condition. They could *not* afford to lose a shield so early in the battle.

Just by the set of her mouth when she turned back to him, Phineas knew it would not be good news. “The shield is intact. But the hinge has been bent.”

Even his prisoner cursed in unison with the rest of the crew.

Two more *thwoops*. One of the ballista shots came so close to the quarterdeck that Phineas ducked instinctively. Tipped with a crescent-shaped blade, the javelin sliced some of the cordage holding the main boom in place. It moaned against the bending forces. One line snapped. The aerofoil started to flap angrily. The thing could collapse any moment. A pair of deck hands—the sisters—nimble climbed the mainmast, bare feet working the ropes entwined around the wooden pole, and reached the spar in record time. One of the lithe young women looped a line that her sister secured while the first rolled over the spar. Hair flying wildly, she came down in a pendulum swing, holding onto the spare line. Phineas nodded his thanks when she landed on the boom, knotted the end of the spare line around the last block, tightened it then dropped to the quarterdeck to run to her next task.

The best crew in the privateering business. He hoped York had witnessed the maneuver from his window.

Full Steam Ahead

“You have to steal their wind!” His prisoner’s yell forced him to look down at her. Her naked foot bled from her incessant jerks against the cord.

The engines’ voicepipe relayed only two pulses remained until they could unfold the shields. Or shield, singular.

The other two drekkars fired their ballistae. Shots thudded against the reinforced hull. *Thunk-thunk*. Phineas looked in horror as one of the javelins came *that* close to the dirigible. They *needed* those shields.

But Ayer was undaunted. “*Seagull eaters!*”

“Engines. How long for the shields?”

“One pulse.”

“Jibe!” The prisoner shuffled around the base of the mast when one of the mates came for her with a handkerchief stretched between his fists. “Come about, turn the stern and steal their wind. It *works*.”

Steal their wind? What nonsense was this?

“*Black tooth! Cheese-encrusted cock-hair!*”

Although if he *could* manage such harebrained maneuver, with the lone remaining shield up to defend their vulnerable flank, he might be able to bring the *Brass Baron* at a sharp enough angle to allow the boarding party to tear the drekkar’s sails. But if it failed, it could spell disaster because the monsters would have ample opportunity to use their wicked bowsprits and shred the dirigible. And everything else, for that matter. Rammed, they wouldn’t stand a chance. They couldn’t afford to engage hand-to-hand. Not with these odds. Not with their cargo and York’s presence. They had to make a run for it.

But in order to do this, he would have to fight his way out. With a damaged shield *and* four drekkars in pursuit.

Full Steam Ahead

“Come on,” she went on, probably guessing his internal debate. “I swear. It works.”

He would regret this decision, he was sure of it. But what else could he do against four drekkars? Plus, at the first sign of perfidy and given her small stature, he could easily toss her overboard.

“Cut her loose,” he ordered to the mate with the handkerchief. “Bring her up here.”

Barely touching the planks, she was escorted up the ladder and onto the quarterdeck. When she was deposited back on the deck, he leaned into her and fisted the front of her slick, yellow garment around the strange, spongy armature clipped to her torso.

“If you’re trying to cripple us,” he snarled, “or trick us, I swear I shall grace you with another big mouth. From ear to ear. Are we clear?”

She nodded emphatically. In her square, freckled face, eyes the color of the Nordic ice sheets flared to the size of coins. She licked her lips—some whitish balm gave her the pallor of a corpse. He had met other women more beautiful than her, that was for sure.

“Crystal clear,” she said.

“Good.”

Whatever the hell was happening, it was for real. To her, anyway. Maybe she *was* in a hospital somewhere, in a coma, or a psychiatric ward and on meds strong enough to conk out a horse. But everything felt *real* to her. The silvery cord digging in her ankle, the wind in her face, the giant darts the other ships were firing at them. All of it real. Too real. She was going completely nuts. Still, she had to do something! She couldn’t sit there and bawl her eyes out as she pretended nothing around here existed. She’d done that and it hadn’t achieved a single damn thing. She was still on a weird craft that was part pirate ship, part dirigible,

Full Steam Ahead

part *something else*. Nothing had changed. And the menace of these huge, black Viking-like ships hadn't gone anywhere, either. They were under fire. Real fire.

When the captain finally told the guy coming at her to cut her loose, she could've danced a jig. But there was no time for that. The enemy, whoever they were, presently fired very large javelins—or small trees—and caused quite a bit of damage to the ship. She didn't have any affiliation, but for now, because that ship was all that kept her in the air, she'd make sure, *damn sure*, to do her bit to help.

With his one gloved hand, the captain gripped the wheel. A muscle twitched along his jaw. “So what is this about stealing their wind?”

“You hold the weather gauge,” she began. “Know what I mean? Stay upwind to them.” She hooked her thumb at the three black ships looming a few hundred feet away. “So they can't maneuver the way they want because they have no proper wind. That'll force them to make corrections all the time, and to think about sailing and *not* firing their guns.”

He must have liked that chain of thought—especially the last bit—because the captain's eyes narrowed meanly. Damn, he was scary. Not that she'd admit it out loud.

He leaned over so he could call instructions into one of the brass funnels bolted to the handrail. A copper pipe for each disappeared into the deck except for a couple that ran up along the foremast and became lost in the tangle of pipes and lines climbing to the superstructure above.

“Plotted, sir. A tenth of a pulse to trim.” Laurel recognized the voice of the young woman dressed all in red.

If she was plotting something, it meant the girl in red was the navigator on this ship. Good to know.

Full Steam Ahead

“*I’m hungry for Varangian brains,*” shouted the guy with the megaphone. “*Too bad they’re so rare!*” Laurel couldn’t help the snort of laughter.

“Engines,” the captain said in another funnel. “Tell me we can deploy the shield.”

“In four pulses, three, two, one. Shields at your disposal, sir.”

“Shields!” the captain roared to the Headmistress on the main deck.

As she’d tried to pull the bonds from her ankle, Laurel had watched the older woman terrorize the sailors with verbal slings pointy enough to poke holes into armored concrete. Laurel decided she’d keep her mouth under control whenever she’d deal with the woman.

Sailors rushed below deck. To Laurel’s shock, the giant Chinese fans on either side of the hull began to unfurl like the wings of a white bat, higher and wider. Steam hissed angrily from tubes that ran the length of the armature. One was raised all the way up so as to hide the vulnerable dirigible, while the other grinded to a stop midway. Obviously, the shot to the hinge had damaged it.

One of the black ships detached itself from the other two—the last had disappeared into the clouds—and came at them, sails bulging with wind, lines straining for the angle. At the end of thick metal I-beams, incongruous propellers roared. On the enemy deck, she spotted large upright forms dressed in dark clothes rushing to and fro. The enemy crew looked *huge*, even with the distance.

“Trying to recognize your master?”

“No. Keep them at six o’clock, then when they’re close enough, you jibe that thing like there’s no tomorrow.”

The captain’s dark eyes narrowed. “I understood not a word of what you just said.”

“*Ocean dwellers!*” shouted megaphone man.

Full Steam Ahead

“Keep them behind, dead center if you can. Then jibe, er, turn into the wind.”

“Into the wind? But that’s demented. We would give way when their bowsprit is about to ram us.”

“Not if you’re fast enough,” she countered. Gripping the handrail beside the wheel, she looked up and tried to see what performed which duty. She’d never been onboard such a large sailboat. Well, not that it was one. But close enough. “How fast can that thing turn, with these at full power?” She pointed to the props.

“Ten pulses for a complete rotation, but I try not to turn my flank to the enemy when they are close enough to read the insignia on my buttons.”

Sarcasm. Any other time, she would’ve loved his reply.

“Ten pulses. What’s a pulse? A second?”

“One pulse, two pulses, three pulses. *Children* know this.”

She let the barb pass. This time.

“Okay, so let’s say a pulse is a second, that means—whoa, that’s *fast*. Good.” Ten seconds to completely turn that huge thing around? Perfect.

“If you say so.” The captain widened his feet. Wind plastered his coat to his thighs. “When we turn, you better hang on to something.”

“Aww! Go hide in your captains’ trousers! Crybabies!”

“Your orders, sir?” called Headmistress from the main deck. She looked worried, as did some of the crew waiting to pull on lines.

“Prepare for full about-turn.”

Horror flashed on many faces but no one questioned his order. They must have trusted him completely because some of them didn’t look any different than if someone would’ve told them to

Full Steam Ahead

jump overboard and trust they'd fly. If she knew nothing about this man, this show of trust would've been enough to get him ahead by a few points. He wasn't all bad. She'd keep that in mind when things quieted down and she brought the lawyers in on her little adventure.

If you come out of it, Benson. Big if.

The crew went to work, pulled on lines, ran across decks, the older woman yelling herself hoarse and chasing after those not running fast enough for her. The Headmistress from hell. Definitely.

Behind them, the closest ship began to maneuver to the left. Its hull bristled with spikes and hooks. No one was crawling up that thing. On deck, the crew came into clearer view.

"Holy mother of... What is *that*?"

The captain shook hair out of his face. "Our death."

The ships' sides bristled with people. Really, *really* big people. A good seven or eight feet tall, and broad. And they seemed impossibly pale, from face to hair to arms and hands. Laurel shivered.

Four hundred feet or so behind and closing, the ship leaned to the left. Clearly, they were getting ready to overtake them, and she was sure they had more of those devastating javelin-things to fire.

"Anytime you wish," the captain muttered through his teeth.

"Almost. When they're close."

"They're close *now*," he replied. The leather of his single glove squeaked when he twisted his hand nervously around the pommel on the wheel. "Madam, they're *very* close now."

"Not yet. Wait until they can't weasel their way out of it." Despite the wind, she sweated in her PFD and unzipped her jacket to the waist. She realized she'd curled her fingers into the guardrail. Wood splinters darkened under her fingernails.

Full Steam Ahead

The captain swore under his breath, leaned over one of the funnels. “Boarding party at the ready!”

The guy with the megaphone renewed his colorful and inventive insults. *Dragon larvae jam?* She’d never heard that one before.

The first black ship loomed closer. Three hundred feet if she had to guess. “Boarding party? You want to *board* that thing?”

“No, shred their aerofoils. Just mind your own affairs and tell me when.”

Shred their sails? What was he talking about?

Laurel counted to herself and gauged the enemy ship to be a few nautical miles an hour faster than hers. They’d have to be quick or lose wind themselves. “Get ready.”

“I’ve been ready for quite some time now, madam,” he growled.

Wind filled the blood-colored square sails. *Not for long, suckers.*

“Now! Jibe! Quick!” Adrenaline made her voice into a trumpet.

“Butt-faced pig people! Your ship is a stinky sty!”

“Boarding party!” roared the captain, followed by a quick series of orders. She had no idea what the orders meant or who the orders addressed. But they made sense to the crew, and only that counted right now.

She heard a strange hiss coming from overhead and almost instantly, several dark forms arced off the ship with thin silvery lines trailing in their wake. What the hell were those? *People?* Laurel shook her head. Were they nuts? Strange cylindrical apparatuses were strapped to their back as they flew at the other ship.

The captain had been right. As soon as the ship began to turn on itself, it gathered incredible speed and force. She hung on to the handrail with both hands, but slipped and collided with the man, who’d strapped himself to the wheelbase. He grunted as he

Full Steam Ahead

expertly spun the wheel hand-over-hand, never once missing a handle or crossing his wrists. The guy was *good*.

Through the chaos and adrenaline of the fight, another layer of stimuli fired her nerve endings. The man was hard all over. Hard and long and lean. Sexy. Despite the moroseness, the symbolic dark and menacing cloud hanging above his head, the man had to be the most handsome, in his own way, she had seen in quite a while. The pressure of his leg between hers as he fought with the wind set off a good jolt of awareness. His upper lip curled up in that ominous way she had quickly come to associate with him.

Laurel couldn't help the surge of heat flaring out of her jacket. The man was dangerously sexy.

With the maneuver, a collective groan rose as some of the crew slid across the deck. Headmistress, one gloved hand on a line connecting the mainmast to the deck, caught a young man as he went careening past backward. She steadied him enough that he could twist cat-like on himself, catch the handrail and crawl back to his position.

Laurel understood then what the captain had tried to do with his boarding party. She watched, slack-jawed, as the dozen or so people flew overhead from the top of the airship, right at the enemy rigging. Something was in their hands too because as soon as they landed amidst the bulging sails and started to fall, long tears in the blood-red fabric followed in their wake. The captain was using the about-turn to keep his boarding party as pivot so they could do their thing. Smart man. Genius, really.

As soon as her ship turned, the boom snapped side-to-side. It groaned against its moorings and flew right over the captain and her. Laurel instinctively tucked her head lower while the much-taller captain just stood straight and kept yelling commands. The boom whipped an *inch* above his head. If that. Plus, he'd been the

Full Steam Ahead

only one unaffected by the sudden change in speed and heading. He kept on manning the wheel with his hard gaze on the enemy and his hands on the handles.

She tried not to imagine what these hands could do to a woman's body. Failed. Miserably.

Under his skillful handling, the ship twisted on itself. Props roared, sails groaned, crewmembers cursed and went sliding along the deck. For a scary second, the sails began to flap for lack of wind. Oh, shit, the shiver effect. But a tiny adjustment to the wheel and the captain had filled them again. He was *good*.

Behind them, the enemy ship wasn't so lucky. Because they were downwind and thus blocked, they couldn't fill their sails again. Plus, the boarding party had literally made ribbons of the fabric. The enemy crew on the black ship clambered up masts and spars, struggling to get at the much smaller boarding party members. The difference in height and mass was incredible. Who were these people?

The centrifugal force still plastered her against the captain. For a split second, he met and held her gaze. Then he pushed her back against the handrail.

"Get them back," the captain yelled at the funnel farthest from him. Whoever was at the other end must have heard because the lines trailing behind the boarders tautened with musical twangs. One by one, the members of the boarding party were winched back from the enemy ship. But one got caught in the rigging. The line strained. Water dripped from the shaking rope.

"Hey." Laurel pointed to the young man—she thought he was a man, difficult to tell with their uniform—as she pulled herself closer to the captain. "One's caught."

"I know that." He spun the wheel half a turn. The ship responded with a groan and accentuated angle. Stuff thudded

Full Steam Ahead

below deck and rolled up above. A loud crunching noise drowned what Headmistress yelled. The lines between the boarding party and the airship's top tensed even more. Two of the flyers were ripped back to dangle along the hull. Whatever apparatus was winching them back worked painfully slow.

"It's Ian," called a voice from above that she could swear belonged to an opera singer. "Ian is trapped."

Ian, wasn't that the one who'd boarded her boat?

Headmistress dispatched a pair of young women who nimbly climbed up ladders that led to the platform overhead. Laurel spotted them on the rope not a second later, like circus acrobats swinging from their own lines as they attempted to untangle the flyer. But they wouldn't reach him fast enough.

She gripped the handrail. "Hurry."

They wouldn't get there in time. Already the closest enemy was maybe ten feet below Ian.

She had to do *something*. She couldn't just stand there and watch.

Laurel grabbed the flare gun from the captain's belt and jumped off the quarterdeck. Before anyone could stop her, she'd climbed on the handrail itself, feet spread wide between the blocks and hanging onto one of the many lines. Some of the enemy crew had already scaled up to Ian's level and were carefully working their way toward the young man, who frantically thrashed against the ropes tangled around him.

She had one shot. Laurel breathed in deep, took aim and fired the flare gun.

The red phosphorus shot blazed a trail from ship to ship and hit the bottom spar on the largest sail. To her shock and delight, the thing caught fire right away. Yelling, the enemy crew clambered back one level of sails to stamp at the fire, which spread rapidly up

Full Steam Ahead

the lacerated sails. Whatever they used as hydrofuge, some kind of oil or tar-based compound, it proved highly flammable. Flames rose along the mainmast and while the two young women reached Ian and cut him loose, the captain brought the ship at perpendicular angle to the burning enemy craft. *Thwoops* announced the dangerous missiles. But the angle was all wrong. The thing couldn't fire directly in front or behind. Black javelins arced from the enemy's side and disappeared into the clouds below.

The rest of the crew cheered when the enemy ship, with its burning sails flapping impotently, began to sink and twist out of control. Like violin cords, the lines still linking the two ships together snapped. Both young women and Ian were reeled back. To Laurel's shock, all three grinned wide.

She jumped down from the handrail only to come face to face with a scowling Headmistress, who grabbed the flare gun from Laurel and slipped it in her belt. "I think I shall hang on to that."

But some of the crew smiled at her as she made her way back to the quarterdeck and the captain. "Next time," he grunted as he fought with the wheel to force the ship into the wind once again. "Warn me or I shall let Dame Augusta shoot you."

"Sir," came the young woman's gentle voice from the funnel. "We need to disengage the enemy *now* or we shall run out of steam."

Laurel looked over the captain's shoulder and cringed. Two more ships. Closing in fast. No way they were disengaging soon enough. They'd have to fight their way out of this mess.

She chuckled as she raked her hands back into her hair. Completely nuts. This was all crazy. Ludicrous. She'd wake any second now. Had to.

Please, let me wake up.

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 3

Why had the stranger helped? She didn't belong to his crew. She had no vested interest. Perhaps survival instinct had warned her that good fortune would leave should the boorish enemy get their claws into the *Brass Baron*. Whatever her motive, she had saved Ian. That bolt of fire had been the perfect riposte at the perfect time.

Grim satisfaction filled Phineas as he watched the Varangian ship, its blood-red sails lacerated and burning, slowly sink into the clouds, to end its journey into the raging, toxic sea. A fitting end to their vile existence. He turned to his prisoner, who stood with her feet wide apart, one small and callused hand on the handrail for support. Suddenly, with the unexpected turn of events, the chapped-lipped, pale-haired and pale-eyed woman didn't seem so strange and foreign to him, didn't seem so different from them all. Not to mention his physical reaction to her short and hard body crushed against him during the about-turn.

"The other two ships are moving in, sir," cried the vigil.

Ayer echoed the vigil's warning, but with his unique spin. "*Two ships of Varangians are about to compare cocks! Get out the magnifying glasses!*"

Because they had made a complete about-turn for his prisoner's outlandish maneuver, they now had the two enemy ships on their port side, quickly converging toward the *Brass Baron*. Both sported bulging sails and no doubt a full complement of warriors. Comparing pistols more than cocks, he was sure.

"Miss Carmina," he called into the navigation voicepipe. "Do we have enough steam for another boarding party?"

Full Steam Ahead

“No, sir. We wouldn’t have enough left to make it to Orabilis. Should I send a bird?”

Sending a bird to Orabilis asking for the Admiralty’s help would amount to telling York that Phineas could not be trusted to handle the very lucrative association. Plus, he was a privateer, and therefore, no friend of the Admiralty. “No. Plot a course for Orabilis now. We’ll fight them as we go.”

Dame Augusta gripped the bottom of the quarterdeck ladder and looked up. “Your orders, sir?”

“We set for Orabilis. Keep our remaining shield to them. Have the cannons ready for several salvos but do not fire. We must preserve steam for propulsion.”

“Should I have the boarding party take up long-range rifles? The lads and lasses will want to play.”

“Do it.”

She rushed off to relay his orders. The boarding party’s cheers rose to drown even Ayer’s speaking trumpet. They climbed back down to the main deck, pulled out long-range rifles from the armory chest beneath the castle deck and took positions along the handrail. Ian stopped long enough for a small nod of thanks to the prisoner before rushing to join his colleagues. They were bad shots to the last one of them, but Dame Augusta had been right, they would want to do something with themselves. Perhaps a lucky bullet would hit the enemy helmsmen. If someone could man the helm to his own ship, Phineas would gladly take up a rifle himself. He was the best shot onboard. Well, perhaps not anymore after his prisoner’s feat. What kind of gun shot fire?

“What do I do?” she asked. She raked back her pale hair with one hand.

“You stay put and shut up.”

“But, I just helped—”

Full Steam Ahead

“I said shut up, did I not?”

Muttering, she gripped the handrail and turned her back to him to watch the enemy ships’ advance.

Temper.

Phineas grabbed the pair of proculars from his belt and pressed them to his eyes. With the late afternoon sun, he had to flick the blue and red filters over the lenses. The enemy ships seemed close enough to touch. He squinted, scanning for the helmsmen, finding each a few seconds later. Neither of them were Thorne Sankliver. Good. He didn’t need the fiend’s presence on top of everything else. Although he couldn’t be very far. He never was. Cemeteries and the sea bottom were littered with Thorne’s kills.

His prisoner watching from the corner of her eye, Phineas adjusted his course to outrun the ships. Above his head, the boom creaked when it began to move left to right. Somewhere below deck, something clunked. But he kept to his heading, hand over hand turned the wheel until the aerofoils began to luff, and then when he knew he played with fire, he abruptly tacked.

“Hang on,” he roared. “Hard to starboard!”

Dame Augusta relayed his orders, one hand to the shroud, the other cupped to her cheek. Her voice did not need amplification. Never had. He should know.

Wood groaned, sails shivered, spars smacked against their moorings as the *Brass Baron* executed a tight right-turn. Both enemy ships tried to match his course, one with more success than its cohort. Like blood-drenched paintings, their aerofoils bulged. Propellers roaring, the lead ship turned enough to present its side to Phineas. Just too tempting a target.

“Cannons. One shot.”

Dame Augusta had barely relayed the order before thunder erupted from beneath his feet. His four cannons fired

Full Steam Ahead

simultaneously, a tribute to his crew's fine handling. The salvo hit the other's metal-barbed hull. Three of the shots rebounded against armor plates, but the fourth crashed through the wood planks near one of the rudders. At once, the ship leaned to port, bowsprit up in the air, entered into a spin and began to veer sharply, so abruptly that it collided with its beastly neighbor. Both riggings became entangled. The roar of outrage from the two crews could be heard over the din. Phineas could not believe his good fortune. He even threw his prisoner a quick nod, which she acknowledged with a strange gesture of drawing a short vertical line in the air. The number one?

Ayer peppered the crew's cheers with some of his own. "*Take that! You slimy poltroons! Go kiss the sea demoness's pimply ass!*"

The violent lurch caught everyone by surprise. The ship rocked hard as though it had struck something.

Phineas widened his feet. "What in the bloody sea was that?"

"Below." The vigil's cry came a split second before the tip of a Varangian ship's rigging appeared not fifty feet from the handrail. They had rammed the *Brass Baron* from *underneath*?

"Cannons! Rifles! Drop the anchors!"

All at once, his crew obeyed his commands. Cannons were spun and aimed as far down as possible while the boarders all fired right below the handrail. On a long rattling moan of metal against wood, both anchors were dropped onto the enemy deck. Immediately after they hit, he had his crew reel them back lest the enemy clamber onboard. He heard the shattering and the cursing and smiled in spite of the turn of events. If they were going to die, they would take as many brutes with them as possible. Too bad York had been there to witness the demise of the *Brass Baron*.

Full Steam Ahead

To his right, the rigging continued to rise. The drekkaar that had dipped into the clouds at the beginning of the battle surfaced like a ghost ship. Its shielded dirigible crested first, then two masts and square sails the color of blood. Shreds of cloud still clung to its rigging when it maneuvered to face the human ship. Its low handrail bristled with Varangian hordes waiting to board the *Brass Baron*. Pistols and machetes, spears and steambows glistened like metallic death.

“Captain,” the vigil warned. “It’s him.”

Thorne. Phineas swore under his breath. He should have known. He wasn’t ready to face him. Not today, not crippled with a single shield. The honorable thing would be to stay and fight. But a *smart* woman had raised Phineas.

“Retreat. Prepare for tack.” One hit, then he would back out of enemy reach.

Whatever had not been anchored rolled when he brought his ship at a sharp angle, turned and turned the wheel, kept turning until his bowsprit faced that of the other ship. Face to face with his old enemy.

Steam hissed and whistled. Moans from both ships announced more maneuvering. Sails began to flutter. Wind shoved the boom from right to left, where it hung loosely. His prisoner nervously tucked her head low in her shoulders as she gripped the handrail of the quarterdeck.

“Nina. Joy.” His best deck mates, both accomplished climbers, ran up to the ladder. The sisters’ pointy faces upturned to him.

“Sir?”

“Cut their main lines. Be *careful*.”

Both bounded up the shrouds, hand over hand, displaying incredible strength and skill, and had soon reached the aft buttress sticking out over the void. Below, barely fifty feet away, the

Full Steam Ahead

enemy ship kept surfacing. Phineas could see the helmsman. Thorne. Rage triggered a wave of heat up to his face. That hateful, detestable creature. His arm burned.

Nina and Joy, lines securing them to the *Brass Baron's* many winches, dropped like flying monkeys to land on the enemy ship's foremast. Right on the very tip of it. Flashes indicated they had begun to slice lines with their wicked little blades. The sisters had joined his crew several years before as deck mates and had soon displayed such skill at climbing around the rigging he had charged them with anything that did not happen on deck. He hated putting them at risk so, but they had no choice. They could not be boarded. Not by this particular Varangian crew. Phineas was as stubborn as any other privateer, but he would never willingly cross iron with Thorne Sankliver, not when the barbarians surpassed him in crew number and ship armament. Profit was one thing, recklessness quite another.

A hail of bullets flew up from the enemy ship, sending slivers of wood flying, creating scuffs on metals parts and the armored glass cylinders holding some of the carburant to power the winches. He spotted one of his boarding party members snap back to lay groaning on the deck. Another joined her. Phineas swore. More gunshot erupted. From his crew. From the enemy. More wood chips flying.

Roars of outrage from the Varangians announced they had spotted, amidst the chaos of bullets zipping back and forth, the two lithe climbers chopping all-important lines holding aerofoils in place. Some dropped onto their spars, others fluttered uselessly. While his boarders peppered the enemy with long-range rifle shots, both women vaulted over to the next mast, which they attacked right away. Wood chips flew from the enemy mainmast. Too large to come from one of his rifles. The giants were firing up into their

Full Steam Ahead

own rigging in hopes of catching one of the women. But their work was done.

“Reel them back!”

Nina let go of the main mast when her line tautened behind her harness and brought her back up hard against the *Brass Baron*'s hull. And now for Joy.

But something happened that squeezed his heart painfully. With an impotent *clunk*, the winch linking Joy detached from the upper deck. Moved by instincts that rivaled a panther's, she just had time to slice her line before the heavy winch fell onto the enemy ship, shattering the deck and creating chaos down below. If she had not cut the line, the heavy piece of cast iron would have taken her with it on its way down.

“Oh, no.” His prisoner clasped her hand over her mouth.

“Boarders, provide fire cover.”

Most shots missed but it was still enough to keep most of the brutes from clambering up the rigging to reach the trapped young woman.

“The bowsprit,” someone yelled. Ian? “We can reach her there.”

Thunder erupted when the other ship fired its cannons. Phineas heard and felt the tremors of direct hits to the hull. By the goddess, his poor crew down below.

Cries reached him. Dame Augusta dispatched a handful of deckhands to help with the damage. Soon, the engines voicepipe vomited smoke. It stung his eyes and nose. But he held on to the wheel despite the discomfort. His engine crew suffered much worse.

From mainmast to fore topmast then on to the line holding it to the bowsprit, Joy moved fast. She slid down the line and soon stood on the very tip of the bowsprit, as far forward on the enemy

ship as possible. Ian and a couple of boarders clambered over the *Brass Baron* handrail.

“Joy,” Ian yelled.

He had gone down on his belly at the tapered end of the propeller shaft and threw a line that could never hope to reach the young woman. He tried several times, after the fourth unsuccessful attempt, climbed to his knees to throw the loop of rope farther. It tickled the tip of the enemy bowsprit, but not close enough for Joy to reach. She would have to jump to catch it.

Ian turned back and said something to Dame Augusta, who turned to Phineas. “We’re flying too fast.”

Both ships had begun to move apart from one another so as to be able to fire cannons. The drekkaar, some of its sails gone for the sisters’ sabotage, was dropping speed and some altitude as well. Thorne must have wanted a good shot at Phineas’s lower hull.

“I cannot,” Phineas yelled back to Augusta. “They’re readying another salvo.”

“Joy!” Ian dangerously clambered up the actual propeller cage to give himself another precious foot or so. “Jump at the rope.”

Two of the enemy crew, knives out and flashing menacingly, neared Joy, who backed a bit farther away. She was running out of bowsprit. Already, a mere two feet or so remained before a thousand feet of sky and the poisonous sea below.

Phineas spun the wheel in an attempt to angle his ship down and give another couple precious feet to Ian. The line passed barely five feet from Joy’s hand.

“*Sir*,” Ian called.

“I know.” He could do very little to diminish the distance. Ships could not fly backward. Not under this situation. Already, he was playing with fire. Literally. Smoke still rose out of the engines

voicepipe. He could hear the crew yelling as they fought the flames.

His crew took up Ian's cry, enjoining Joy to make a jump for it. One of the Varangians advancing on her pulled a pistol from his belt, took aim.

The shot clacked.

Joy shuddered, barely managed to hang on to the line. Blood appeared on her leg. Her foot slipped, she fell sitting astride the thick beam. Grinning wide, the monster joined her halfway. His rictus of triumph and lustful greed slashed Phineas across the chest. She would be caught alive.

Dame Augusta rushed to the quarterdeck and looked up at him. "We cannot save her *and* the ship." Her usual resonant voice was subdued.

"You," he growled. His prisoner's bright blue eyes were huge as she turned to face him. "Take the wheel." Phineas hurriedly unstrapped himself from the wheelbase, pulled his prisoner by the sleeve until she stood to replace him. "You keep us in that heading. No matter what."

She didn't complain, didn't ask questions or show displeasure or confusion. On a sharp nod of understanding, his prisoner took the wheel in two steady hands and widened her feet.

Phineas leaped from the quarterdeck and ran across the main deck. His crew scurried out of his path. On his way he ripped one of the long-range rifles from a boarder's hand, cocked it as he ran. Up the forecastle deck. He swore he did not touch a single step as he leaped up. Landed on both feet. By his side, the enemy ship was dropping further away, one hundred feet, one fifty. The closest Varangian had Joy by the ankle and was tugging her to him, to his crew's vociferous delight. Another salvo of cannons rocked the *Brass Baron*. A thunderous crash preceded a portion of rigging

Full Steam Ahead

landing on the main deck, sending his crew and Dame Augusta scampering and yelling. Yet everything came strangely muted to him. His crew ran to and fro, his second-in-command roaring instructions and making order of chaos.

She had been right. He couldn't save both.

Three hundred feet and moving back slowly, the other ship began to turn away. Thorne probably meant to turn hard enough to present more gunports. Phineas's ship could not take many more shots. Wind whipped his hair when he leaned both elbows on the thick handrail. He took a second to flip up the brass sight from the barrel, flicked both blue and red lenses down over the tip. The rifle's wooden body felt cool against his cheek when he aimed. Silence replaced clamor. Focus replaced distractions.

In the rifle's sight, Joy's magnified face was turned toward him. Long black hair partly hid her eyes. Behind her, the barbarian grinned wide. Delighted with his luscious prize.

Phineas put his finger to the trigger. Cold against his gloveless hand. Joy appeared silent, mouth closed, staring at him. The moment did not last. The lifespan of a spark. But he *knew*. He understood her silent pleas. Doubt left him. He fired.

One of the three shots hit the Varangian yanking on her ankle, sent him strumming down the shroud like a broken puppet. The second and third shots both hit Joy. She shuddered, blood like liquid rubies seeping outward on her slim chest. In the magnifying lens, a triumphant smile spread on her face and Joy lurched forward in one last defiant push. She slipped from the beam to plummet into the clouds. A bird with ruined wings but unbroken spirit.

They would not catch one of his crew alive, not as long as he drew breath. No matter the cost to his soul.

Full Steam Ahead

Laurel couldn't believe her eyes. He'd just shot one of his own crew. A mercy killing, but still. Saliva tasted sour in her suddenly dry mouth.

After the captain had rushed all the way to the other end of his ship, the Headmistress had climbed up to the wheel and kept a hard eye on Laurel. What did the woman think she'd do? Steal the damn thing?

The captain's dark eyes were rimmed in red, mouth a thin line, when he returned to the wheel. He looked even more forlorn and sullen than when she'd been brought onboard. Without acknowledging her, he strapped himself to the wheel base again. She backed away from him, not in fear or horror but to give him some space. The Headmistress placed a solicitous hand on his forearm, the one without the glove, gave a squeeze then rejoined her spot on the main deck.

The crew was silent as he gave orders to put as much distance as possible between the enemy ship and them. Smoke had stopped coming out of the funnels. Someone in one of the brass cones announced the fire was under control. Even the guy with the megaphone was quiet. The other young woman was reeled back onto the deck, where she crumbled in a sobbing heap. Climber wrapped his arms around her and both stayed this way as Headmistress pushed and shoved and yelled the stunned crew back into motion. They had quite a bit of repair to do as the last shot from the Viking ship had demolished the forward part of the rigging. At least the dirigible part was intact. Without this, even she knew they'd sink like a rock. Instead of firing and finishing the job, the enemy ship turned at a forty-five-degree angle. Up somewhere on the mainmast, Opera Singer warned the Varangians—the bad guys, she surmised—were pointing something called *proculars* and scanning the ship. She had no idea

what that meant other than the captain throwing a dark glance her way. What had she done now?

“What does it mean?” she asked.

“He wants to see who is at the helm.”

“At the helm?”

“Thorne is always on the lookout for new human helmsmen, and those who catch his eyes....”

Laurel swallowed hard. She zipped the collar all the way up and tucked her chin down under the Varangian’s unseen scrutiny. “They wind up dead?”

The captain shook his head. “They only wish.”

Laurel swallowed hard. During the next few minutes, the enemy ship slipped farther away before sinking into the clouds. Like a shark diving after an attack. A frisson tightened her nape. She rubbed her arms to give herself something to do.

That poor girl.

She threw a surreptitious glance at the captain, who looked as though he meant to never blink again. She wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but he kind of...sort of.... Well, he scared her. A little bit. Or more.

Maybe it was the wild fury in his eyes as he’d rushed off, or perhaps it was the calculated murder of one of his own crew. It had taken some cold nerves to fire at the trapped girl. She wasn’t sure she’d have the guts to do something like this, even knowing what would happen to that poor woman. She wouldn’t want to be caught by the likes of...whatever they were.

“It’s Phineas,” the captain muttered. “Phineas Hamilton.”

“That’s your name?”

He threw her a dark glare. “Surely you want a name to put on the monster you think I am.”

“I don’t think you’re a monster.”

“How can you not? Have you lived with the beasts so long that you forgot what a monster looks like?”

A wave of heat flared out of her collar. “You *know* I’m not one of them.”

“Where lies your allegiance then? Certainly not with us. If not them, then with whom?”

“No one. I just want to go home.”

“Then you are no better than the traitors who infiltrate us to better their position with the enemy. Despicable traitors who turn on their own species.”

She stood in front of him, hands on hips. “Then if you just let me get to a radio, or a phone so I can contact my crew, I’ll be out of your hair and you won’t have to worry about me.”

He leaned into her. Those dark eyes could melt a hole into armored plating. “Do you not realize that I can’t release you?”

Her heart squeezed painfully. “W-what?”

His lips glistened after he moistened them. “The *Brass Baron* will be your home until I figure out what to do with you.”

“You can’t keep me here against my will. It’s wrong and it’s illegal.”

A dark eyebrow arched. “Is that so?”

For a terrible second, his eyes narrowed to murderous slits. Then a smirk appeared on the corner of his mouth. “You are staying, madam. End of conversation. Unless you think you can fly, in which case, you’re welcome to try.”

Heat flushed her cheeks as she wrestled with the perfect riposte to the jerk’s comment. But in the end, she just crossed her arms and backed up until she could lean against the handrail. Let him think he had the last word. At the first opportunity, she’d get the hell off this ship, and there was nothing he could do. In the meantime, Laurel would study the ways of this vessel and its crew.

Full Steam Ahead

By the time he looked at her again, studied her as he unstrapped himself from the wheel base, the sun had started to dip into a section of the sea she could see through the thick cover of clouds. Slashes of brown and purple stretched from the horizon. It was eerily beautiful, if a bit odd. She'd never seen such a sunset. The look was right, but the colors were all wrong. She wondered what Jacques was doing right now, if he'd alerted the authorities his racer had disappeared. The shore crew would be going nuts. It wasn't like her to go silent for so long. Plus, was she even on the same sea?

What the hell are you thinking?

Of course she was. This couldn't be happening. She lay in a hospital bed somewhere, medicated out of her mind. The weather had pounded her ship, she'd lost consciousness, Jacques had sent the rescue teams after her. Unless she was dead. Laurel looked around at the strange ship and its stranger crew and shook her head. Where could she have come up with all of this? Some of the stuff, she couldn't even imagine what it did. Half the tools hanging from the captain's belt were foreign to her. Weapons? Tools? She had no idea. One thing she knew though, as much as Phineas was a jerk, she'd fallen on the good side, because from what little she'd seen of the other guys, she did *not* want to mess with them. That poor girl. What she must have thought as she was being shot by her own captain? In a small part of her, Laurel couldn't help feeling resentment toward the man. Why hadn't he tried to maneuver the ship closer instead of going to that extreme? Couldn't they have followed the enemy ship, boarded it and taken the girl back? It didn't seem likely. The difference in size—ship *and* crew—was just too much. Damn, what a screw up.

"Come with me." The captain's muttered comment pulled her out of her dark musings. She followed while an older man with

Full Steam Ahead

hands as wide as her thighs came to replace the captain at the wheel. The night watch?

She followed Phineas down the ladder and onto the main deck, where Headmistress, after a nod to the boss, fell into step behind them as he opened a door and descended into a darkened corridor. Laurel felt the weight of many stares pressing between her shoulder blades. But at least they weren't hostile. Mostly curious. A couple even smiled at her. She'd scored a few points when she'd shot the flare gun.

"I'll go assess the damage to the hull," the captain announced as he pointed to a narrow door to his left. "Then I'll join you in a few pulses."

"What do I do with her?" Headmistress opened the door to what Laurel guessed was the captain's cabin.

"Nothing until I return." He turned back before he stepped down another, narrower ladder that protruded from the gleaming wooden floor. His dark eyes were lost in the shadows under his furrowed brow. "*Then* I shall get answers."

Headmistress indicated the room beyond the door. Laurel backed into it just in case the older woman had any ideas. It occurred to her just then that she was still missing one boot. And her ankle burned from tugging against the silvery cord that had kept her in place. "I don't *have* any answers to give. I told you, all I want—"

"Sit."

Headmistress indicated a straight-backed chair by a narrow ledge along the wall. A worktable, she wagered. Some things were the same as on her own ship, the same economy of space, the frugal and functional decor. Nothing that didn't fill at least three tasks had a place in this room. Beyond a partly drawn, red velvet curtain, Laurel could spot the foot of a plain, narrow bunk a foot

off the deck. Four star luxury. Clearly, this wasn't the cabin of a diva captain. Or divo.

Laurel removed her PFD and looped it on the backrest before unhurriedly sitting down. No one was going to make her rush around like an idiot. She wouldn't run after anything, no man, no ball nor bus. She'd always had an ego the size of her mouth.

The Headmistress studied her before she removed her gloves and looped them in her wide belt. Laurel couldn't get over the woman's garments. Like Victorian or something, but with bits and pieces clearly not meant to be historical. Where the hell was she?

From a compartment Laurel hadn't noticed, the older woman pulled a narrow glass tube filled with amber liquid. No glass for her. She just flicked the cap off and took a long gulp. Despite the fact the older woman drank from what Laurel supposed was a bottle, she did it with extreme refinement and class, pinky up and all. Who could drink directly from a bottle and not look like a slob?

"So, ah, what's your name?" Laurel tried to sound unaffected as she cleared her throat and waited.

"You may address me as Dame Augusta. I am the second-in-command on Captain Phineas's ship, the *Brass Baron*."

Phineas. He just doesn't look like a Phineas. "And where are we?"

"Either you're a gifted liar, or you truly do not know where we are." Dame Augusta raised the bottle, took another gulp and then capped it again.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear the liar part."

"A perfectly acceptable choice."

Laurel crossed her legs. "Just like it'll be my choice when I drag you all into court."

“If you think the authorities will be kinder than the captain, then by all means, do disembark in Orabilis and demand an audience with the portreeve. I’ll be very interested to see how long you last, dangling over a roasting pit.”

Laurel swallowed.

Luckily, the door opened just as Dame Augusta looked about to go on. Red greatcoat wide open, the captain stood in the embrasure, filling it with his intensity, smelling of smoke and looking ready to break heads. Longish dark hair spilled over his eyes and cast the rest of his lean face in shadows. Muscles twitched along his jaw. The tiny flame in the gas lamp quivered when he kicked the door close behind him. Ego or not, Laurel stared at the floor. He was hot and he was scary.

“Where are you from?” he demanded. The leather glove creaked when he balled his fist. “If not from Varangian stock, then who the bloody sea are you?”

“I told you already—”

“I’m gifted with an excellent memory, Laurel Benson-Desmarais with a shore crew in Les Sables. Now, I want to know what island you call home. I’ve never heard of Les Sables. Where do you *come from*?”

“I told you. But you don’t want to hear me.”

The captain stalked up to her and grabbed her PFD from the backrest. Brandishing it like an offending thing, he turned to Dame Augusta. “What is this? Do you know? Who makes these odd things?” He threw it at Laurel’s feet. “Everything about you is foreign. Your hair, your eyes are Varangian. Your clothes are...the sea goddess knows what. But you look like us. I am at my wits’ end with you. Maybe I should just throw you back into the sea, since you claim to have sailed it on a boat.”

Full Steam Ahead

“You destroyed my boat and are holding me against my will. You *kidnapped* me.”

Phineas stomped across the cabin, pushed aside the red velvet curtains and wrenched open a porthole she hadn't seen. Outside, dark purple clouds shredded the sky, which had turned amber and bronze. Wind whistled into the opening as he extended his gloved hand, inviting her. “By all means. Set yourself free.”

“I think,” Dame Augusta put in slowly. “That we all can agree this girl is not—that you, Laurel, are not—Varangian, hence not the enemy.”

Laurel sighed in relief.

“Although not necessarily an ally,” Augusta went on. Her gaze was dead serious. “I don't know what place you call home, but because of the way you look, you will not be welcome where we're going. Like it or not, the *Brass Baron* is your home for the next little while. Unless the captain thinks otherwise.”

Laurel cast the man a glance. She was reminded again how forlorn and alone he seemed, even here in a tiny cabin with two other people. A wall had been erected around him. Of his own making? Who knew? Not that she cared, either.

“Thank you, Dame Augusta.” He yanked the curtain back over the window.

The woman nodded and left. Laurel noticed she had taken the bottle with her. She also noticed a change in the air as the captain and she stood alone in the cabin, and she half expected to see sparks of electricity dance along the coffered ceiling. Because when Phineas turned to glare at her, with that menacing air like a fog enshrouding him, Laurel could do nothing else but stand there riveted to the spot. Fear did that to people. Fear and attraction.

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 4

What to do with her?

He could easily grab her by an ankle and dangle her over the void until she told him every little secret stored in that hard head of hers. In fact, perhaps he should. But what would that say about him if he couldn't get answers without resorting to physical duress? Not very much. Maybe he should try something more subtle. Instead of coercing her through brute force, he might coax her with a gentle touch. It would be so much more fun to make her whimper with pleasure than with fear.

And he really shouldn't be thinking about *that* right now.

"Where is Les Sables again?"

"France."

"And where is France?"

"Europe."

Phineas stalked across the cabin, fisted the front of her eccentric garment and reeled her to him. She weighed more than he had anticipated but far less than his comfortable tossing weight. The warmth of her flesh seeped through the fabric, but he tried not to notice that. "One-word answers are not advisable in your present situation, Laurel Benson-Desmarais of Les Sables, France, Europe. Perhaps I should find less agreeable means of getting my answers?"

She stared unblinkingly. Stubbornly. "You're being a bully," she said through her teeth. "I don't bend to bullies."

"I lost three crewmembers today, madam. Each a thousand times your worth to me. Do not think I'm above resorting to physical pain to get what I want. And I *will* get what I want."

Full Steam Ahead

Her cheeks blushed as she looked somewhere above his head, trying to hide her emotions from him. He leaned even closer to her. She would not be afforded the luxury of hiding. Not from him, not on his damn ship. As he was about to tell her what privateers did to traitors, a faint tendril of her scent interrupted his breathing and his chain of thought. A mix of the foreign layered with the familiar. Female musk, fruity undertones and others he could not name and which he suspected emanated from her odd, glossy coat. Her gaze flicked back to his as if in surprise, narrowed and then unexpectedly widened. Irises an even paler shade of icy blue tightened to pinpricks. Someone recognizing a familiar face.

The air suddenly thickened. Phineas could hardly remember what he had been about to say. Somber thoughts of intimidation and a pressing need for information eased as heat from her breath tickled his throat and warmed the frayed corner of his collar he should have had mended a long time ago. He swallowed hard. Hair in disarray partly hid her eyes, but her expression changed from defiance to shock to something that must have mirrored his own internal transition. It stirred something deep within him, and he couldn't dismiss it any longer. She was no longer a mere outsider with an odd accoutrement and outlandish dialect. She was a *woman*. An unusual one to say the least. But a hard, fit woman who presently matched every angle and relief from his knees to his chest. As if she was a negative mold of him. Or he a positive mold of *her*. For the first time since she had stepped on his ship, Phineas could only see the woman and not the dangerous foreigner.

Phineas breathed in her scent and let out a silent ribbon of breath that disturbed a few loose hairs sticking out of her bangs.

“Do you know,” he forced out, struggling for focus. His voice sounded almost intimate and tender to his own ears. He cleared his

throat and tried again. “Do you know what privateers do to traitors?”

She swallowed and Phineas could not help staring at the way her throat moved. Inviting. “I-I’m not a traitor. I don’t have a dog in this fight.”

Clearly, she shared the transformation that had taken him, in the way she looked up into his face, without the accusatory or belligerent expression he had come to associate with the woman. With *Laurel*.

“Why can’t you believe me?”

Lust. Obviously, his male instincts were betraying his psyche. He never should have touched her. But the thought of letting go of her garment proved harder than he thought. If he let go, he would have no reason to stand so close to her. Why did he lust after her? What else should she evoke in a man other than frustration? Still, for her sturdy body and fiery temper, she must make a formidable partner in bed. Albeit a disagreeable one. He narrowed his eyes to drive his point home. And to give himself some countenance.

“Here is my position. I *cannot* trust you. I *will not* release you. The *Brass Baron* is your temporary home, as Dame Augusta pointed out. Accept it.”

“You mean my prison.”

“Call it what you wish. It matters little to me.”

“I’m beginning to see that. Nothing matters to you. And no one.”

His heart skipped a beat. Her slick garment made a squeaky noise when he hardened his fist on her lapel. “What do you mean by that?”

“You didn’t even go see her, the one you reeled back, after you—after the other one—” She looked away again, movement

that drove a spike through his chest. His budding interest in her crystallized and broke.

“You mean, after I killed that girl?” His voice rose before he could put the leash back on his temper. His mother’s side. “Have you any idea what they would have done to that poor girl? The debasements, the violations? Joy would have been raped to within a whisper of her life, revived, and then skinned alive. *If* she were fortunate enough to avoid catching Thorne’s eye.”

Joy’s relief when she realized his intentions did little to provide him with any now.

A flicker of empathy softened the stranger’s expression. Her thin mouth quirked at one corner. “Spare me the details. I know what men can do to women.”

“They are not men.”

He released the front of her odd coat. She did not move back from him. He would have expected her to shove away from him, or to at least take a step backward to put distance between them. Perhaps she did not care. Perhaps she did not mind. His predicament only deepened. His male nature seemed to want to have his way with her right then and there, but luckily his intellect ruled his actions. It always had. Phineas willed his arousal to subside.

She raked her hair out of her eyes. “You like to have the last word, don’t you?”

“I *am* the captain.”

“I’m a captain, too.”

“Where is your ship, then?”

“At the bottom of the sea where *you* sent it.”

“How convenient.”

“Ask Climber—er, that guy you sent down. He saw it and he told you so.”

Full Steam Ahead

“What were you doing on that boat?”

“I was in the middle of a race. But there was a storm, thunder and lightning strikes like I’ve never seen before. Waves as high as apartment buildings. Then something just happened. Everything changed.”

“Something just happened? A little vague, don’t you think?”

She rolled her eyes. “If I’m being vague, you’re being stubborn.”

He *was*, truth be told. Another charming consequence of his past. He wondered if Dame Augusta felt the same betrayal he did with humanity as a whole or if she had drunk the details out of focus. He pushed the past beneath the surface. Where it belonged. Where it could not hurt him.

Phineas was confronted with the probability that she was not from any of the islands he knew about. An undiscovered realm, perhaps? Were there any left? Had not the entirety of Orbus been mapped already? How could there be new, uncharted worlds when he had spent his life sailing the skies and had in his possession a most extensive collection of nautical charts? Surely new worlds named “Europe” or “France” would have garnered at least a few stories and rumors? Clearly, she had lied. Why?

Yet the stranger looked so earnest when she described the storm that he almost believed her wild claims. Almost. Trust had never been one of his few virtues. For all he knew, she could have on her person right then more of those incendiary weapons she had used to burn the enemy aerofoils.

By the sea demoness....

His slip of judgment made him want to kick something. He had been so busy with the enemy outside his ship that he had forgotten to deal with the one within. He had basically let this stranger walk around his ship without even having her searched properly.

Full Steam Ahead

“Remove your outer garments.” He crossed his arms because he could already see the battle brewing in her strange eyes. Life could not be simple with her. He felt sorry for the man shackled with such a life partner. If she had one.

The notion she probably did brought a pang of jealousy he could not explain. She was not even his type of woman, and comely at best, if perhaps a little intriguing. She was not even his *species*. Or barely. Or was she?

“My outer garments?” she demanded. “You want me to take my clothes off?”

“Not the underthings. I am no boar.”

“Absolutely not.” Her lips thinned to an angry line.

“Should I search you then?”

He put his hand on her hip. Lightly. Electricity jolted him right to his core. It must have her, as well, because her eyes flared, her mouth loosened. The pulse at her neck intensified. Each little throb clearly noticeable as he watched, transfixed by the sight of her neck, so strong and fitting her solid physique, with skin that looked soft enough to warrant a lover’s prolonged ministrations. The atmosphere charged like the sky just before a thunderstorm. He discovered, much to his vexation, that his body seemed immune to his mind’s reservations about his guest’s origin and goals. In fact, the more he looked at her, the more his blood boiled. Phineas *wanted* her. He had spent the better part of the day standing by her side yet had not really noticed her. Not as a woman, anyway. Not like he did now. Phineas suddenly felt constricted and warm in his many layers of clothing.

“I’m not armed,” she breathed.

“Which in no way equates to not being dangerous.”

She tilted her head. Subtly. An overture? A test? A ruse?

This has to stop!

Full Steam Ahead

Phineas forced himself to return to the table and lean against it. A safe distance. But despite this added measure, her neck still called to him to touch it, kiss it, explore her skin and where it would lead. She intrigued him, this strange woman with hair and eyes like those of the enemy. Yet clearly her size and facial features were all human. Dame Augusta had been right in assessing that their guest would be welcome in neither world.

“Why did you attack the Varangian ship? You have no obligation to this crew or to myself. No loyalty to us.” A not-so-subtle change of subject. He hoped it would return his countenance.

“I know bad guys when I see them. Plus, I wanted to live. They seemed bent on preventing that.” While she spoke, he looked at her mouth and how she formed the words. That dreaded white balm was gone, and revealed rosy lips that did nothing to help his focus.

“No sense of allegiance to your own kind?” he asked to break the awkward silence.

“Survival instincts are stronger than loyalty.”

“Are survival instincts stronger than anything?”

She nodded.

What should I do with her?

He had no idea, frankly. He could not keep her indefinitely tied to the mast of his ship. Somehow, he would have to deal with her and what she represented. Were there other people like her? Fair haired and pale eyed yet not Varangian? The Admiralty would want to know, would want a closer look at her. Perhaps York could arrange for a lucrative exchange, as he had offered. But then Phineas wouldn't see the woman again. Not alive, anyway. Why did he care?

Full Steam Ahead

“You could help me get back home. Just drop me off somewhere. I’ll manage.”

“You know I cannot do that,” he murmured. “Wherever you home is, I cannot take you there. I cannot let you go.”

“I think you can,” she countered likewise in a whisper. “And I think you *should*.”

“A threat?”

“Advice.”

Simply unflappable. And dangerous. He squeezed his eyes shut for a second, to regain some measure of control, then set his gaze on her, nonchalantly put his hand on the handle of his pistol. “I have advice for you, too. Remove your outer garments.”

Like a weathervane, her expression flashed to hard and angry. “No. And next time you touch me, I’ll kick your ass.”

Phineas narrowed his eyes. “Why not now? Why wait until next time? Because you are hoping by then to have convinced yourself you did not enjoy it?”

The sound of her knuckles against his mouth seemed to surprise them both. He patted two forefingers to his lips, realized they were bleeding. “You are engagingly easy to taunt.”

She cocked her arm for another.

Phineas moved fast. He blocked her right arm, locked it by twisting his wrist a quarter turn. With his superior height and weight, she could not keep him from slamming her back against the wall. Air left her in a loud *oomph*. The shock sent books toppling from the shelf.

He pinned her there with his body. A blast of heat raced through him. He was torn between his duties of captain and his needs as man. In the end, the captain won. As he always did.

“Remove. Your. Outer. Garments.”

Full Steam Ahead

His mouth was so close to her face he could see individual creases on her lips and could hear and *see* her say “Go. To. Hell.”

Laurel tried hard not let the her body call the shots. As Phineas adjusted his hold, which forced one of his thighs harder between hers, her body decided to abandon her right then and there. Traitor! Heat flushed her cheeks. He seemed to notice the change because he tilted his head, which sent dark hair cascading to hide part of his face. Shrouded him in shadows. But in a flash, he changed. The aroused man was gone, replaced with the forlorn, grave-eyed captain she’d first met. As though the first had existed only while the bubble of attraction had lasted. The hand with which he gripped her polar fleece relaxed. With the back of his knuckles, he grazed her jaw. A faint odor of leather reached her. Why just the one glove, she wondered. He didn’t seem like the fashion-conscious type.

Abruptly, he released her and backed until he had sat back on the corner of the chart table. He looked relieved to be away from her.

“As I said before,” he said through clenched teeth. “You may keep the underthings, but I want to be absolutely certain you are not carrying any concealed weapons. Trust, alas, is not a virtue I possess.”

She may have fought her way out of many situations, but she wouldn’t argue or fight her way out of this one. Plus, a sordid, ridiculous but primitive part of her wanted to see again the man who’d looked at her lips as if they’d been the most delicious fruit in the world. For a moment, she’d felt desired, craved, something she’d never had with any man. Her boyfriends had all been racers like her, and their first love was their boat. Always their boat. She could relate. She’d easily spend a free weekend tweaking her sloop

Full Steam Ahead

but had never found the time for anything more complicated than restaurant-movie-sex with a boyfriend. She'd liked them all. Good guys to the last of them. Maybe. But none of them had ever looked at her the way the captain just had. As something he wanted with an ache that wouldn't relent, yet unable to let himself do it. Not that she would *let* him! The haughty conspiracy theorist.

With vengeful tugs, she wrestled off her long-sleeved T-shirt and threw it at him. Her lone boot landed between his feet. She'd aimed higher, but the man had good reflexes. Damn him.

Damn him and his haunted eyes and his sexy voice and his hard body all over.

Cool air tightened her nipples and raised the hairs on her arms. Phineas stared at her face, always her face, as she tossed her things to him. That greedy, intense glint in his eyes flickered on and off. A man fighting between two demons. She wanted to hate him. A lot.

Pants followed. With the stuff she had in her many pockets, surely she could hurt him if she hurled her pants hard enough. Didn't seem to work because he caught them delicately. The guy and his killer instincts. Pocket light, bits and pieces clattered to the deck. He methodically gathered her things, went through every pocket, seemed at a loss to manage the zipper, and then while averting his gaze tossed her stuff back. He kept her belt and boot, which he put on the table.

"Thank you." He didn't look at her.

Snooty, arrogant jackass. *Look at me!*

As soon as she had pulled her things back on, Phineas faced her and put his fists on his waist. The change was so drastic it stopped her midway through pulling her top back on. It occurred to her maybe he'd kept his gaze considerably averted not because he couldn't be bothered to check her out—not that it mattered a damn

bit to her—but because she was stripping. Nah. Probably just timing. No guy would pass the chance to see a gal in her bra and panties, as boring and bland as her sports set was. Still, the timing was suspicious.

Her arms were through the armholes, but the body of the shirt was still rucked up around her armpits. Her stomach was bare below her bra. She held still, her hands wrapped in fabric at her shoulders, and waited.

There. His eyes flickered down her body. Just the slightest glance, but enough for her to feel she could claim a victory. Her nipples tightened—from the cool air, she told herself, and not from the knowledge that he looked at her. She slowly, tauntingly, gently eased the long-sleeved T-shirt down over her breasts and belly, covering them inch by inch like a stripper in reverse. He didn't look down again, but his eyes were glazed. She knew he took it all in even without looking directly. Another victory, though why she thought that, she couldn't say.

“Now what? I was telling you the truth. Do you believe me now?”

“The difficulty lies not in whether I believe your words or not, it rests with your presence on this ship. I need to manage your company.”

“What does that mean?”

He gave her a hard look.

“Oh no. No, no, no. You're not thinking—”

Phineas grabbed her by the elbow and unceremoniously escorted her out of his cabin.

She yelled the entire way to the mast. A couple crewmembers stopped to look at the noisy procession. Laurel hurt her feet kicking at anything she could reach. Walls, handrails, sailing instruments. In the end, he tied her by the ankle to the mast,

despite her best efforts. She managed to place one good kick on the inside of his thigh. He satisfyingly grunted with pain as he backed away.

“I should have tossed you overboard at the first opportunity.”

“You didn’t because you’re a *coward*.” She’d officially lost her mind. Abusing her captor. *Great going, Benson*. But she couldn’t take it anymore. Tears stung her eyes, and she’d never been good at dealing with her emotions. And right then, she had plenty to juggle. Carnal hunger and frustration, fear and hope, confusion and a dogged determination that she’d be okay. She wanted to crush herself against Phineas’s hard body while at the same time she wished for a very sharp object with which to stab the cynical jerk.

At her words, a pair of deck hands gasped and stared at the captain.

“Madam,” Phineas began, carefully modulating each word. “You are beginning to seriously chip away at my tolerance.”

“You wait. You’re going down—so hard—I can’t tell you how hard—Goddammit.” She sputtered with the curses trying to get out all at once. “And I need to *go*... You—you bastard.”

A muscle bulged at his jaw. He closed his eyes momentarily. She feared for a second he just might toss her over the rail. “I suggest you get some rest. Tomorrow, when we reach Orabilis, I’ll sell you to the Admiralty. I am through with you.”

Through the tears, Laurel spotted the boot she’d lost while pulling free. Without thinking things through, she grabbed it and with all her might, hurled it at him. She was beyond any bounds of propriety. To hell with all of it. Tears flowed down her cheeks. She didn’t give a shit. Maybe she was mad. Or dead. Who the hell cared at this point, right? Not her. She was past that.

Full Steam Ahead

She'd always had a good aim. He caught the boot right between the shoulder blades. Phineas lurched forward, stopped with his hands in trembling fists.

He froze.

Now, you've done it.

For a second, she knew he was coming back. He was coming back and he was going to toss her overboard. He was strong, he could do it. Phineas cut a murderous glance over his shoulder. It froze the blood in her veins. But he adjusted his belt and angrily stomped away.

"I did not need this," he grumbled as he stooped to enter the door leading to the cabins below. It rattled in its frame when he slammed it shut. Something crashed to the deck.

"I need to go to the toilet," she muttered to no one. Did anybody care? At all?

Laurel sank to her butt and wrapped her arms around her knees. She was too tired to even try to find a comfortable position. Fighting against the man had taken everything out of her. Mere moments ago she'd wanted to kiss him and let him get his hands full. Then this. She leaned her forehead against her knees, took in a long inhalation. Maybe she'd wake now. Hadn't she suffered enough already?

Please, let me wake up.

The worst thing was, she really did need to go to the toilet.

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 5

Click-click.

Something touched her on the shoulder. Laurel woke with a gasp. Wind in her hair. The familiar sounds of her boat.

Oh, thank you. What a weird dream.

A chuckle triggered an urge to pee. Man, she needed to go badly. Laurel looked around. Her heart squeezed painfully. Wind played in her hair as she sat cross-legged at the base of a pirate ship's mast. A *flying* pirate ship. It hadn't been a dream.

But it sure is a nightmare.

She'd been so sure.

"Just a dream," she whispered.

Around her, the night was pitch black save for the few places where the crew had hoisted tiny gas lamps that swung in the breeze. They gave off a pale light that turned the ship a ghostly shade of blue.

Click-click.

Something landed on her knee and rebounded against the polished deck.

"What now?"

Laurel picked up the item. By the timid light, she made out a nutshell in her palm. Where had that come from? She looked up and her heart vaulted against her rib cage.

"Jesus!"

"Shh."

Not two feet above her head hung a man with the largest eyes she'd ever seen. A complicated harness kept him suspended upside down. Late forties, maybe older. Hard to tell in the gloom.

Full Steam Ahead

“Who are you?” she demanded. “What do you want?”

He blinked those bug-eyes of his and she realized her wore thick glasses—binoculars, more aptly—strapped to his head in what resembled old-fashioned aviator leather goggles. “Eternal merriment and engaging company. What do *you* want?”

“Okayyy.”

“The name is Virgil. I am the vigil.” He beamed. “Virgil the Vigil. Fitting, yes? What is yours? Cooper the Prisoner? Evelyn the Cageling?”

Laurel couldn’t help a snort of irreverent laughter. “It’s Laurel.”

“Laurel.” He cocked his head. “Laurel the Corrival.”

“You look like a decent man—”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t cross him. Even if I thought he was wrong.”

How the hell had he known what she meant to ask? “But he *is* wrong. I want to get back to my shore crew. I just want access to a bloody *phone*. And a toilet.”

“I know not what the first could be, but about the second, I can help.”

“Oh, good, thank you. I’m getting desperate here. The captain isn’t listening to anything I say.”

Virgil blinked. “Wariness is often the sum of tragedy and sorrow.”

Laurel wanted to reply something to the point. And pointed. She was the victim here. Of kidnapping, of having her half-million dollar sloop—and any chance at salvaging even a rivet of it—destroyed. But despite her best attempt at voicing her frustration and anger, Laurel had to take a couple seconds to digest the man’s comment. Maybe she’d been looking at this the wrong way. How had she felt when this stranger, Climber, had landed on her own ship? She’d attacked him outright. She hadn’t asked questions,

Full Steam Ahead

hadn't waited to see what he was up to. She'd assumed the worst and gone from there. So to Captain Phineas—Finn, in her head—*she* was the stranger on his ship. *She* was the threat. He hadn't attacked her, only tried to restrain her movements. He wasn't such a bad guy. Not one-hundred percent anyway. Hadn't he averted his gaze as she stripped to her undies? That required decency. And the fact that he peeked at her belly? Well, that just proved his humanity.

“Point taken. So what should I do? I've tried talking with him. It didn't work.” A wave of heat spread to her cheeks.

“The captain is a man of deeds, not words.”

“I have nothing to show that would convince him. My boat sank.”

Virgil dug in his breast pocket. He, too, wore clothes fit for a Victorian fair. Loose-fitting shirt, sleeveless jacket, cravat and pinstriped trousers. He reminded her of Robin Williams. If Williams were ever cast to play Charles Dickens. He pulled out an item shaped like a pen and gave it to her.

“This will unlock the shackles. Use the facilities through that door to your left, then return here and replace the shackles. Someone with ill-will would use the opportunity to harm the ship. If your claims are true, then we have nothing to fear from you.” He blinked a few times. Through the binoculars, his eyes resembled glass balls.

“What if I get caught before I can return? They'll think I was snooping around the ship.”

“Then you must hurry.”

Before she could say anything, he zoomed up the mainmast. In the distance, she heard the clicks and clacks of a hoist. Sails obscured her view of the retreating face and the strange, bug-like eyes.

Full Steam Ahead

The item in her hand glistened like liquid silver. Shaking with adrenaline, she exposed her ankle, which was raw and throbbing, and fiddled at the mechanism. How did that thing work? She pressed the tip against what resembled the lock. Something clicked. The shackles opened around her ankle and noiselessly landed on the deck. She was free!

Laurel sprang to her feet. She had her chance. Fire burned her veins. She was so getting off this crazy ship. She didn't know how, but she was getting off. She'd go hide somewhere below, wait until they reached that city the captain had talked about. Ora something. Then she'd sneak out. She'd find a way.

On naked feet, she padded to the door Virgil had mentioned. Around her, blue fog from the dangling lamps created Chinese shadows of ship parts and the strange machines that made it fly.

A flying ship. For god's sake.

The door led to a narrow cubicle. Just by smell, she knew she had the right one. Fiddling around in the dark, she encountered a protuberance to her left. Some sort of tiny lever. She hoped she wasn't about to jettison something or create a racket. Laurel grimaced and flicked up the lever.

A tiny lamp at her feet shone bright blue for a second or two then dimmed to nightlight strength.

“Whoa.”

She stood in what very much resembled a bathroom in any English pub she'd seen. Except that a sort of wooden bench replaced the toilet itself. At least there was paper—a stack of little parchment squares filled with strange drawings and cursive handwriting. Scrap paper? Something that looked like a tiny brass hose coming out of the wall curved into a cereal bowl-size basin.

It couldn't be worse than the time she'd had to use the toilets in that Marrakech restaurant. A shiver of recollection shook her. Ew.

Full Steam Ahead

She did her business, managed to work the toilet's handle to flush. Hands washed and shaken dry, Laurel pried open the door and waited to see if the coast was clear. She had to find the way down below, where she would hanker down and wait for the ship to dock. To land? Whatever.

But Virgil's words wouldn't leave her alone. *A man of deeds.*

If she did that, if she took off with Virgil's key—and his trust—she'd give plenty of reasons for Phineas to have a cow again.

“Jesus,” she snarled under her breath.

She didn't owe any of them anything. *They* had sunk her ship.

Wariness is often the sum of tragedy and sorrow.

What could have happened to the man, she wondered. Was it tied to his hand that he kept hidden in a glove all the time? Was it something else entirely? Did she care either way? Laurel rolled the silver implement in her hand.

Night owned the sky and the deck as she crept along the handrail, bent in half so she wouldn't stick out over the top. The polished wood felt smooth and hard under her palms. Lovely sounds of creaking wood and clanging metal bits reminded her why she'd fallen in love with sailing in the first place. Nothing could replicate those soothing rhythms, those venerable noises forever associated in her head to adventure and living life to the fullest. Just like growing up. Her sailor parents would take her brothers and her out on weekend trips. They'd sail all along the English and French coasts, then out further when the kids were old enough to help. Summer vacations were spent on the Mediterranean when the money wasn't too tight. An office manager and a warehouse employee didn't make enough for yearly Mediterranean vacations, but those had still happened often enough to seriously give her the sailing fever.

Full Steam Ahead

The *Brass Baron* emitted the same noises. Soft rustling of sails as they hung from shrouds and spars, waiting for the captain to set them free so they could fill and billow and roar with the wind. The groaning of wood parts rubbing against one another, like old friends reminiscing about past battles won and lost but still worthy of a good tale or two. And the myriad little clings and clangs that broke the occasional pearls of silence. Laurel closed her eyes for a few seconds. This was a Moment. She'd had Moments in her life—the first time she'd set foot on her own sailboat, the day her parents hadn't been at home waiting for her to get off the school bus because she was a big girl now, the starting horn announcing the *Vendée Globe*. This moment was different. *Everything* was different. She had a choice to make.

Adrenaline made blood thunder in her ears. It drowned even the wind humming among the shrouds and lowered sails.

Sorrow and tragedy.

Her inner cynic threw one last punch. Laurel snarled under her breath. She didn't care about any of them. She shouldn't think of anything else—or anyone else—but her situation. Guilt and attraction and wondering about a stranger's inner demons shouldn't even *be* in the equation. She had the perfect opportunity right here and right now. She would use it.

To her right, the mast gleamed in the blue light. A bit of fog—or clouds—clung to the base.

The Moment passed.

Without thinking, Laurel crossed the deck and made a bee-line for the mast.

What the hell is wrong with me?

She was going mad. Completely. She had the key to her chain in her hand and what did she do? Put it back *on*.

Full Steam Ahead

Muttering under her breath, she hurriedly looped the silver chain back around her ankle. There should be someone to stand beside her with a T-shirt that read “I’m with Stoopid”. It sure as hell would fit.

“I refused to believe it,” a man said from the darkness to her right.

Laurel started so bad she dropped the key. It clattered to the deck. Frozen, she watched the captain emerge from the shadow of the lowered rigging like a ghost ship slipping into port. He wore only his shirt and pants. And his one glove. Barefoot, he approached her, picked up the silver item.

“Virgil, you swindler,” she muttered.

Phineas leaned against the mast and crossed his arms. The bluish light couldn’t hide the man’s fine features or the way his shirt strained on his well-defined shoulders. He reminded her of a surfer. All lean lines and crisp muscles. “You should thank him.”

“I should kick his ass.”

“He saved you from a very unpleasant night.”

“What do you mean?”

“I truly would have left you there until we reached Orabilis. The dockings are difficult and jarring even for someone not tied by the ankle.”

“I’ll thank him later, then. I guess.”

“It becomes clear to me there is truth in some of your story, and more of it than what you’ve so far shared. But perhaps it’s not wholly negative or dangerous to my ship or crew. Therefore, I have a proposition.”

Laurel likewise crossed her arms.

“Swear to me you will not do anything to put my crew or my ship at risk.” His hair obscured his eyes when he suddenly leaned into her.

Full Steam Ahead

She resisted the urge to put the mast between them. He'd startled her. The man could move fast.

"Why would my oath be good if you think I'm with the bad guys? What difference does it make? Swear on what, anyway? Bibles don't do for me."

"Surely there exists something larger than yourself in which you believe."

"I believe in my instincts."

"And what do they tell you?" His mouth glistened when he moistened his lips. She could hardly stop staring. The same trance-like feeling descended on her as when she'd stood an inch from his face, her front pressed to his torso hard enough to feel *everything*. Her heart thundered then and it did now. What did her instincts tell her? To wrap her legs around him and have him ride her hard. To not forget she was probably dead, or dying in a hospital somewhere. But most of all, her instincts told her that for all his surliness and threats, the man wouldn't hurt her. Not that he wouldn't hurt anyone—she had no doubt he could and would—but not her.

She shook her head. "I'm not too sure anymore. They keep telling me that a flying ship can't exist. That steam alone can't power something like this. They tell me *you* can't exist, you can't be real."

"Mine say the same thing."

Some hair flew out of his face and exposed the angular side of his cheek. A quick whiff came her way. No artifice. Just the good, honest smell of man. Laurel wiped the sweat from her palm against her thigh.

"So, ah, so what now? What do we do?"

He reached out to her but seemed to change his mind and instead dropped his hand at his side. "We are going to make a

promise, to each other and to ourselves. To keep an open mind. To wait before we rush to judgment. A tie.”

Laurel shrugged. “Like a truce?”

“Yes. Swear on it.” He extended his gloveless hand as if to shake.

“This is all very silly—”

“*Swear it.*”

Eyes like black diamonds stared at her expectantly. His lips remained a straight line despite the tendency to curve up at one corner. She’d thought his mouth was the sexiest thing. Until now. He wasn’t playing. Too bad. She would like to play with him and his sexy mouth.

Laurel met him halfway, grabbed his long, square hand. Heat spread to her wrist. Sensualization unfolded like a Chinese fan. She smelled him, felt him, filled her eyes with his body. The only thing missing was taste. He’d taste great, she had no doubt. That wicked mouth of his.

“Okay,” she breathed, almost panted. His hand squeezed a bit harder, drove her absolutely nuts. “I swear on my instincts that I won’t do anything bad to you or your ship. There.”

He stared at her the way he had in his cabin. Half hungry, half reluctant. And he wasn’t gauging her, nor did he seem to test her against some internal scale only he knew the measure. It felt as if he were seeing inside her very core. See her soul. She fought the instinct to raise her face to his. The air charged between them. Crackling with energy, with repressed needs.

Finally, he nodded. “And I swear to reserve judgment until you have shown me your true character.” He released her hand.

She couldn’t help the feeling she’d just lost a part of her arm. His heat dissipated. She was cold again. And still hungry. But not for food. “So what now?”

Full Steam Ahead

Phineas looked up into the sky above their heads. His throat looked good enough to lick. “Now, we hope Thorne doesn’t return before we reach Orabilis.”

“What about that Admiral place? Are you still going to drop me off there?” Maybe *they* had a phone? Though she doubted that.

He shook his head. “You may hate me, but you would dislike their methods even more. I’ll keep you here on this ship. As a guest.” He turned away but stopped to give her a once-over. “You need proper garments. Miss Carmina will see to it.”

“I don’t hate you,” she muttered.

If he heard, he didn’t let it show.

Laurel just stood there as he walked away. His pants hugged a very nice butt, now that she had the time and opportunity to notice. A spike of adrenaline made her jittery. What a mind-screw this whole thing was.

A moment later, the young woman dressed all in red came out of a trapdoor in the deck. She beamed as she rushed to Laurel and held both Laurel’s hands. Hers were so dainty and light that Laurel felt like a lumberjack compared to the delicate woman.

“I am so comforted to see the captain changed his heart about you.” She smiled and patted the back of Laurel’s hand. “Come, we both need a bit of sleep. Docking at Orabilis is not for the faint of heart even on a calm day. And with the little steam we have left, the captain shall have to use every bit of good fortune the Sea Goddess throws at him.”

“You talk a lot, don’t you?” Laurel replied through a tired smile. She was dead on her feet now that the adrenaline of impending fight had left. Drained and confused, too. Maybe a good night’s sleep would put it all in order again.

The young woman didn’t seem put off in the least. She beamed. “Indeed, I do. There has not been a young woman of my age on

Full Steam Ahead

this ship....” She stopped, cleared her throat. “Well, not in many years.” She suddenly appeared sad enough to cry. “Come.”

Carmina’s cabin proved to be even girlier than her clothes. But Laurel was enchanted to see an extra narrow cot set against the corner of the tight cabin. That must be her bunk. She didn’t care that the sheets had lace around the edges or that a collection of tiny dolls on a ledge kept their glassy eyes on her as she thankfully sank onto the thin mattress.

“Tomorrow,” Carmina whispered with a conspiratorial smile. Was this suddenly a slumber party? “Tomorrow, we’ll see what I can find for you to wear. I think I have the perfect dress.”

Laurel cringed inwardly. *I’m sure you do.* “Er, thanks. I think I’ll sleep now. I’m dead tired.”

“Of course.” The young woman smiled then likewise sank on her bunk across from Laurel’s. She pulled up a coverlet that would put Barbie marketers to shame. “Happy dreams.”

“Night.”

“I don’t *think* so.” Laurel gave the smiling young woman her most potent Evil Eye. It didn’t seem to work.

She’d been awake for hours, tossing and turning and convincing herself none of the previous day’s events had been real. But it was hard fighting the sights and smells and sounds around her. It all felt like...well, like real life onboard a ship.

A flying ship.

In the end, she’d given up and sat cross-legged in her cot until Carmina had turned to her, sleepy-eyed and offered to fetch breakfast and tea. Laurel hadn’t realized how famished she was until the young woman returned with a tray overflowing with victuals. They’d dug into the food and drunk all the tea. Now

feeling a bit better—if still confounded by her surroundings—Laurel had decided to play along until she would find a way out.

Carmina presently beamed. “Then perhaps this one?” She pulled out another, slightly less horrifying dress from a crate under her bunk. This one *only* had three rows of lace at the cuffs. Morning sun slanted through the tiny porthole and highlighted the row of buttons along the underside of the sleeve. But it wasn’t as ostentatious as the one Carmina wore, which resembled a mix of Chinese satin jacket and full skirt over high boots. All in red.

“Er, anything less, ah, involved? You know, like a pair of pants and a shirt or something? And why can’t I keep my own stuff?”

“You wouldn’t make it to the harbormaster’s dressed this way.” Carmina busily rummaged through her clothes for Laurel to wear. “The Admiralty would have you arrested. Especially if you were to be seen disembarking from the *Brass Baron*. Captain Phineas is not a well-liked man in Orabilis.”

“Oh? Why not? He’s so *charming*.”

“It is a long story.” Blushing, Carmina definitely avoided Laurel’s gaze and resumed digging in her chest. “I think I found something more to your tastes.”

Laurel had already started to cringe by the time the entire thing was pulled out of the chest. Although when she took a good second look at it, there was only a cropped, navy blue velvet jacket that reminded her of a pianist’s tuxedo, complete with tails and brass buttons. Not bad, actually.

“Where’s the rest?”

“It is an aerocycle riding outfit, worn with trousers. See?” Carmina showed her the pants and high-collared shirt neatly folded inside the jacket. “If you add a scarf, it should do very nicely.”

Full Steam Ahead

Smiling in relief, Laurel helped the young woman smooth out the wrinkles in the clothes. “I won’t need the scarf, but thanks for lending me all this.”

“It’s for your hair.” Carmina blushed again. “I do find it very lovely, but the color may attract attention. I am sorry you must cover yourself this way.”

The pants turned out to be a lot tighter than Laurel had anticipated and molded her butt and thighs. She’d never worn pants so adjusted. A double row of buttons in front made sure they wouldn’t burst open, and the shirt hid a bit of her exposed butt when she let it loose instead of tucking it in as Carmina insisted. The wide belt the woman lent her was perfect though, as was the jacket when she slipped it on. The shoulders were a bit tight, but it would do.

Carmina grinned as she pulled on a brass knob in the wall and a whole section came out. A long and narrow gilded mirror reflected Laurel in her new outfit. She looked ready for Halloween. Because none of Carmina’s cute little shoes fit Laurel’s size eight double E feet, she wore her own boots, with the pant legs over them to hide the strange look. She wagered she owned the only pair of Columbia hiking boots for miles around.

“Like an exotic warrior princess from a faraway land.” Carmina tucked Laurel’s blond bob into a navy blue shawl and tied it at her nape.

“One who’s lost and confused.”

They shared a smile.

A commanding knock made Carmina slam the partition back into the wall. Red skirt fretting around her knees, she rushed to the door and opened just as Dame Augusta raised her gloved hand to knock again.

Full Steam Ahead

“If you two are quite finished playing with dolls, we shall need you both on deck. The vigil spotted Orabilis. As usual, a storm hangs over it like a vulture over a carcass. Come along.” The older woman gave a long look to Laurel’s new clothes and then turned around and marched down the corridor. “The belt does not match those horrid boots,” she threw over her shoulder.

“That woman scares me,” Laurel admitted in undertones.

Carmina agreed with a nod. “She does everyone.”

The pair climbed the stairs to the main deck.

“I shall see you after we have docked.” Carmina squeezed Laurel’s hand. “I’m glad we’ve met.”

“Er, yeah, me too.”

She’d never been the kind to share her feelings this way. Brothers had teased that trait out of her early on. Hot under the collar, she turned to the back of the ship and easily spotted the captain, who towered by a good head over the rest of the crew. The memory of his hand on her—he’d only put his hand on her hip, for god’s sake, yet she still felt warm when she thought about it.

She pushed the intruding vision down. Wind plastered Laurel’s jacket against her body as she made her way up to the quarterdeck, where the captain waited with Dame Augusta. Another man, the one who’d swaggered by when she was tied to the mast, also stood with the pair. Even she could tell he was rich and wore only the best. Truth be told, he was very handsome, with honey-colored skin, an Asian touch to his features, and ink-black hair slicked back in a ponytail. Centerfold-grade, for sure.

When the captain spotted her, Laurel couldn’t help the burst of heat that no doubt turned her cheeks bright red. His eyes flared and then narrowed as he took in her new look. Wind slapped his hair around his face but Phineas didn’t seem to notice or care. It gave

him quite the sexy, devilish look, all that long hair flying wildly around his lean face.

Focus, Benson.

“Lady Laurel,” the man in black said. He extended his hand. Laurel hesitated for a second, then grabbed it hard, shook it once and dropped it. Either he was surprised by her grip or he thought she had the manners of a dockworker because his upper lip curled in a fake smile. “We finally meet.”

“We’ve met before. I was hard to miss, tied to the mast.”

“Such an unfitting way to make a lady’s acquaintance. Allow me to remedy this unfortunate situation. My name is Fredric York, from York and Associates. Perhaps you have heard of us?”

“No, I’m afraid I haven’t. But don’t take it personally, I’m not from around here.” She directed the last bit to Phineas. Was that a mocking curve to his mouth? It was hard not to stare at it. Especially since she’d burned to taste it the night before. Still did. Even if things had turned to shit moments after his hand landed on her hip, Laurel would be lying if she tried to pretend it hadn’t affected her. It had. Still did.

“Perhaps when we dock at Orabilis, we could share a glass of wine,” York went on. “I could show you the sights, introduce you to my friends. I own a lovely little tearoom atop the city’s highest building. The view is stunning from there.”

Laurel didn’t know how to begin her reply. No, she didn’t want to have a glass of wine with Mr. I’m Too Sexy for My Bank Account. No, she didn’t want to see the sights or meet his no-doubt snobbish friends. And she sure as hell wouldn’t lock herself on a rooftop with a stranger. She barely tried to hide her feelings. There was such a thing as time and place but clearly, Mr. York didn’t know about that.

“No, but thank you for the offer.” Effectively dismissing him, she turned away from him and toward the captain, whose eyebrows had quirked just the tiniest bit. She adjusted her shawl. “So, Dame Augusta said I was needed up here?”

“Come, Mr. York,” Dame Augusta said above the howl of the wind. “Too many people at the wheel makes for an ill voyage.”

Grinning despite what Laurel thought should had been a pretty glacial comeback to his offer, York bowed to her, nodded to the captain and climbed down the ladder leading to the main deck. Not a strand of hair on his head was out of place. How did he manage that?

“Are you always so disagreeable, Lady Laurel?”

“Just Laurel, please. And yes, I am with those I think could use with a bit more common sense. It’s neither the time nor place to ask someone on a date. Plus, I don’t like him. He’s slippery.”

“Women are usually very fond of him. A combination of good looks, charm and money works universally, I’m told.”

“Not on me, it doesn’t.” She shrugged. “But we’re not here to discuss my tastes in men, are we?”

Phineas stared at her with his head cocked. Wind tossed a long strand of hair across his face, which drove Laurel crazy refraining from brushing it aside for him. Didn’t it bug him? He let his gloved hand rest on the handrail as he approached close enough for her to read the engraving on the buttons of his blood-red greatcoat. A stylized *PH*. Phineas Hamilton, she surmised.

She hoped he wasn’t about to address what had happened the night before. Or what hadn’t. She didn’t even want to deal with it in her own *head*.

“And what would be your taste in men, Lady—I mean, *just* Laurel?”

Full Steam Ahead

“I like a man with more meat to him. Less perfect hair and more dirt under the fingernails. Tattoos, scars, *something* that tells me he hasn’t been sitting on his pretty hands for his whole life.”

“Do you enjoy scarred men because you entertain the hope of healing them or because the sight of ruined flesh stokes your fire?”

“Neither.”

She forcibly pushed air in and out as he leaned even closer to her and blocked out everything else. Only his face occupied her field of vision. His handsome, grave face. Nearly close enough to kiss. Wind howled and whistled between the many protuberances on the flying ship. Somewhere, the rumble of steam engines created a steady quiver underneath her feet.

“Then why?” he asked.

“Scars are like medals. In exchange for a good scratch or a broken bone or two, you get experience in return.”

“Experience?” He cocked his head again. She loved when he did that. Except that she could not *think* when he did that. “Some scars only reveal the ugliness inside the man. A testament to his flaws.”

“I disagree.”

Phineas moistened his lips. “It seems to be a habit with you.”

“Good or bad, experience is what makes us go forward. And I’m all about going forward. I’m a racer.”

“Yes, I have witnessed your skill with the wheel.”

“You haven’t seen me at my own wheel. The other guys, they ate my spray, let me tell you.” She couldn’t help but smile. “One time, there was this—” Laurel cleared her throat. “Yeah, well, never mind.”

“Please, madam, go on.” No one, *ever*, had said something so simple, yet triggered the reaction now blooming in her. Wet

warmth gathered in her sex. She throbbed and ached and felt quite cranky about it.

“I’m, ah, I’m a racer, as I’ve told you.”

“You race alone or as part of a crew?”

“Alone.”

Why did that make her feel all grim and testy? She’d never had problems with being alone on a boat. Or in life.

“I race better alone,” she went on, with more aplomb this time. “No one to argue with.” Laurel tried for a smile.

“No one to count on, either.” Phineas moistened his lips. “As well as scars and dirty fingernails, what else do you enjoy about a man?”

Laurel couldn’t talk for a good five seconds. All she could do was think of the things she would like to enjoy about him. She swallowed repeatedly as she tried not to make a complete fool of herself. That mouth.... Her kneejerk reaction would’ve been to brush him off, let fly a pointy retort and be done with it. But not with him. With Captain Phineas, Laurel wanted to be careful. Why? No idea.

Stockholm Syndrome comes to mind.

“I like a man who knows who he is and what he wants.”

There, she’d revealed a sliver of her true self. To a stranger in velvet pants and a single glove.

He nodded. The mocking lift to his mouth accentuated. She wanted him to touch her again, even just put his hand on her hip, his thigh pushing up between hers as he kept her put against the wall.

I’m going nuts. Have gone nuts.

“And do you like for a man to *take* what he wants?” His murmur rose between them like a thin shred of fog.

Full Steam Ahead

“Life is too short to wait. I prefer to beg for forgiveness than for permission.”

The corner of his lips rose tentatively. He seemed to taste her remark and roll it around on his tongue. She couldn't focus on anything except his mouth. It would feel like heaven crushed against her pussy. A wave of heat rose to her cheeks.

“Blushing?” he whispered. “What would make a woman such as you blush?”

“A woman such as me?”

“Strong, capable, iron-willed.”

“You mean stubborn?”

“Indeed.” He caressed the cuff edge at her wrist. Electrifying. For the fact nobody could see him do it, for the added layer of tension in the air. Because she hungered for another, deeper kind of touch.

Laurel moved her arm so his hand would rest against her wrist more fully. It must have been the first time in her life she was trying to act subtly. Finesse had never been one of her strengths.

The pads of his fingers were callused but warm as he leisurely rubbed small circles inside the cuff of her shirt. Frissons pulsed upward to her whole arm. No man had done this. Ever. Just touch her this way, gently, simply, with the tips of his fingers. What else could he do with his hands? His nice, working hands.

“Laurel,” he began. He seemed at a loss for words. He encircled her wrist. Skin on skin. So hot.

“I was thinking...ah....” Laurel was lost for a moment in the depth of his dark gaze.

He leaned over a little bit more. Some of his hair tickled her forehead. Was he going to kiss her? Right here on the bridge? And she was going to let him.

“Yes?”

Full Steam Ahead

“About what happened. Last night. What *didn't* happen. Um.”

His eyes narrowed mockingly. “Regrets?”

“Captain, sir!” a man called from inside one of the funnels.

Phineas sighed and looked away. The spell was broken. Good, because she'd been about to say yes, she *had* regrets, she wished he would've put his hands all over her, not just on her hip. Regrets that she hadn't locked her ankles behind his back as he held her to the wall. Regrets at not kissing him square on his wicked mouth as he stood an inch from her, leaning on the mast as he considered whether or not she should be trusted. But then again, judging by the look on his face, he shared those regrets. Phineas unhooked the rope from the topmost handle on the wheel and took position behind it.

“The docking will be foul, sir,” another voice called from the funnel further from the captain. “We'll be windbound for most of it.”

Laurel stood by Phineas's side, cringed when the funnel announced the last bit. Contrary winds were often cause for concern during tricky dockings. She'd once bumped her boat pretty damn hard against a jetty in northern France because she'd been windbound and had overcompensated. When the wind had died down for a few seconds, her overcompensations had taken effect all at once. Like oversteering on an icy road and then hitting a patch of dry pavement.

“We will speak of this again,” he said from the corner of his mouth. He didn't look at her, but she knew what he meant. In a way, she looked forward to more intimate moments with him, but at the same time, dreaded it. She couldn't think when he was around. Didn't want to think. Wanted only to act. Or at the very least, fantasize about acting.

Full Steam Ahead

“Power up the props.” The captain’s instruction was relayed twice, and the ship powered up noticeably. At the extreme ends of their flying buttresses, the propellers accelerated their rotation. The drone accentuated. Up above their heads, the damaged shield flapped angrily. Laurel tried not to grin at the rush of adrenaline. This was quite the ship!

“Can you take the wheel?” Phineas asked.

“You want me to? Sure.”

He didn’t need to ask twice.

She planted herself squarely at the wheel, feet wide on either side of the base. She barely saw above the top handles but didn’t care. Because this was a flying ship—ha—she needed to see up more than down or straight on. Energy charged her veins. She grinned.

“Keep it steady and aim for the mass of clouds.” He pointed at two o’clock. “That is Orabilis.”

“That storm? It’s a city?” She narrowed her eyes but couldn’t see anything but vertical columns of angry storm clouds.

“With its climate, Orabilis is well protected from barbarian marauders, but it does make for tricky dockings.” Turning to the closest funnel, he added, “Navigation, calculate azimuth and report.”

Phineas barked orders to the sails crew, orders they obeyed quickly and without a hint of dissent. Laurel fought to control the large, alien ship and keep it from spinning on itself. Those were wicked side winds.

They entered the mass of clouds. Lightning strikes zigzagged above the topmast. Virgil the Vigil cried, “Land ho, dead on,” and Laurel gripped the wheel tighter.

Funnels disgorged clipped answers to the captain’s demands, deck hands ran and pulled on lines, the sail crew were aided with

Full Steam Ahead

the mavericks—it sounded much better than the tame “boarding party” which did *not* at all convey the group’s collective madness—and through it all, Phineas coolly paced the quarterdeck. His hair fretted around his lean face and gave him a wild, predatory air. She was wet for him all over again. She squeezed her thighs together and focused on the wheel because looking at the man wasn’t going to help her steer this mammoth.

Through tears in the thick cloud cover, she spotted dark outlines. The city, she surmised. A horn made her jump. Soon, other ships broke the clouds, an armada of them, circling or taking off or approaching the cluster of dark forms in the middle. And when the thing finally broke free of the storm, she stared open-mouthed.

Orabilis wasn’t like any other land she’d ever seen. Not even *land*, per se. It was built on gargantuan metal stiles, at least two, three thousand feet high because she could hardly see the raging sea below through the clouds. As if someone had taken an entire island, ripped it out of the earth, then balanced it on top of a forest of upright beams. It was fantastical, magnificent and totally impossible.

“I must be going nuts.”

Phineas turned to her, eyebrows raised.

“Never mind.”

Seagulls cackled mockingly as they flocked around the *Brass Baron*, and when a sharp slap of wind hit, veered away as one. Laurel gritted her teeth. She turned the wheel ever so slightly so she wouldn’t overcompensate. Another slap, this time from the opposite direction, forced Laurel to steer to starboard instead. Judging from the sound, the seagulls didn’t like the wind any more than she did.

“Four knots, sir,” cried Virgil.

Full Steam Ahead

“Bearing?” Phineas called into the funnel Laurel had recognized belonged to Carmina. The girl’s soft voice managed to cleave the wind’s howl. “Dead center, sir. Perfect speed and heading.”

He turned to Laurel, a shadow of smile on his handsome face. She didn’t know how this was possible given her circumstances—she wasn’t here for real, was she?—but Laurel nonetheless felt a bond develop between this strange crew, their captain and her. They did good work together. She’d always been a capable sailor, even under others’ command. She was a team player, despite her temper, and not one to argue when instructions made sense. And Phineas’s did. So she listened. Just as she did to Jacques when he told her to abort a race because of weather—

Poor Jacques.

He was probably yelling himself hoarse trying to find her. And her folks. They’d worry, even if this wouldn’t be the first incident involving their youngest. Her brothers would try to pretend not to be overly worried, Louis, the oldest, especially. He’d often defended his younger siblings from bullies, even if Laurel had been eminently able to deal with them. Mom and dad, Louis, Richard, Jacques, she missed them all. Laurel sniffed as she rubbed the back of her wrist across her eyes. Lace around the shirt’s high collar tickled her chin.

The city soon loomed all around them. The sheer size dwarfed the ship and any of the others flying around. Big airships, smaller ones like flying bikes, long boats loaded to the gunwales with cargo, sleek, shiny ones obviously carrying the rich and powerful. Flying silver limousines. She shook her head.

“Number twenty-four.” Phineas pointed to their right where a row of glowing amber dots formed the numerals 24. “This is our assigned dock.”

Full Steam Ahead

She nodded. Luckily, no other ship flew close by. The last little slaps of wind didn't make her lose her heading or speed, and with one last adjustment to the wheel, she slowly flew alongside the long and crowded dock made of riveted sheets of metal. The skeleton of a horizontal skyscraper. One of the deck hands aimed a bazooka-like contraption outward and fired. A black ball arced over the rail, its thin rope fretting behind, and landed on the dock where it was quickly snatched up by land crews and tied to a winch. As they heaved the thin line taut, the thick hawser tied to it coiled around the winch.

Someone on the *Brass Baron* cheered. Lady Augusta slapped a man on the back and turned a smiling face toward the quarterdeck. "The grog is on me."

A loud chorus greeted her announcement.

Grinning, Laurel looped the rope around one of the wheel's handles and secured it in place. When she straightened, Phineas was staring at her. For once, he didn't look angry or cranky or otherwise displeased. He cocked his head at her. She replied with a small *hey, there* lift of her chin.

They hadn't said a word. But Laurel knew she'd just scored a good point in her favor.

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 6

First came the smells. Smoke, burnt fuel of organic origin, humidity like a forgotten pair of wet socks. And the smells of people as well. A lot of them. Sweat and colognes, wet wool and the faint odor of rare dyes, dirty hair and powdered faces. Orabilis turned out to be as beautiful and decadent as Carmina had warned.

Laurel couldn't believe the range to which the city's rich stew took her senses. Like being plunked in the middle of a crowd downtown on a Friday night. Except these people did not wear suits, sneakers or jeans. Instead, garments pulled right out of a fantastical story were displayed in front of her. Velvet cropped jackets like those of Victorian times, long boots with pearls for buttons, elaborate hats, billowing skirts, and men in accoutrements that could land them on the set of any WWII or pirate flick. Except for the weapons and technology. Clearly, nothing in history had produced these.

The buildings, too, stole Laurel's ability to speak. Wouldn't her brothers celebrate that day! Laurel? Not speaking? Impossible.

Steam pumped out of buildings shaped like the innards of a mammoth clock. Everything was mounted on stiles. Bridges with legs so long they disappeared into the fog enveloping the sky-city's bottom portion. Above, the better part of town. But there would be no welcome for the likes of Captain Phineas and his eclectic crew. She'd been told neither the brooding privateer nor his clients ever conducted business up above in the light of day.

Laurel craned her neck to see over the crowd. It reminded her of Amsterdam. Same mix of raw energy and thinly disguised decadence. She loved it.

“Laurel,” Dame Augusta called from a few steps to the right. She wore her usual aviator-turned-Victorian-lady outfit. And her usual Headmistress expression. “It is safer if we remain a group. Orabilis has lured many an unsuspecting woman to her doom.”

“Won’t the captain join us?” Laurel had hoped he would. If only for the pleasure of his raw masculine energy, if not his oh-so-charming disposition. The scowl on that man could send her brothers running.

“Clients come to him. Captain Phineas never goes to shore,” answered Carmina. A shadow crossed her doll-like face. “Except to conduct delicate business or break a fight between a crewmember and a local, the captain has not stepped off the ship since....”

Carmina would have gone on if Dame Augusta’s frown had not just reached nuclear meltdown proportions. What had happened to the man to so change him?

“The captain’s goings and comings are not open to discussion by the crew,” Dame Augusta snapped. “Come along or be left behind. I have no argued with him so you could stay here and gawk.”

With an apologetic smile, Carmina fell into step with the glowering older woman.

The Headmistress *had* indeed argued with Phineas for permission to bring Laurel ashore. He hadn’t wanted to hear anything at first and had only relented after making her swear she’d keep a close eye on their guest. Laurel hadn’t said a word because, one, she *did* want to see the town, and two, she’d been not a little bit pissed off to require a permission in the first place. She was used to calling the shots.

Laurel turned back to the ship and caught Phineas standing tall at the prow as the deck hands repaired the damage done to the

Full Steam Ahead

ship. Some of its sails and wings lay in tatters, and holes pock-marked the armored hull. That this ship could fly, for all of its improbable parts, still shocked her.

He must have sensed her gaze on him for he turned. A small nod dislodged hair from his shoulder. Flapping on either side of his long and lean legs, his greatcoat parted to reveal the vast assortment of silver, brass and black lacquered weapons that never seemed to leave his side. Did the man sleep with his pistols?

Again, in Laurel's mind blazed the vision of the captain taking aim at his trapped crewmember and firing a trio of merciful shots. That young woman would have suffered a horrible death at the hands of these monstrous brutes, only after untold abuse. But the budding warmth she had seen in Phineas's eyes had died afterward. He might have saved Joy from a world of torment, but he seemed to have paid a heavy price. Now, the torment was his own. Laurel nodded in return and joined the two women. Dame Augusta threw her a slanted glance after she followed Laurel's line of sight.

A couple of deck hands who had received their leave to disembark also tagged along, although it was evident they were looking to spend their night off in a way wholly different from what the three women had in mind. One by one, as the group pressed deeper into the floating city's underbelly, they lost their male companions to brightly painted prostitutes and brothels festooned in strings of gas lamps and red paper lanterns. At one point, Laurel stopped to watch a fire breather dazzle the crowd with her incredible skill and tiny, tiny outfit, a garter belt and a leather sleeveless vest, which disgorged breasts that glistened like bronze in the twirling flames. The woman's red tresses danced about her head like living snakes when she spun the chain around her hand, passed it to her other behind her back then stopped it in

front. She spread her legs far apart, to the crowd's vociferous delight, and, smiling wide, swung the flaming end of the chain between her legs.

"Does your home look like ours?" Carmina cringed then applauded the woman's pendulum act. "Do you have fire artists?"

"Yeah. I just never saw it in person, only on TV."

"Teevee?"

Laurel patted the air. "Never mind—ooh, that's got to burn."

The woman had just extinguished the flaming knob in her sex, as one would in their mouth. Laurel had no idea that sort of thing could be done.

"Ladies," Dame Augusta called from between several heads farther away from the fire eater. Men turned to stare as Carmina and Laurel joined the ship's second-in-command. Laurel felt ill at ease in her borrowed clothes and revealing pants. They molded her butt and left precious little nothing to the imagination. Neither did the shirt that was a size too small. Still, Carmina had been very kind to lend her all these clothes and Laurel was thankful. But uncomfortable. She longed to get her own stuff back but suspected cargo pants and a yellow rain jacket would stand out. And not in a good way.

"Does she always ruin everybody's fun?" Laurel asked in undertones.

Carmina hid a smile behind her gloved hand.

Finally, they stopped at a tavern that instantly made Laurel want to rush to the dance floor and jig. Part Irish folk music, part something else that reminded her of industrial rock, it stirred her right to her core and plastered a smile on her face. Things were definitely looking up. She almost forgot that a part-pirate ship, part-dirigible flying craft had sunk her sailboat right in the middle of a race, that she'd been shot at by Viking lookalikes on

Full Steam Ahead

monstrous ships like dragons. She almost forgot that the captain had kept her tied to the mast for the better part of a day as he tried to figure out what she was, or that she'd landed either in a strange world or lay in a hospital in France, prey to the meds' hallucinations. She almost forgot she was going completely *crazy*.

Almost. Her yen for revelry burst like a soap bubble.

She *was* lost. In a strange world where the ocean ate the hulls on boats. Water had always meant something positive for her, courage, independence, a way to strike out on her own and be her own person. Yet here, in this bizarre place, water had turned on her. From ally and friend, it had become negative, unfamiliar, deadlier. If she didn't have sailing, what did she have? If she wasn't a racer, what was she?

Nothing. Just some chick with a big mouth.

"Just have a meal and a mug with us," Dame Augusta said. Uncharacteristic warmth toned down her scowl. She slipped her gloves in her belt and put a callused hand on Laurel's shoulder. "I know you yearn for your home, wherever that may be, but for now, take it one day at a time and just enjoy a mug. Let oblivion dull the edges." Sadness crept into her voice. She looked away. "It works for me."

They found a table near the wall. Crumbs and the universal rings of spilled drinks marred the wood surface. The thing could use with a bit of wax and a nail or four. It wobbled when Dame Augusta leaned against it and sat with her back against the wall. Laurel's favorite spot. She should have called shotgun.

"It is particularly boisterous tonight," Carmina said through a timid smile. She squeezed her joined hands between her thighs. "And *loud*."

Laurel bobbed her head to the rhythm of the Irish-like tambourines and flutes. "I like it."

Full Steam Ahead

Dame Augusta must have spotted their waitress because she made a circular gesture of her hand and raised four fingers. Not long afterward, an oval tray filled with victuals landed by Laurel's elbow. She turned to find a wiry old woman with fewer teeth than a toddler unloading mugs from another tray perched on her shoulder and free hand. Laurel passed the empty mugs down to the right and thanked their waitress, who glowered and stormed away. When she turned to her companions, both looked at her as though she'd sprouted a pair of antennas. Pink, fuzzy ones.

"What did I do now?"

Carmina seemed to fight the grin. A losing battle. She began to chuckle. "I personally think she is a bit old for you, but we each have our own personal tastes."

"*What?* All I did was say thank you."

"You just made a very obvious overture to the woman. I rather think we shall not see her at our table again." Dame Augusta picked what looked like a potato skin and dunked it in a yellowish paste. "Unless you wish for her to return your *interest*, Laurel, you should not engage someone this way."

"I didn't engage her. All I did was help an old lady."

"That 'old lady' owns this establishment and is perfectly able to toss you out on your ass. I have seen her deal with much larger patrons. To their detriment." A sparkle of mischief danced in Dame Augusta's eyes. All in all, Laurel thought the Headmistress might not be so bad. Just a tad grouchy. Okay, a lot grouchy.

Laurel sighed long and hard and dug into the potato skins. At least the food was familiar. And succulent. She forced herself to wait for the other two women so she could gauge portions and emulate manners. Pretty much all the same except for the napkins, which neither of her companions touched. Even Carmina, all femininity and finesse, used her knuckles to wipe her mouth.

Full Steam Ahead

A young man served their drinks to them efficiently and threw Laurel a curious gaze. She was parched from the salty, starchy food. Wine, judging from the amber liquid sloshing around in the glass carafe. Dame Augusta filled all three mugs but didn't wait for the others to drink before she raised hers to her mouth and took a long swallow. So Laurel did the same. That stuff was *good*. Honey wine, maybe? It was sweet and cool and perfect after their pub-food meal. Laurel had another mug quickly after the first then a third after that. The music seemed to be getting louder. She turned to find a couple of women bouncing to the rhythm of the band. Clearly, a dance floor.

“Do you dance?” Laurel asked Carmina. Only after a good three seconds did she realize her rudeness and also included Dame Augusta with a quick glance.

“I'll go powder my nose first,” replied the young woman. She grinned, unsteadily tried twice to extricate herself from the chair and succeeded on the third attempt. “Do not begin without me.”

Laurel chuckled as she watched Carmina weave her way to the back of the bar. She could only see the top of doors, but one opened then closed. At least now she knew where the ladies' room was.

“You are worthy,” declared Dame Augusta. She downed—what, a fifth mug at least. Laurel had stopped counting. In fact, now that she tried to remember, she thought she had drunk maybe three or four herself. A nice fuzzy glow enveloped everything.

Laurel leaned back and grinned. She'd been cold at some point. But she was nice and toasty now. And that music was just calling her name. “I'm worthy of what?”

“Of my son's affection.”

“Your son's...” Laurel rubbed the back of her hand across her blurry eyes. “What? Your who?”

Full Steam Ahead

My, that stuff is potent.

“My son,” Dame Augusta replied. “Phineas. He is my son.” She knocked her mug against Laurel’s, brought it up to her lips and drained it in one long gulp.

“Holy crap. Phineas.” Laurel’s world spun for a second. She gripped the table, fought an urge to giggle. “Phineas, Finn, is your *son*? Oh. My. God.”

Dame Augusta *mm-hmmed*. A twinkle of amusement flashed in her eyes as she leaned back and delicately unhooked the first few buttons on her high-collared shirt. The woman was a neat drunkard.

Laurel snorted a laugh. “Well, damn, whodathunkit?”

“Precisely.”

“You have no idea what I just said.”

The older lady smiled and downed a mug. “Not in the least.”

Their laughter drowned even the noisy patrons at the next table.

“You’re all right,” Laurel began, waited for a second to see if she could manage the unbelievably complex task of unbuttoning her jacket. *Hey, what do you know. The hands of a surgeon, I tell you.* “You’re allllll right.”

Another toast. Another sip. “As are you.”

“Does that mean you trust me now?”

“No. It means I won’t kill you outright.”

“And for the record, I like him, too, His Crankiness. A little.”

Augusta nodded. “I know.”

“But I did *not* tell you that.”

“Tell me what?”

Laurel couldn’t remember laughing so hard. It wasn’t that funny. Whew, that honey wine stuff was insidious. She was *so* drunk.

Full Steam Ahead

Carmina returned and created another bout of guffaws from her companions. She had powdered her nose all right.

“Dear, dear.” Smiling, Headmistress pulled a crisp-looking handkerchief from inside her sleeve and wiped the white streaks off Carmina’s blushing cheeks.

“I’ve overdone it, have I?” she asked.

Laurel couldn’t help it. “A tad. Nothing a good blast of sea wind can’t fix.”

All three burst out laughing. Laurel thought it was time to teach them how to high-five. So she had them practice one-liners, then punctuate with resounding high-fives. People around them turned and stared, but not with open hostility. Just curiosity. She could deal with that.

“So, do we dance now or do you need to powder your face again?”

Showing great timing, Dame Augusta reached across the table and smacked her open hand against Laurel’s.

“That was a perfect high-five, ma’am. Let’s go.” Laurel stood a bit too quickly. Lamps danced wildly, even though she knew they hadn’t budged a smidge. “Whew, boy, let me get my feet under me.”

Dame Augusta raised her hand for more wine. “And meanwhile, I shall fiercely guard our table.”

Giggling, the pair squeezed through the many patrons, stepped on many shoes and boots and naked feet and finally emerged on the other side, closer to the band, who had entered into a lively tune that made Laurel’s hair stand on end. Smiling, Carmina began to spin, arms raised slightly, head tilted. Laurel decided she wasn’t drunk enough to try that. Yet. Instead, she began a good old slide to the right, bounce, then slide to the left.

Full Steam Ahead

It was the first time since the day before that she didn't feel sorry for herself. She wasn't looking for ways to get off the ship or despair that she wouldn't wake up from her coma. She just lived the moment. Just like when she'd sail on the open sea. Live the moment, don't think about anything else. Let the wind decide and go with the flow.

Fellow dancers, mostly women—some things were the same everywhere—began to make more room for Carmina as she danced in wider circles, a miniature and very girly version of a twirling dervish. Her arms and legs began intricate, circular patterns that put Laurel to shame with her simple routine. Grinning and clapping her hands, Laurel followed her companion as she spun closer to the band. One noticed the girl in red and laughed, pointing with his bow before launching into a hellish-fast violin rip. Carmina turned to him and began to dance mostly for him. He wasn't even handsome, but he was clearly gifted with the violin, seemed nice and smiled wide when she quickened to the rhythm of his music. The band followed suit. Laurel laughed when Carmina bounced a couple of times on the spot, egging the band on, faster, louder. They complied.

Laurel's blood boiled. She hadn't had so much drunken fun since her university years. Not to be left behind, she bounced closer to Carmina and entered into a hilarious but earnest bump and grind that made everyone laugh. The funniest part was when Carmina decided to imitate Laurel. Skirts and froufrou and dainty boots showed when she gripped Laurel for support and writhed against her. So Laurel decided to imitate Carmina's style. Spinning and spinning. She collided into a couple of people, who, laughing, sent her on her way. She was "passed" down a line of grinning guys, one of whom pinched her butt. Just as her temper flared, Carmina leaned on Laurel's shoulder to yell-whisper that she

needed to go relieve herself. Forgetting the lucky bastard who'd groped her and not had a strip torn off, Laurel laughed so hard she almost lost it herself. Both women bounded and skipped back to their table.

"Water for me," Laurel declared. "That wine is way, way too strong for me."

Dame Augusta chuckled. "I agree." She raised her hand again, showed three fingers. The woman had this whole thing down pat. Her eyes shifted to the front of the tavern and narrowed.

Laurel tried to look but had to lean against the table not to topple off her chair. Whew, damn, things were definitely turning now. "What? Trouble?"

"Not for me, my dear. But for you." Dame Augusta waved at someone. Even in her advanced state of drunkenness, she had lost none of her grace. Her gesture could have been a royal wave.

When Laurel finally managed to crane her neck and see who it was, she caught Phineas cleaving the crowd and aiming right for them. He looked *pissed*.

A nervous chuckle escaped her. "Oops."

A few cycles earlier, Phineas had watched his prisoner-turned-guest leave with Dame Augusta and Miss Carmina as a strange, new feeling spread in his gut. Remorse. He had treated the woman poorly. Even his fearsome second-in-command had found tying the foreigner to the mast a bit of an overreaction. Still, he would rather be wrong than careless. Lady Laurel might not present real physical danger, but her temper surely rivaled that of a sea demoness. Or a Varangian. What if he was wrong and the enemy *had* sent her? The skills she had displayed at the wheel, thus allowing his *Brass Baron* to defeat four enemy dragon ships, had to weigh in her favor. Or prove the enemy had trained her. If she had

not, if indeed she was from an island he'd never heard of, well, the enemy would want her. He knew somewhere in his veritable sky fortress, the infamous Thorne was working to discover the identity of this new human helmsman. Not many human ships could hope to evade the Varangian fleet. Phineas had not only evaded it, he had destroyed part of it. Thanks to Lady Laurel's inspiring—if albeit demented—maneuvers. Perhaps he should emulate his crew and give her the benefit of the doubt. So difficult to do.

His arm burned and he balled his fist to alleviate the old, familiar pain. The glove that covered his scarred hand felt tight and constricting, yet he would not part with it. He rarely did except for his daily ablutions and to sleep. But even then, he often fell asleep fully clothed with boots, pistols and all, exhausted at his desk.

On the docks, Lady Laurel seemed to be looking for something along the ship's deck. Then her gaze met his and held it. His breath caught. Again, merely looking at the woman brought on a surge of lust he could ill explain but that would not be denied. The next time they were alone together, Phineas was not sure he would be able to curtail the needs from his flesh. Weak, vulnerable flesh. Unable to turn his gaze away from her, he nodded.

She likewise returned his nod and left. Orabilis's thick crowd soon swallowed his crew. They had better behave this time.

Even if business and the counting of the momentous run's proceeds awaited him, something he never left to anyone else, he found no joy in remaining on the ship. His crew had come to expect him to stay with the *Brass Baron* by now. But for this one time, he would have enjoyed a bit of down time. Perhaps with his temperamental guest. She had seemed open to the possibility.

He shook his head and turned away. There was work to be done. And York still needed to see him for the next run. On top of securing the best privateer east of the border, he now could boast

Full Steam Ahead

that he'd witnessed Phineas and his crew—and his peculiar visitor—give a sound thrashing to the enemy. A profitable outcome for all involved.

“She is one amazing woman, is she not?”

Phineas turned to see York lean against the balustrade and gaze into the crowd where Lady Laurel had disappeared a short while back.

“Dame Augusta is an esteemed first officer.” Phineas enjoyed keeping this man on his toes. He could toss him much, *much* farther than he would ever trust him.

The lean, suave man smiled and acknowledged the non-verbal message with a small nod. “With your leave, I shall endeavor to court her. She would make a fine companion.”

Phineas's first instinct was to smack the man upside the head. Instead, he shrugged. “Do as you please.”

“What, Captain? Would you not wish to be recipient of this lady's attention? Have you no pulse?”

He had a pulse all right, and it was rapidly climbing.

“Mr. York,” Phineas began. “It pains me to share with you that your attentions toward Lady Laurel will earn you bruises, to your ego and elsewhere. But you're a grown man, as she is an adult woman perfectly able to deal with suitors, as we have seen earlier today. I wish you much success.”

York grinned wide. His slicked-back hair glistened when he leaned into Phineas and winked. “A challenge, then?”

“For this to be a challenge, my interest in Lady Laurel should be vested. It is not.”

“You're a stronger man than I.” York slipped his gloves on and buttoned his expensive greatcoat up to the collar. Orabilis stood the closest to the pole and enjoyed more than its fair share of cold, wintry winds. “Then I shall pursue her as I see fit, because you

Full Steam Ahead

don't seem to care either way. Perhaps my attentions shall not be in vain. But then again, I care little with whom, as long as I have a warm companion in bed with me tonight. Good evening, Captain, if I daresay."

A spike of temper warmed Phineas's cheeks. He gritted his teeth and turned away to inspect the damage done to the retractable shield. He threw a curt, "Good evening," over his shoulder.

The repairs required long cycles from the crew and himself. Night had fallen by the time he straightened from the task of entering the last few days into the log. He stretched his tired legs and was considering going down into the galley and getting something to eat when a small knock came to the door.

"Yes."

Virgil poked his head in the embrasure. The shy crow's nest man rarely came down from his perch and makeshift home atop the mainmast.

"Is everything alright, Virgil?"

Phineas had seen him down from the nest only a handful of times. Short and pleasantly stout, Virgil had been a singer according to the ship gossip. Why was he now working on a privateer ship? Only the sea goddess knew.

The man pushed his goggles up to his forehead. The leather tunic creaked with his massive shoulders. "One of the lads came back." His kindly dark eyes crinkled when he smiled. "Not on his own two feet."

Phineas sighed. "Another fight?"

Virgil shook his head. "No fighting, but a bit too much revelry, I was told. A few deck hands are now at the *Spars and Gunnels*."

The establishment boasted the best potato skins in Orabilis and the quickest way to get in trouble due to its proximity to brothels

Full Steam Ahead

and more infamous districts. He had enjoyed venturing into that tavern on quite a few occasions as a teen. He and his brother—

The painful memory surfaced like a bad tooth ache.

“Are they *causing* trouble or *watching* trouble?”

“Well....”

“Which one? If it is Ayer, I shall wrap that blasted speaking-trumpet around his neck.” Phineas pushed himself to his feet.

“Not Ayer nor any of the boarding party.” Virgil entered the small cabin and closed the door behind him. “You must understand, captain. She is far from home and perhaps feeling a tad gloomy.”

Phineas froze in the act of putting on his greatcoat. “Go on.”

Despite the ominous tone to Phineas’s short comment, Virgil smiled. “I am told she and Miss Carmina make highly entertaining dancers.”

“Danc—*what?*”

He had *told* them, all of them, to be careful, to not draw attention to themselves. With her pale hair and eyes, Lady Laurel too closely resembled the enemy and would be mistaken for one. As he had done when she had first come onboard. So why in all the levels of watery death were she and Miss Carmina dancing in one of the seediest taverns in all of Orabilis? Did they *want* to draw trouble? Was Dame Augusta not there to prevent these things? Had she not promised to keep a close eye on Laurel?

“I’m sure they don’t mean ill, Captain. They are young and looking to have a bit of—”

Phineas did not wait for Virgil to finish as he wrenched the door wide and charged up the stairs. He must have scared his night watch out of their wits because as he stormed across the deck, one challenged him with weapons drawn.

Full Steam Ahead

“Troubles, Captain?” the man who challenged him asked after he recognized his captain’s tall form.

“No. Man your damn post.”

His ears buzzed with his blood flow. What if a rival ship caught his crew unaware and diminished by spirits? What if marauding Varangians crept along Orabilis’s dark alleys, looking for unsuspecting human prey? Females would be especially delightful to the vile creatures. Damn them, could they not heed his words for once? Could Dame Augusta not forego a couple of mugs to keep a better eye on the younger crewmembers?

His height allowed him to cleave a path through the thick, boisterous crowd on the docks. Within moments, he’d charged deeper into the city’s underbelly. There, depravity and decadence came hand in hand. Prostitutes, some of them beautifully painted and wearing little more than provocative grins. Mercers showing their most beguiling bedchamber ware. Couples, trios, groups having sex in corners not dark enough to hide their writhing forms. None of this touched him. He had once spent many a night here, looking for excitement. Now, he only wished the streets were deserted so he could reach the *Spars and Gunnels* faster.

What if something happened to them? What if someone decided to inspect the exotic woman closer and noticed the pale hair? What if she was hurt?

Finally, he pushed a pair of drunken men aside and put his booted foot on the first step leading inside the *Spars and Gunnels*. Music, loud and pumping to a mad rhythm, made his ears hiss painfully. How could someone hear anything in here, even one’s own thoughts? A thick crowd all turned toward one spot and blocked further access. He craned his neck to see over the sea of heads and spotted something that made his heart squeeze painfully. All over again, his old nightmare took shape. Except that this time,

he was not watching his brother and his lovely fiancée dance to a mad tune, while his mother looked on and laughed, moments away from tragedy, treason and a heartache that would follow him to this day.

The sight of both young women amidst a pack of slobbering drunkards broke the leash on his temper. He pushed and shoved and straight-armed his way to the three women's table. Dame Augusta saw him first. She even waved at him!

Both young women turned to look at him. If Miss Carmina blushed right up to the root of her hairline, Laurel only grinned boldly. The shawl that hid her pale hair had shifted slightly.

“Hey, there, Captain, my captain.”

“You are drunk. In public. Where anyone could—”

“It's okay. I have my bodyguards here taking care of me.”

Beaming from ear to ear, she held up her hand for Dame Augusta to smack with her palm. What sort of nonsense was this?

“I would have expected more caution from you, Dame Augusta. You know what could happen.”

She only narrowed her eyes at him, seemingly unaffected by his tone. “What *could* happen, Phineas, *has* happened. Years ago. Lightning does not strike the same mast twice. You should—”

“Is this man pestering you, ladies?” inquired a burly man who smelled of fuel and fried onions.

“Stay out of our affairs.” Phineas shoved him back. Hard enough to dissuade further meddling but not violently enough to trigger a fight.

Unfortunately, his companions did not seem to agree. As one man, all half dozen of them jumped to their feet from a few tables over and pushed forward.

Phineas cursed under his breath. “I have no quarrel with you, gentlemen. These ladies work for me.”

“I don’t,” quipped Laurel. She wiggled her eyebrows at him.

Phineas repressed the very real urge to stamp his boot in her seat. He breathed once, long and hard. He grabbed the closest woman—who happened to be Laurel—and pulled her to her feet. She yanked her arm out of his grip and glowered.

“Don’t ever touch me that way again.” Her gaze drilled holes into his hide.

He leaned into her to be heard above the din. “I would not have to if you had shown the smallest bit of sense. I told you not to draw attention to yourself. It’s dangerous. Yet here we are.”

The burly man meant to push Laurel behind him, but he also tasted the woman’s deathly stare.

“What do I look like to you men, a Post-It note you can move around? Get your paws off me.”

Just as one of the man’s companions elbowed his way through to come at Phineas, Dame Augusta snapped to her feet and barred the man’s progress with an imperious motion of her hand. “This nonsense has gone on long enough. Put it back in your trousers, gents.”

“I’m not the kind of man to just stand by while some thug manhandles the ladies.”

“Then your mother taught you well,” Phineas snarled. “But I hope she also taught you to keep your tongue safely in your mouth and not wag it around at strangers.” He had enough of this. “Both of you,” he snapped for Miss Carmina’s and Laurel’s benefits. “You’re coming back to the ship.”

“We were only enjoying ourselves, Sir,” his navigator replied. “All we wanted was to forget.” Her large, dark eyes welled. “It was a hard day for everyone.”

Laurel rolled her eyes. “Don’t grovel. We didn’t do anything wrong. He’s just being—”

Full Steam Ahead

“Be very careful about your choice of words, madam.”

Even though she hid her smile by turning her face away, he still saw the corners of her mouth twitching.

That foul-tempered, hard-headed sea demoness!

But she was his charge now. His responsibility. Phineas Hamilton might not have been the most well-liked man in the world, but he wouldn't shirk his duties.

Just as he reached Laurel to take her wrist, she snatched her arm up, lost her balance and collided with her would-be savior. With a hand as wide as the lady's head, the burly man steadied her by the shoulder.

Phineas only had time to curse when her shawl caught and slid off her head. It hung impotently in the man's hand. His reaction quickly shifted from apologetic to confused to disgusted when the woman's pale hair caught the gas lamps' light.

Time seemed to grind to a halt.

A wave of silence spread from their group, wider, across the entire tavern until only the band remained oblivious. Then they, too, froze and turned to stare. The last blast of flute sounded shrill in the sudden silence.

“What is this, this *thing* doing here?” a woman's voice demanded from the general direction of the bar. From among the pressed bodies emerged a tiny old woman, the *Spars and Gunnels'* well-known owner.

“This is not as it appears,” Phineas began. His voice was loud and clear, even if his heart had just skipped two beats. “She is not Varangian, only a visitor. She comes from a faraway land. But she is human. Like us.”

Someone sneered the word *freak* as Laurel reached for her shawl. But the man dropped it to the floor as if stung. She picked it

Full Steam Ahead

up, wrapped it back around her head. Miss Carmina tied it for her. Both had lost the gay sparkle in their eyes.

Phineas stood closer to Laurel. This time, she tried neither to stop him nor to share another slice of her temper. For the first time since he had met the curious woman, she looked cowed. He hated them for it.

“Get that creature out of my tavern.” The old woman curled her lip in disgust. “I never want to see your faces at the *Spars and Gunnels* again. Leave!”

Phineas extended his arms and carefully retreated from the corner where the women had chosen their table. Amidst a hostile silence interspersed with hissed insults and the scraping of chair legs, he escorted both young women toward the exit. Dame Augusta followed, casting stares all around and letting everyone know she was leaving because of some flaw or weakness the locals had demonstrated, thus making them beneath her standards. Sometimes, he envied the woman’s aplomb. Her hand was at her waist. Under her jacket, Phineas knew she hid a small pistol, despite Orabilis’s restrictions against steam weapons.

Confusion, anger and hurt made Laurel’s eyes even larger. She looked up to him. Her chin trembled. With repressed fury as much as a wounded spirit, he was sure.

As they neared the exit, the crowd parted to let them pass.

“This is just too weird,” Laurel snarled in undertones.

He squeezed her wrist harder. “You have done enough damage for one day.” He turned toward the door, shoved it wide open.

Everything happened fast.

Out of nowhere, a bottle flew directly at Laurel’s head. She would never see the dangerous projectile in time. Acting purely on instincts, Phineas snapped his gloved hand up and at the last second deflected the missile. The bottle hit his knuckles and tore a

Full Steam Ahead

growl of pain from him. In a geyser of amber liquid and glass, the bottle crashed against the doorjamb a few inches to his left. Bits of glass showered the nearest people.

Perhaps the deed had somehow liberated the murderous monsters lurking in the crowd, for several men charged at Phineas and his crew.

So much for not drawing attention.

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 7

In this strange world, just like anywhere else, the shit-o-meter could hit the red zone in the span of a second. How did these things happen to her? She hadn't been looking for trouble. Not once in her life had she gone out and specifically looked for trouble. Not once. Yet trouble always ensued. Although she was sure Captain Phineas would never believe her if she tried to tell him she'd just come here to forget. Just have a drink, dance a bit, and forget everything. Stuff just *happened* around her. And here she was now, standing in a shower of beer from a broken bottle that would have made a nice dent in her skull if it hadn't been for Phineas. He had killer reflexes.

A nervous giggle made her slap her hands over her mouth. "Sorry," she mumbled through her fingers when Phineas cut her an angry glare.

He snarled a curse, backing away by a step. "This is all your doing. I told you not to draw attention to yourself."

"I said sorry."

"I'll deal with you later." He grabbed Carmina by the elbow and squeezed her behind him. "Dame Augusta, a diversion, if you please."

"Certainly." A smile rounded her blushing cheeks. Laurel couldn't get over how much of a neat drunk the Headmistress was. Laurel herself probably looked like a grinning idiot, complete with Halloween costume and IQ temporarily in the double digits.

The unmistakable sound of chairs angrily scraping against the floor made her cringe. Several men jumped to their feet. Trouble. A lot of it.

Full Steam Ahead

But before any of the ugly men had a chance to attack, Dame Augusta extended her arm upward. Laurel spotted a small, silvery pistol in the woman's gloved hand. A single shot hissed out. The closest gas lamp exploded and sent downward a jet of flames strong enough to lick the floor. A collective yelp of fright spread through the crowd. Even Laurel gasped. Everything was made of wood in this place!

A moment later, the lamp died and the flames went out. But it had been enough to slow the men considerably. They reached Phineas, who stood in front with his arms and legs apart, staring hard at the oncoming thugs as if the power of his glare alone would slow them down. It didn't. They plowed into him and sent him back several paces. But he still managed to headlock one and grab the collar of another. With his wingspan, Laurel had no doubt he could headlock a second right next to the first. But he didn't have to because Augusta pistol-whipped a third man. He whirled on himself and collapsed against a nearby table. Mugs, patrons and loose bits scattered in a wide radius.

Something tugged her back by the coattails. Laurel yelped and kicked without looking. Her heel connected with something soft. She turned just in time to see her would-be savior of earlier crumbling in a large heap. The way he held his crotch with both hands let her know just what she'd hit. The universal body language of male pain.

From behind, someone abruptly trapped her in a bear hug. She arched back but wasn't strong enough—or tall enough—to overbalance her unseen attacker.

“Duck!” Augusta yelled. Laurel barely had time to do as instructed before the woman threw a pewter mug right at her. It flew by her face. Barely an inch, she was sure.

“Are you *nuts?*”

Full Steam Ahead

Another mug followed the first. This one from Carmina, who had a great aim but none of the Headmistress's force. It clipped Laurel on the shoulder and sprayed both her unseen attacker and herself with a geyser of whitish liquid. Whatever it was, it reeked.

Meanwhile, Phineas made a sort of hockey jersey maneuver and pulled one of the guys' shirts over his head and shoulders, basically trapping him in his garment so that Phineas could punch at will. And he did. Laurel had never seen someone punch so hard and so fast. The guy's whole upper body shook with each hit. As Phineas was cocking his arm back for another round, a pair of very large, very ugly men tackled him onto a table. Then all three rolled pell-mell onto the floor.

"Get him," someone yelled over the chaos.

"I don't think so," Laurel yelled right back. She had no idea where this aplomb came from, because right now, all she'd wanted was get the hell out of Crazy Town. Without thinking, she lunged at one of the men, sort of landed on his arm and back, simultaneously clawing and kicking up until she'd settled mostly on top of him. He tried to reach back but couldn't yank her off him. Who knew punching someone's skull would hurt so damn much? Despite the alcohol-induced numbness, she clearly felt the throb in her right hand as she pummeled the man's nape and crown.

"Augusta," Laurel yelled. Punch-punch. "Kick him. *Something.*" Punch-punch-punch. "Quickly."

It was Carmina who helped save Laurel from herself. She did just as Laurel had done and hung on to the man's other arm, the one with which he was struggling to dislodge Laurel. Both women literally hanging onto him, he stood back from Phineas, began to stumble sideways, backward and forward, and knocked a few chairs over to finally end his wild course against the wall. The air

left her in a great *humph* when Laurel was crushed under the man's weight.

As she tried to disentangle her legs from beneath two hundred plus pounds of drunkard, she noticed more people joined the fight. Some of them she recognized as Phineas's crew. Then a sizable group of young men and women busted into the tavern. They wore brown leather aviator uniforms. Those, she recognized. The boarding party, the crazy ones who'd flown at the enemy ships with something that looked like jetpacks attached to their backs. As one, they rushed to their captain's aid, pulling, shoving, elbowing, kicking, and some of them seemingly having a grand time doing it.

The inimitable voice of the ship's official insult-slinger cleaved the air. He must have still been outside, but she heard him clearly.

"To the rescue!" he called. *"Before the smell overcomes us all!"*

"Laurel!"

She turned to see Dame Augusta waving frantically to join her.

With the addition of the boarding party, the original combatants could make a hasty retreat, which they did. Laurel's knuckles throbbed from repeatedly hitting the guy's head. But damn. What a night.

Phineas stumbled out of the tavern with a man still attached to his neck. He quickly dispatched him with a knee to the outer thigh that looked even more painful than it must have been. Growling a curse, he shoved the man away and leaped the couple of stairs to the street proper. Lady Augusta and Carmina followed with a couple of crewmembers. Laurel was about to rush to them when Phineas roughly yanked her back by the collar of her jacket.

"All of you, go to the ship," he panted. His eyes could have melted metal, she was sure. The scowl on him. "I shall have a word with *her*." He gave her a rough shake.

Full Steam Ahead

“Hey!” As much as she tried to pry his hand off her jacket, she couldn’t. So huffing and puffing were basically her only remaining recourses, which she used copiously.

No one on the street seemed to care a fight had just broken out in the tavern. While the group ran away and disappeared into the churning crowd, Phineas kept his fist on her collar and drove her forward one block. He turned left into a narrow alley that reminded her of Chinatown in half a dozen cities. Smells assaulted her. Cooking oil, wet wool and spices. People became sparse and then nonexistent. Above their heads, wind howled through the jagged rooftops and the many protrusions.

“What the hell are you doing?” She grabbed the handrail on a passing staircase. Phineas didn’t even slow down, despite the obstacle. She grunted and had to let go when the skin of her palm began to burn. “Are you out of your *mind*? Let me go. Right now. I’m not joking, Phineas.”

Sky appeared between the rows of decrepit buildings ahead. A dead end. Laurel gasped in fright when Phineas released her a couple of feet from a wrought iron fence that was the only barrier between her and an endless sky. She stumbled to a halt. Fog, steam and a timid glow from a faraway streetlight illuminated a long, long drop into darkness.

Phineas brusquely turned her around. “Do you have any idea what you have *done*?”

“I wasn’t trying to do anything. All I did was—”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. You are an irresponsible, imprudent little—”

“Whoa. Wait just one minute. There’s no need to call me names.”

Full Steam Ahead

“You don’t *think*. You just act and pretend to worry about the consequences when in fact you care not at all. I loathe people like you, madam.”

“And you’re just a pretentious fathead who thinks he knows everything.”

“I know enough not to put everyone in danger because I cannot hold my liquor.”

Laurel harrumphed. “Well, excuse me if I’m not like you and don’t hide behind—”

He crowded her against the fence. “I do not hide.”

With a curse, she pushed him away. Or tried to. But he grabbed her wrist and took her with him as he lurched back. The sound of his boots scraping the cobbles covered what he said then. It didn’t look polite.

“You, too,” Laurel snarled. She yanked on her arm but couldn’t dislodge it from his iron grip. A flare of anger and some fear triggered animal responses that she might have been able to abort had she been sober enough. Unfortunately, she wasn’t. She snapped her knee upward, caught him on the inside of the thigh.

He grimaced, opened his mouth, and snapped it closed a couple of times. Rage made his eyes into twin dark suns. “I should toss you over that fence. Right now.”

“You keep saying that, don’t you. But when you have your chance, you do nothing. Just like last night.”

Uh-oh.

His hands gripping her lapels and hoisting her to him effectively interrupted her good rage. Those lips she’d loved at first sight quivered as he obviously tried not to bite her head off. Or toss her into the void, as he’d said he should do. Laurel couldn’t control the flush of heat rising to her cheeks. Hunger burned deep in her belly.

Full Steam Ahead

“You’re some hot when you’re mad.” Laurel chuckled at the expression on his face. Shock. Disbelief. Outrage.

God help her, she was still feeling her liquor.

Phineas thought his head would explode with anger and frustration. What sort of woman would say something like that? Had she no preservation instinct at all? Was she that brash and unconcerned? For a moment he wondered what it would feel like to be this carefree, to act without forethought or very little of it, to just respond to stimuli and damn the consequences. Living life as though nothing could touch him. Or act as if he did not care either way. He’d never tasted such freedom. Probably never would. He had responsibilities. People depended on him. His crew needed him alert and sharp. Not bouncing from one crazy venture to the next.

In his anger, he had gripped her lapels and brought her close to him. So he could yell at her, shake some sense into her. He did neither. This exotic woman, this pale-haired stranger with eyes like those of the enemy could do this to him. Make him lose his legendary focus. Cause chaos where there was only order and discipline. But he, too, could rattle her. He pinned her against the wrought iron fence separating them from a long fall into the toxic sea at the foot of the city’s mammoth iron stiles. Only iron could withstand the corrosive effect of the ocean.

Laurel didn’t seem impressed. On the contrary, her eyes narrowed in what very much resembled lust. She returned his grip with two fists on his collar. “What are you going to do? Huh?”

Invitation or challenge. Or both?

The evening’s events, coupled with the previous day’s tragedy, mixed in his head, became a whorl of emotions and irrational

Full Steam Ahead

urges. Chaos mutated into frenzy, numbness into oversensitivity. He couldn't stop the spiral.

Her lips felt tender and pliable—contrary to her personality—when Phineas crushed his mouth to hers.

For a brief moment their mouths were one. Then he pushed her back to arm's length. Their panting created ribbons of fog to curl between them. A fever took him. He shook from trying to restrain the powerful drive to do it again. And again. To have his way with her, to fuck her. Proper men didn't treat ladies this way. And yet....

With his gaze he devoured her. She returned the favor with an intensity that took his breath away. So he kissed her again. Laurel received him with a long moan. It spurred him on. Urgency, turmoil, pressure. The blade of white-hot lust cut into him. He curled his hips into her. Hard. Details on her garments like buttons and thick hems pressed into his belly and chest. Her stout and strong body molded to his. Perfectly. He had never touched a woman this way, urgently. He had let go of all bounds of propriety. He was only impulses now. Only hunger and urges. It scared and liberated him. Freedom. Madness.

He put his hands on her hips and she bucked against him, rolled and undulated and plastered herself against his front. He abandoned trying to make his hands gentle. His belly cramped with need, as did his thighs, and Phineas pushed his tongue deeper into her welcoming mouth, biting and licking and nibbling at her juicy lips. Their feverish writhing created faint clicks of loose sections of fence, with their moans as accompaniment. Phineas seized one of her wrists and brought it up above her head, and when Laurel arched hard into him, he pushed a thigh between hers. To keep the woman put, to satiate his need to feel her most intimate spot.

Full Steam Ahead

That throat he had admired proved even better than anticipated. He licked a long pass up to her tender earlobe. Bit it. She gasped. He did it again. Her hand still trapped in his, he bit his way down her throat until he had reached the fever-hot skin between her breasts. The damn shirt prevented him from reaching deeper.

His gaze on hers, he abandoned her hand so he could unbutton her coat. He wanted to feel her. Right then and there. Wanted to get his hands—his one good hand—full of her curves and hard angles, wanted to feel her flesh make a home for his.

“Take it off,” she snarled in his ear. Tugged on his greatcoat.

She yelped when he fisted the front of her cropped jacket and yanked it open. Her breasts pushed against the too-tight borrowed shirt. She shared none of Miss Carmina’s slight form, even if the two were the same height.

He planted his gaze on her. “Undo it.”

She let her head rest on one of the fence’s rods. Eyes like blue stars and a crooked grin like a crescent moon. “You do it.”

He undid the first button, kissed the portion of newly exposed skin. Undid a second button. Luckily, there were many. He would enjoy this.

She wrapped her hands over his and yanked outward. The shirt ripped open almost all the way down to her navel, exposing a narrow vee of her cleavage. Buttons clicked as they landed, unseen and lost, on the cobbles. “This is what I want.”

“Then you shall have it.”

A particularly thick patch of fog obscured their surroundings until only the two of them existed. From a faraway gas lamp perched high atop the closest roof, faint amber light graced her skin and made silver threads of her hair. Her gaze on his, she cupped her breast through the parted shirt, creating a crease where the mound pushed almost all the way out of her underthings. A

tantalizing offering. One he had no intention of ignoring. Phineas dove for the exposed cleft between her breasts. Licked a long, hard pass up her throat before bearing down for another kiss. When she opened her mouth, he sucked on her bottom lip, held it between his teeth, and released it so he could nip her jaw. But he could never be long without her mouth against his. This kiss, he made brutal.

Instead of accepting his weight, she fought against him, pushed up and arched her back until only her shoulders rested against the metal. With his thigh against her mons, he crushed her back against the fence. Again, she resisted. So be it. Phineas snaked his gloved hand behind her so he could curve her lower back and plaster her to him. He felt teeth and realized she smiled against his kiss.

Phineas grabbed a fistful of shirt and tugged sideways to expose her breast. A pale nipple rose defiantly. He took it into his mouth. Laurel gasped when he bit her and moaned when he sucked the stiff point.

Her head lolled side to side. “Oh, that’s so good.”

A metallic, rattling sound froze him. His heart pounded hard. He checked behind him, saw nothing.

Laurel licked her upper lip, eyes closed. “Why are you stopping?”

“I heard something.”

“I don’t care.” She opened her eyes and kissed him. Hard.

The threat of discovery deepened his need, heightened the urgency. Burned him body and soul.

Phineas pulled back. “Turn around.”

“*Make me.*”

Her grin widened when he whirled her around so she faced the fence, pressed up against her, and squeezed his arm between two rails so he could cup her naked breast. So hot despite the chilly

Full Steam Ahead

wind. With his gloved hand, he gripped her hip to keep her put. She was not going anywhere.

Laurel had heard the sound, too, but knew what it was. A window high above across the alley had glowed amber and silhouetted a person for a few seconds, before going dark once more. Was the unseen spectator still there, watching them? The thrill of exposure stimulated her. Who knew she had an exhibitionistic streak in her? Let them watch. She didn't care.

Laurel's heart thudded hard against her rib cage. Hard enough that she was sure it pounded against the fence as well. Phineas's lean body kept her from wiggling her butt. He whispered something in her ear but the wind drowned his voice. She didn't care what he was saying. All she cared about was what he did to her body. She hadn't foreseen the change that took him after he kissed her for the first time. As if the taciturn and mannered man had suddenly metamorphosed into a commanding, unyielding lover. She'd spotted a hint of his deeper nature as she stripped in his cabin, but he'd kept his gaze mostly averted, even if the sexual tension had been thick enough to cut with a knife. But this here, this touching and kissing and biting, just about melted her between the legs.

His thumb dug into her hip. She knew what he wanted. She stepped her right foot out sideways. Gave him room. Made it easier. He pulled his arm back from between the rails and squeezed it into her tight pants. But as soon as his fingers reached her mons, she twisted to keep him from reaching his goal. His growl of frustration made her bite her bottom lip, waiting for his response.

She didn't have to wait long.

On a snarl, he pinned her harder. His boots crunched on the cobbles as he adjusted his stance and squeezed a thigh between

Full Steam Ahead

hers, this time from behind. Puffs of steam rose with both their panting. She couldn't move anymore. Loved every second of it.

Against the rail by her cheek, a fat drop of rain landed. Then another. *Plat-plat*. Some seeped into her mouth. The rain tasted metallic. Like pennies. In this strange world, she'd come to view the water as her enemy, but not here, not now. Water could also be soothing to feverish skin, a cool accompaniment to love's fires. Laurel closed her eyes when Phineas raked his bottom teeth up the back of her neck. Her spine arched of its own volition.

Surrender. Challenge. A silent plea.

He must have understood. She knew by the way he moved. He seized her surrender by wrapping his gloved hand around her throat and angling her head back. He met her challenge in the way he gave her just enough room to arch into him. And he answered her silent plea by branding her with a kiss that took everything she had. Lips throbbing, she opened up to him. His hands, his mouth. *Take me.*

When Phineas tugged at the back of her shirt to lift it up, Laurel yanked it up with her free hand. Bars dug in her collarbones but she'd change nothing. Cool air pebbled the skin of her chest, her shoulders. Half-naked from the waist up, with her breasts between rails on the glacial fence, she pressed her butt up into his groin. Above them, the rectangle of amber darkened with a person's outline. Then another. Close together. A couple, obviously. An expression she'd read somewhere came to her. *As above, so below*. Somehow, she doubted the author had had this situation in mind.

"Laurel," Phineas whispered.

His erection crushed a home in the small of her back. Then rain hit her butt and hips as he jerked her pants down on one side. Rolling her hips helped take care of the other side. A brand-hot hand slid around her waist and then wound lower until the tips of

Full Steam Ahead

his long fingers parted her. Entered her. Above, the two silhouettes at the window merged, undulated. The taller began to pump rhythmically. She knew that dance.

Between her legs, warm moisture and cold rain mixed, triggered frissons up her back, this water that had once again become her ally. It cleansed her. Christened them. The last shreds of alcohol dissipated. She wanted to feel this, she wanted to take this man and remember every second of it, wanted to be made his and recall the details to her last day.

He abandoned her neck so he could seize a breast. Teased and rolled the hard point from around the rail next to her elbow. As though the touch came from someone else. An unseen, second lover.

“Ah, Phineas.” Her moan rose like a ghost to mix with the fog.

Phineas growled something against her nape while simultaneously pinching her nipple. Laurel gasped. His name again. She’d never said a man’s name during sex. It surprised and rattled her. Even in her aroused state.

The contrast between the heat of his hand and her rain-cooled skin created a spasm low in her belly, a spasm that spread and burned every nerve ending from toes, calves, thighs, butt and upward through her abdomen and breasts, arms and fingertips. He must have felt it because he curled his hips into her, those glorious, lean hips that would make perfect anchors for her knees. Would he eat her? With those wicked lips, such intimacy would make him a memorable lover.

She arched harder into him when his fever-hot fingertips centered on her clitoris. She wanted him to take her. Like this. Consume her entirely. Raw masculinity that offered no quarter. No mercy. She wanted to become lost in the heat and intensity of his lust, like a spaceship headed for a supernova. Not at idle to float on

Full Steam Ahead

the pulls and currents. No. She was heading for a collision with a sun and was doing it at full throttle. Life was short. So very short. And this made her feel alive.

“Ah. Ah. Ah.”

Her gasps coiled up through the rails like ghosts, floating, roiling, mixing with the night to become memories. She would never forget this. Faint echoes answered. Another woman, same pleasure.

Behind her, Phineas deepened his touch. One finger entered her deeply. Instead of adding fingers—she wanted all of them—he curled the lone finger so it rubbed against her. Moisture gathered in a heated recompense to his expert attention. Laurel squeezed her vaginal muscles around him. It was his turn to voice his pleasure with a gasp.

“Harder.” His lips against her ear. So hot. A nip.

She squeezed as hard as she could. The burn, his finger, his body crushing her against the fence. The shadowed lovers at the window. Night choking out faraway gas lamps. Rain and wind and pebbles crunching underfoot. His finger, in and out, pitiless, precise. He knew what he was doing. He knew what he wanted. So did she.

“Do me.”

Movements, garments melting away. He turned her around. Roughly. He’d already pulled his shirt wide and partly out of his pants. With his greatcoat parted over his chest, she could revel in the network of lean muscles like those of a surfer. And scars. A *lot* of scars concentrated on his left pectoral and even more that disappeared up by his shoulder. He wore a silver bullet on a leather cord around his neck. She briefly wondered what it was for.

While he kept her put with his gloved hand splayed on her chest, he tugged his belt open. A man about to give his woman

Full Steam Ahead

what she wanted. What she'd demanded. Buttons and clasps and fabric were no match for his vigor. Things ripped, the sound a tiny machine gun. Pale skin contrasted against his dark clothes. Rain had plastered his long hair on his skull and only one eye glared out through the uneven bangs. He held her in that dark lens. Captive. Willing.

Laurel pushed off the fence so she could help with the damn pants, but he pressed her back against it. Finally, his penis bobbed into view and like the rest of him, it was long and lean and perfect. Damn. She almost came just watching him. Warm moisture gathered in her sex.

He fisted himself, pumped a few times with his gaze on her face. She wouldn't pass up such an opportunity and caught the head of his cock when he pulled his hand back around the base. A curse escaped him. With her thumb, she rolled the pre-cum that had pearled on the tip all around the glans.

"You like that?" A woman's pleasure could be heard above their heads. The oldest song. Phineas didn't seem to notice.

Still she rolled her slick hand along his cock. 'Round and 'round. Her kneecaps had connected on the ground before the thought registered that she wanted him in her mouth. Now. She took him deep, pumped and licked and sucked. She spared a hand so she could hold him still. Rain made his leather boots nice and smooth. She never had time to taste him to her satisfaction before he gripped her coat collar and pulled her up against him, put her back the way she'd been. The way he wanted.

"Laurel."

A warning. A split second of stillness before an explosion of movement, a storm of loose garments and wet hair and burning, rock-hard flesh. The fence rattled when Phineas pushed her back

Full Steam Ahead

against it. Laurel teased him by hooking up her foot on the bottom rod. He seemed to lose control and all but attacked her.

Hard muscles, cool rain, pitiless mouth and smooth cock. Phineas took her.

He gripped her by the thighs so she'd hike them up higher around his waist. She didn't need prompting. Laurel's hamstrings burned as she clutched his waist between her knees and welcomed his thrusts, rolled and twisted and undulated to deepen the penetration. His hands hurt her thighs. She didn't care. Hips worked hard against gravity and what cumbersome garments still remained, while the burn that accompanied his brusque claiming intensified into an exhilarating rush. Her gasps drowned the wind and the unseen woman at the window.

"More," she snarled. "More, more! Ahh!"

Phineas bucked so hard she knocked the back of her head against the fence. It didn't detract her from voicing her pleasure. Nothing could.

From burning, her sex began to tingle with the precursors of an orgasm. She squeezed her thighs as hard as she could. She didn't care if she hurt him. Just as he didn't seem to care about her comfort as he pounded into her, his member rubbing and rubbing her clitoris, which throbbed to the crazy rhythm of her heart. Inflexible. Vigorous. He ripped a long groan from her. She squeezed her eyes shut, gritted her teeth. She came.

But he didn't stop. He pushed into her. Brought her up higher along the cold and wet fence, high enough that she was the same height as he. His puffs of air warmed her face. Phineas pinned her in a cage made of iron and man. Laurel hooked her arms back and held on to the horizontal rod. Her palms grew slick with rain but she held on with all she had. Her senses rioted. Tiny suns burst in her vision. Phineas's eye stared through his wet bangs. Daring her

Full Steam Ahead

and holding her captive. Peering into her very soul. She'd never had that. Had never wanted that.

"Do it," she urged. "Do it, do it."

A series of arrhythmic pumps heralded his own climax. He froze, sheathed to his base, her end, in a vacuum of stimuli as if nothing else but their rain-slicked and feverish bodies existed. Or mattered.

Tingles turned to frissons then to spasms. On a long, broken moan, she came. Altered state, otherness, void. A couple seconds later, she floated back inside herself. Different. A moment of brilliant clarity stilled her racing mind. Nothing had changed around her, it still rained, the wind still whistled a forlorn tune, Phineas still pinned her against a wrought iron fence that dug in her bones. Yet she felt changed. Reborn. Renewed. Through this man's intimacy, she'd achieved a rush, pure exhilaration, that only racing had brought. In her life, pleasure had always been intimately linked to adrenaline and achievements. Not tonight. Not with him. This world in which she'd crash-landed, she'd domesticate in time, she'd pull through this skid, she'd go on. Never surrender.

Gripping the bars on either side of her head, he gently pulled out, panted out one last growl before collapsing against her. His chin fit so nicely in the crook of her shoulder. She encircled his waist with her arms, as he did with her shoulders, and then held still. He grew quiet and immobile.

Above their heads, the window turned dark and empty once more. Yielding to one final temptation, she licked a single raindrop from his cheek.

Phineas's lungs burned. He could hardly swallow. Her arms around his middle brought back painful memories. The last woman

Full Steam Ahead

to have held him this way had not been a lover but a good friend, his brother's lovely fiancée. His left arm burned and his hand throbbled. Even his shoulder ached with the strain and the phantom pain that accompanied every memory of that horrible night. It had rained then, too. Everything had looked greasy and dangerous as he lay chase to what he thought were kidnappers. How wrong he'd been. He wondered if Lady Augusta remembered as well as he did and if she felt the same shame and loathing. His brother—he refused to call him by name, even in memory—had duped them all.

In contrast, the woman in his arms felt so right. She fit perfectly, even if his tall and lean frame towered over her stout and muscular body. He held on to the moment as long as he could. In the end, he knew he had to let go. So hard.

Phineas took Laurel's wrists and broke her hold on his waist. "Come."

"Again?" she mumbled against his chest with a chuckle. She seemed content, and smiled a half-smile that made him wonder what went on in that hard head of hers.

He shook his head. Her inebriated state and reactions to it—no mortification, no embarrassment that he could detect—reminded him how different she was, how *foreign*. She had to still be drunk to not be horrified and angry at the way he had touched her.

"We must return to the ship."

She shrugged, still looking up at him until it made him feel uneasy and awkward. His lower back ached, as did his thighs. He could just imagine how she felt to have been repeatedly pounded into an iron fence. Mortification burned his cheeks. Luckily, the lack of proper light would hide his predicament.

"Hurry," he demanded.

Full Steam Ahead

Phineas stepped back and rearranged his clothes without looking at her. She felt no awkwardness about their actions, but he sure did. What had possessed him to treat a woman this way? Lust had made a beast of him. Perhaps he had a drop of Varangian blood in him after all. A mirthless smile curled his lip.

He felt the weight of her stare like a physical thing boring into the back of his head. His cold, wet clothing wrapped him like shackles and encumbered his limbs, but it shielded him from the shock of what they'd just done.

She fought with her shirt until she had a semblance of order to her clothes. "What's wrong?"

Phineas angrily yanked his belt back on and tugged his greatcoat closed. "I shall never touch you in this manner again. Ever."

The gay sparkle that had lit her eyes and made her mouth a mocking invitation left. Seriousness replaced joviality. He hated himself for it. For once, she had appeared happy, detached and relaxed. But maybe it was better this way. "You're sorry about having sex with me?"

"No, I..." He cursed. "I should not have touched you that way. It was wrong."

"I liked it."

"You liked it?" He pushed down the pommel of a dagger that had ridden partly out of his boot. "What was there to like? Outside in the rain, no bed, no time." No courtship, no ritual, no sense of human refinement.

He watched her fiddle with her shirt, which was missing a few buttons. Warmth rushed to his cheeks.

"You were yourself, just...you know." She shrugged. "You were free. And so was I. Nothing wrong with that." She had muttered the last few words while pulling her pants up around her

hips. Surely his handling would leave bruises. The thought of her skin, bruised by his hands, horrified him.

After a few adjustments to her shawl, she crossed her arms and stared at her feet. "I'm sorry you didn't enjoy it. Or me."

"I did enjoy you, Laurel—"

She made a dismissive gesture of her hand. Phineas noticed that it shook. "Never mind."

"I am sorry." He gestured at their surroundings. "For bringing you here, for letting you off the ship even if I suspected you would cause trouble, for this. For everything."

Through wet hair that hung in thin, blond ribbons, pale eyes glared defiantly at him. The change in her was profound and radical. He had almost forgotten how formidably irate she could be. It chilled him more than the cold breeze.

"I'm *not*," she snapped. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"I would not." He turned his back on her and began to walk toward the alley. "It was improper. We must go, Laurel. We shall speak of this another time. Then again, I would rather we did not."

"Just like that?" she demanded. Anger brewed like a storm in her eyes. "You're snapping that book closed right in my face?"

"What do you want me *to do*?" His temper rose as well. With a profound inhalation, Phineas struggled to regain his composure. Hard to do when he wanted her again. In a proper bed this time, with all the grace and humanity he could muster. His fiery little sea demoness. But never again as they had done. Outdoors like brutes. Like Varangians! What did that say about him?

"Would it be too damn hard to just admit you liked it, that you liked being with me?"

"I never denied it." He only wished he could. "But now is not the time. We must rejoin the crew. We may have to buy a few favors after the damage you did at the *Spars and Gunnels*."

Full Steam Ahead

Laurel's eyes flared then narrowed. "No."

Phineas froze. "No?"

"You heard me."

She stormed by him without turning, stalked back into the alley with anger like a cloud roiling above her head. Phineas caught up, grabbed her by the upper arm. She whirled around, would have punched him had he not parried the hit.

"And where do you plan on going, Laurel? There's nothing for you here except my ship. No one shall give you the time of day. You've seen their reaction to you."

"That doesn't mean you can just treat me any way you choose."

He flinched.

"I don't care. I'll find something." She tugged her arm free. "I'll find someone who's not a condescending asshole—"

His temper finally broke its leash. "And then what? Shall you just fly away to your home, if it even exists? How? You have no money, no connections, no resources. You are too prideful, too stubborn to accept my offer—"

"Some offer! You tied me to the mast! And now you're acting like I'm some dirty thing you don't want to touch." She whirled around and marched for the busy street which could be heard around the corner. "The hell with you. The hell with you and your zany crew and your stupid one glove."

Her voice ricocheted against the brick walls on either side of the alley. White-hot rage descended on him. The residual warmth of their bodies pressed against one another utterly shattered. Phineas devoured the ground after her in long strides and within three seconds, had caught up to her again. But before he could grab her by the back of her coat—gone were the niceties of etiquette, she wanted war, by the sea goddess she would have it—a trio of men converged on Laurel. In her anger, she must not have noticed them

and knocked right against one the large fellows flanking a smaller, leaner one.

She stumbled back by a step. “Watch it!”

“Miss Laurel. What an unexpected pleasure.” York smiled at her. One of his goons blocked Phineas’s path when he took a step sideways to get at the disgruntled woman.

She narrowed her eyes at the newcomer and then beamed a fake smile that grated on Phineas’s raw nerves. “Hey. I remember you. You’re Phineas’s passenger. York, right?”

His smile accentuated as he turned to Phineas. “Indeed, I am. Captain, I had not expected to see you here. Would you care for a drink? Both of you?”

“Yes,” Laurel replied just as Phineas snarled, “No”.

York arched his eyebrows. “Well—”

“Is that offer for tea still on the table?” Laurel superbly ignored Phineas as she turned to York. She looked wound up tight enough to break in two. “I’d love a cup of something hot right about now. I’m cold to my soul.”

“Have you not had enough to drink?” Phineas regretted the angry barb as soon as it left his mouth. Shame angered him only further. That woman. That damn woman!

She glowered back at him. “I won’t even address that.”

“Of course. You are welcome to join us as well, Captain.” York extended his arm for Laurel to take. She seemed lost for a second before obviously catching on what he meant. She tentatively clutched his upper arm. For a reason Phineas could not explain to himself, he loathed the sight of York, smug as a peacock, giving his arm to the woman. And her taking it, even as reluctantly as she did.

Phineas flicked the collar of his greatcoat up and turned away. “I have work to do. Goodbye.”

Full Steam Ahead

“I shall make sure the lady is well escorted back to the ship.” York’s voice did not stop him.

Phineas wanted to yell back he did not care what happened to her and if the lady was well escorted or not, but discovered—much to his frustration—that he did. A little. Or more.

Hands in pockets, he pounded down the street and tried to pretend he had not left a part of himself behind. A part other than a good slice of ego.

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 8

“Thank you, Mr. York.” Laurel smiled above the teacup. It was so good. Warmth suffused her hands and chest. She sighed as she looked around the outrageous place. A “tea room” he’d described it. To her, it resembled more some demented architect’s idea of a bachelor pad. Yet as much as the tea warmed her cold body, nothing could thaw the rage that had settled in the pit of her stomach.

What an asshole.

Phineas and she had had a good time. More than that. She’d discovered something about herself in that back alley, something that Phineas’s intimacy had revealed. So what if there hadn’t been any finesse about it? It had still been beautiful and raw. Two people fulfilling basic physical needs. Why did he have to get all complicated? He’d enjoyed it as much as she had, she could tell. The look in his expressive eyes hadn’t lied. But he preferred to think that what they’d done was wrong somehow. As if she was dirty or something. Well, he wouldn’t make her feel bad about herself. She liked the time they shared and she’d do it again, as long as they could skip the post-coital argument and accusations. He clearly wouldn’t. His choice. Stubborn, mulish man.

York smiled as he raised his teacup to his lips. He reminded her of an Asian action movie star, all lean lines and loose hair coming over his face in asymmetrical bangs. He looked better this way, without the ponytail.

Around them, steam-powered machines rumbled softly as they fulfilled their many functions—wall clock, ceiling ventilator shaped like props, a wheeled and automated serving tray. Even the

lights seemed to be controlled via a clever set of gears and pulleys encased behind a glass panel surrounded with tubes.

“Everything is so different here.” She shook her head.

“But some things are the same?”

York unbuttoned his shirt collar and crossed his leg. Across from her in the huge bay window, Orabilis spread in all its metallic and shiny beauty. Despite the fog, the city possessed a visceral magnetism in the way it felt alive, with machines sticking out of buildings, and huge gears turning slowly, incessantly. She couldn’t stop looking at the docks at the very edge, with flying ships illuminated by gas lamps on strings or clusters like glowing grapes. She couldn’t hear anything for the height and thick glass panes, but she imagined that she could. Tears welled in her eyes. Where was she? What was happening?

“Are you unwell, Lady Laurel?”

She shrugged and, when she gulped some of her tea, burned her bottom lip on the cup. It smelled of honey and lemon. “I’m far from home, that’s all. And I don’t know how I’ll get back.”

“Do you *want* to return?” He sat closer to her. He never lost that charming smile of his. She’d heard somewhere that charming could also be used as a verb. Was he trying to charm her? Well, frankly, with everything that had happened, she didn’t really care. All she wanted was to wallow in her misery for a bit. She *was* far from home, with no way of going back, with no knowledge of where she was in the first place. Those stories of alternate realities and dimensions. She’d never really given them a thought. Bermuda Triangle, portals to other worlds. What if they existed? What if she’d slipped in one of them?

What if I’m stuck here?

Full Steam Ahead

An hour or so ago in the back alley, she'd found renewed strength and courage, and hope, too. It would be all right. She'd manage. But now? With Phineas gone, she didn't feel so sure.

"Of course I want to go back home," she murmured. "I don't belong here."

"One belongs where one hangs his—or her—hat." York's smiled widened. "Forgive me for being so selfish, but I shall forever thank the sea goddess for meeting you. I have never encountered a woman such as you."

A wave of warmth reached her cheeks. "Yeah, sorry if I don't agree one hundred per cent."

She smiled despite the alarms going on in her head as he uncrossed his legs, deposited his untouched cup on the table and cocked his head at her.

"You're so exotic yet familiar. I know others may not share my views, but you are a beautiful fusion of...dare I say, Varangian verve and human finesse. And your skills at the helm are truly second to none."

She smiled because she didn't know what to do with all the flowers. Surely the pot was coming.

"Where did you learn to sail so admirably?"

"I was born to it, almost. My mom and dad met on a tall ships summer program. They kept in touch for a couple of years, and then dad moved to England to be with my mom. I've always known how to sail. Even when I was little." She grinned. "Aren't you sorry you asked?"

"Absolutely not. I find your story fascinating. I'm sure you would find many ship captains here in Orabilis who would pay you handsomely for your skills."

"As I said, I'm not staying. But thanks for the offer."

Full Steam Ahead

“Perhaps you would reconsider? It would be my pleasure to introduce you to a few well-connected captains.”

“I’ve had my fill of the local captains thank you very much. If they’re all like Phineas, I’ll be glad not to have to deal with one ever again.”

Her lie surprised her. She’d deal with him again any day of the week. But the man had many, many layers to him and she wasn’t sure she could deal with all of them.

York’s smile wavered for a second. “Pardon me.” He rose. “I had not realized your attachment for him.”

“Attachment? Pfft!”

“Perhaps you would prefer to return to the *Brass Baron* now?”

“I want nothing to do with him or his ship.”

A tiny scratching sound brought her gaze down to the windowsill. “What is *that*?” She sat up straight.

“Ah, the first stone has been cast, it would seem.”

She wasn’t sure what that meant and didn’t ask as York opened a tiny portion of the window and let in a funny-looking blue bird. A cross between a pigeon, a raven and maybe even a blue jay. A tiny brass roll gleamed at its leg.

“Are those messenger birds?”

York nodded as he read the minute message rolled in the tube. “You would be well treated as ship’s helmsman, Lady Laurel. You would have a career, suitors, friends. My connections would be yours.” His eyes closed for a few moments then he was back to the regular smooth gentleman. “Life is all about choices, is it not?”

She raised her tea cup to show she agreed. She was about to drink when a loud *thump* overhead made her jump and spill burning liquid on her hand. She hissed a curse under her breath.

“Forgive me, Laurel.”

Full Steam Ahead

She stood and dabbed her hand with the napkin he proffered. “Forgive you for what?”

“For this.”

The door opened and in came a pair of men—judging from the shoulders and height—wearing black capes and hood. A cold breeze followed them before they closed the door. One put a little box of lacquered black wood on the table by the door.

York bowed slightly at the waist. “Gentlemen, you are early.”

“Is that her?” one asked. His voice was so deep it could have been rocks rolling downhill.

Laurel shivered as she took a step back. She realized then that there was only one door to this room perched high above the city. A great view. And a greater trap.

“What’s going on?”

York’s expression flickered between sympathetic and nonchalant. “Politics, religion or even allegiance mean nothing to me. I have made my choices and now you shall have to make yours.”

One of the men walked around the table, directly for her, but she rushed the other side, grabbed York by the lapel of his shirt. “What did you do?”

He kissed her knuckles and, with surprising strength, pried her hand off him. “Do listen to their instructions, Laurel. If you value your safety.” He turned away.

When the tall stranger seized her by the shoulders, she didn’t have time to kick him. His acolyte joined him and the both of them quickly subdued her thrashing and kicking. Her heart hammered so hard, it hurt. She arched against them, clawed and bit and cursed. Nothing worked. She managed to kick the table on which the little box had been set, and toppled it. The box broke open on the floor, spilled what looked like pearls but in amazing colors.

Full Steam Ahead

“How could you?” she roared for York’s benefit. “Backstabber. Lying sonuvabitch.”

The men transported her out of the warm and cozy tearoom, up a spiral metal staircase and onto a windswept roof. Fog shredded here and there with the strong gusts. Near the roof ledge, two contraptions waited. They reminded Laurel of hang gliders with articulated bat wings and twin metal rudders suspended over a long, tubular engine.

“Where are you taking me?”

They ignored her. Despite her violent struggle, one of them managed to harness her into a sort of leather sleeping bag attached to the underside of one wing. They strapped themselves in, picked up the gliders and started the contraptions. Steam hissed out of the tubular engines, whistled for a second or so, and then rumbled softly. The perfect stealth machines. They rose in the air with a rhythmic *thoop-thoop-thoop* like a pump. High. Higher. Wind ripped the shawl off her head. It fluttered and twisted around on its way down. She screamed something, wasn’t sure what. Shreds of fog clung to the highest roofs. As they swerved around the needlelike building, she spotted York standing at the window, arms crossed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Laurel squeezed her eyes shut as tears from the wind and abject fear messed with her vision.

Her cheeks felt numb. She was losing consciousness. Great. Her last thought wasn’t for her safety or the identity of the two men kidnapping her. Laurel’s last conscious reflection was about Phineas and how they’d left on such bad terms after sharing what had been the most primal, arousing and exhilarating encounter of her life. Such a waste.

“She is gone.”

Full Steam Ahead

Dawn light did little to smooth Dame Augusta's scowl. She raised an eyebrow. "Gone? Where?"

"With York." The name came out like a threat. Phineas widened his feet and took position against the railing. "Launch!"

Above their heads in the main mast, Virgil fired a volley of tiny silver globes that dispersed in the wind. Phineas shot five of them and missed one. He rarely missed. It would seem even target practice would not soothe his humor.

"I doubt it."

"You weren't there," he snapped. "He approached us, his usual airs and his polished smile and his pair of thugs, and she left with him."

"She may *be with* him, but she would not *leave with* him."

Phineas flicked the colored lenses up from the sight and shot the other volley. "And what is this supposed to mean?"

"Spirits may have dulled her tongue last night, but she couldn't hide what was in her eyes."

"Which was?" Phineas shot and again missed one. He cursed.

"Fondness."

"Ha."

Despite his disagreement, he couldn't help the little bit of warmth filtering in the collar of his coat. Fondness. With the way he had treated her in the alley, and after the way they'd parted, he doubted very much she was fond of him, just as he doubted Laurel would have qualms about leaving with York. That oily, opportunistic—

"Launch!" he roared.

Virgil cast half a dozen target globes. They shot out in various directions at once, floated up and down on currents until they burst in tiny silver flakes as Phineas shot each one. He didn't miss this time.

“Captain.” Ian rushed up to the quarterdeck. “Trouble, sir. At the harbormaster’s.”

Phineas propped the rifle against the rail and turned in time to see Nina join them. She stood a bit in retreat, huge brown eyes fixed on him. So much like her sister as she waited for Phineas to pull the trigger and spare her the atrocity of being caught alive by the vulgar creatures. He had not spoken to her since Joy’s death. He should have, and realized the proper time had come and gone.

“What is it?” He buttoned his greatcoat all the way to his neck.

“The Admiralty are at the harbormaster’s right now, asking which jetty the *Brass Baron* is docked at. Someone said it’s because...well, because of last night.” The man put it rather delicately. Phineas was not sure he would have had such finesse. He would have blamed Laurel, as he already had. It *was* her fault. Mostly.

Dame Augusta planted her fists on her hips. “Shit.”

For once, he agreed with her.

“Thank you, Ian.” Turning to his first-in-command, he asked. “Is the crew all aboard?”

“Laurel is still in town.”

“She’s not part of the crew. She’s free to do as she pleases. Which she has. Raise the anchors. Orabilis is no longer a safe haven for us.”

All three seemed shocked at his order. Ian left with Dame Augusta after a good, long look. Nina was about to follow suit when he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. She did not turn but inclined her face his way.

“I could not let those monsters catch her alive.”

Despite the angle, he saw tears in her eyes. “If it came to it, I would expect you to do the same for me, sir.”

“Still, forgive me.” He squeezed her shoulder.

Full Steam Ahead

She patted his hand and leaped down the ladder to the main deck. He half expected her sister to join Nina as she nimbly climbed up the shroud and stood on the highest spar.

As his orders were relayed to every crewmember, Phineas spotted trouble running along the docks, rifles at the ready and uniforms like blood stains against the foggy dawn.

“Heave-ho,” he roared, grabbed his rifle again and knelt by the rail to take aim. He couldn’t kill Admiralty soldiers and expect to find safe harbor anywhere in the human territories. But he could and would slow them down.

“Heave-ho,” Dame Augusta echoed from her position near the mainmast.

Deck hands ran to their positions. Steam hissed out of the propulsion pipes as engines pumped harder and quicker, pushed against the lines still mooring the *Brass Baron* to the jetty. Just as he took aim at the closest squad of soldiers, the lines were dropped and the ship leaned to portside. Groans and creaks accompanied the maneuver. He pulled the trigger and watched the first soldier skip and dance away from the tiny crater that had suddenly erupted a foot from where he was about to put his boot. Voices raised in alarm. The soldiers riposted, obviously not as loathe to kill privateers as he was to shoot at them. He fired two more shots that sent the soldiers scattering and hiding behind cargo trunks and into alleys along the docks. Crews from other ships also spread around, yelling and gesticulating. If this would have happened in the good part of town, up above where the Admiralty ships were docked, the *Brass Baron* would not have made it out in one piece. But fellow privateers would not become embroiled in any operation not directly related to their coffers and so Phineas and his crew were allowed to leave unchallenged.

Full Steam Ahead

Dame Augusta's voice rose above the din of rifles and the ship's movements. Wind caught the aerofoils as soon as they unfurled, and filled them until they creaked in protest. Below his knees, the engines thumped quicker. Out of the voicepipes, his crew relayed the operations. Engines at full capacity, shields apt to be deployed, propellers and rudders turned into the wind and ready. The deck vibrated with the steam gathering in the pipes and boilers. As soon as he had a lull in the wind, he would give the order. It came.

"Now! Fall off!"

The ship bore away from the docks at twice the permitted speed. At least. The deck trembled and quivered with the massive power burst. Wind caught the aerofoils. Props howled to life. They backed away from the docks just as soldiers ran out of their hiding spots and began to fire again. Wood splinters flew with the many bullets. But with the aid of his boarding party, Phineas sent the Admiralty back into the alleys to take cover. His crew may not be the finest riflemen, but they had plenty of enthusiasm.

"*See the rats scurrying!*" Ayer's speaking trumpet blared. "*Greasy groundlings!*" Unnecessary, but it did set the mood.

When no shot could reach the shore or the ship, Phineas stood and replaced the helmsman. The man had done good work, even if the angle could have been a bit tighter. Laurel would have done much—

He caught himself comparing her skill at the wheel and cursed. She was not here. She'd decided to leave with York. *Stay* with York, now that Phineas had to leave Orabilis. It was all her fault. If she had stayed on the ship instead of causing all that trouble at the *Spars and Gunnels*, none of this would have happened. If she had stayed on the ship with him....

He grabbed the wheel, winced when his gloved hand began to throb. "Ready to jibe," he called to Dame Augusta.

Full Steam Ahead

She echoed his order to the rest of the crew.

“What is our heading?” asked Miss Carmina from the nav voicepipe. Her voice sounded tight. She was angry at him. Just like Dame Augusta and Ian. Just like half the crew, probably. To the sea demoness with all of them. He had no answer to give her. So he ignored her.

Just as he ignored the pulling in his chest as he watched Orabilis fading away into the thick fog surrounding the city. He wasn't leaving anything of importance behind, he told himself. Anything or anyone. The throb crawled up his arm and settled in his shoulder. He ignored that, too.

Sounds woke her first. Wind whistled high overhead, and played in her hair. Familiar creaks and groans told her she was on a ship. Her head throbbed. Maybe she should've gone easy on the honey wine. But it'd been good to let go for a while. Especially because she was going crazy and hallucinating. Yet the memory of Phineas's hands was real and created a flush of heat that made her smiled. It really was too bad they'd parted on such bad terms.

Then the smells hit.

Groaning, Laurel rolled to her side. “Something needs some Febreze.” Her mouth was dry and her tongue thick. Bleh.

She forced her crusty eyes open halfway through the motion of sitting up. She froze.

“Holy. *Shit.*”

Everything registered in bits and flashes. A vast deck, massive masts, blood-red square sails, fired wood rails blacker than night, and a crew right out of a nightmare. Tall, impossibly thick with chalk-white skin. Like they didn't have a speck of melanin in their huge bodies. Rings and tattoos vied for every available appendage or spot on the exposed portions of meaty, gnarled limbs. Thick

Full Steam Ahead

dreadlocks, yellowed with oil and sweat, dangled down their wide backs and made the men look like Vikings crossed with giant, albino bikers. And they were all looking at her.

Varangians.

No wonder Phineas had gone on and on about his enemy. They really *were* hideous. Yet they looked...well, *human* despite their strangeness. Phineas and the rest would be revolted at the idea of sharing any DNA with these monsters, but Laurel suspected they must have at some point. Just as homo erectus had with homo sapiens, even if the first had become extinct while the latter thrived. Maybe this was what happened with the ancestors on this world. Two separate lines, both hominids, the same yet different. Early environmental triggers could have influenced their evolution. Humans obviously became smaller but smarter, while the Varangians favored predatory traits. Some crazy eugenics system on the giants' side, maybe? Pruning out all the supple, slender branches from the family tree to keep only the larger, sturdier limbs. Or maybe it'd be the humans who'd cut out the bigger ones. Whatever it was, Varangians were ugly as sin.

One smiled and licked his lips. The rictus of monstrous lust sent shivers down her back. "Here, pretty one." His dreadlocks tumbled in clumps when he bent over to inspect her.

She reacted out of pure instincts. Her booted foot caught him on the chin. He barely moved yet she knew she'd struck home when he smiled and pink blood filled the many gaps between his rotten teeth.

"I like her." He smiled again.

Laurel scooted back when he reached for her arm. "Get the hell away from me."

Full Steam Ahead

The assembled crew laughed. Lewd calls and whistles made her swallow hard. Her mind played flashes of horror. They'd rape her. She knew they would. Fear spread like a fever.

Oh god, oh god, oh god.

"He said not to touch her," another growled.

"Just a quick bite," replied Smiley. "She would still bleed for him after I finish."

The dire reality crashed on her. She was on a Varangian drekkar alone. No one was coming for her. No one knew where she was. Phineas would have a fit thinking she'd just run away. He'd curse and rant and brood, but he wouldn't know that she hadn't left on her own two feet. She'd end here on this ship, raped and tortured to death by these monstrous men. Tears prickled her eyes but she forced them down. She wouldn't give them that. She wouldn't let them see the fear. And if she was going down—an eventuality made more probable by each passing minute—then she'd get some DNA under her fingernails. The pigs.

Smiley caught her by the ankle, and, despite some serious kicking and general thrashing, he lifted her up to dangle impotently upside down two feet off the deck.

"Hey. You take your dirty paw off me. You hear. Let me go. *Now.*"

Amidst the laughter, Smiley declared that maybe she had a drop of Varangian blood in her after all, being so much livelier than their regular human females. Lucky her.

He shifted his grip to her thigh so he could put his ugly face in front of hers. Argh, the smell. "You have some tongue on you."

She swung for his chops and caught his forehead instead. Her knuckles cracked and she cursed as painful heat spread and pulsated through her hand.

"Maybe you should bite it out of her," one offered.

“Or stuff her mouth so she can’t run it,” another called.

Laurel took another swing but missed her mark. General laughter ensued.

“Or maybe you could put her down before I chop you all down at the knees.” A new voice?

Laughter died down abruptly. Smiley dropped her to the deck, where she landed in a heap. She’d finished rolling and snapping to her feet when a new face appeared in the inner ring of onlookers.

A tad smaller than the rest, the new Varangian wore different clothes, almost like Phineas and the rest of humans instead of a collection of leather straps, metal bits and ink. To her shock, he looked almost civilized. A long white cape blew in the wind and a pair of brass goggles gave him the air of a giant albino moth. He pulled them up and set his milky gaze on Smiley, who seemed to shrink into his clothes.

No words were needed as the crew dispersed and returned to their duties.

Phineas had talked about him. The one who took interest in new human helmsmen so he could use them on his ships. Thorne Something-something. Phineas had also said that if Joy had been caught alive, this Varangian would’ve been the one to fear the most.

Lucky me.

She crossed her arms. She was cold and she was afraid. The brute only eyeballed her for a long while before coming closer. She took a step back.

“I have not given you leave to move.” His voice was like gravel. Rough and dry.

“I don’t need anyone’s leave to move.” She regretted her words as soon as they were out.

Full Steam Ahead

He approached close enough for her to be forced to look straight up. “I know you have survival instincts, and I suggest you start listening to them. Until I no longer have a use for you.”

She spat. She’d never spit on anyone before and had no idea where that had come from. She cringed when Thorne pulled a tan handkerchief from his pocket and delicately wiped his cheek. He dabbed the corners of his mouth as well, which allowed her to see the entire handkerchief. The deck swooned under her feet.

Impossible.

There was a *tattoo* on the thing. And fine, dark hairs. She nearly vomited and only managed to keep her wits about her by biting her inner cheek.

“*He* was also very brave. At first.” Thorne slipped the odious thing back in his pocket.

“You’d better....” She gagged, coughed. “You’d better kill me now, then, ’cause I’ll never, *ever* do anything for you.”

“You shall. They all do. But later, after my task is accomplished, *then* I shall enjoy you.”

“Go to hell.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Let me share the rules on my ship. You speak only when I ask a question. You move only to go where I tell you to, and you keep that temper under control until you lay in my bed. Then, you can curse and thrash and fight to your heart’s content. I love an energetic female.”

Cold, clammy fingers reached into her chest and squeezed her heart. Laurel didn’t dare say anything else, but she narrowed her eyes and put all the hatred she could in them.

“I think you do not understand. Let me show you.”

Before she could backpedal away, he gripped her by the upper arm and steadied her. She’d expected a punch, a slap or something. Instead, he slid a curved dagger out of its sheath at his waist and

delicately pressed the tip of the blade against her belly. “I shall begin by cutting another hole into which to take you. Here.” He moved the blade up to the middle of her throat. “Here.” Up further the tip travelled until it rested right between her eyes. “And lastly here.”

She stared stubbornly up into his face because it was the only thing she could do. Revulsion tightened her throat.

He smiled, showing a surprisingly clean, straight dentition. She’d expected a broken fence of yellow teeth like the rest. “I think I shall enjoy your company. Immensely. Although I cannot guarantee you’ll enjoy mine.”

Revulsion turned to abject fear. She hoped it didn’t translate into her eyes. Her pride was all she had left. But just in case, she lowered her gaze to the deck.

“Much better. Now, get to work. My task requires much stamina and many cycles at the wheel. You shall teach me those strange maneuvers you performed on the *Brass Baron*. All of them. Now.”

Laurel gasped when he grabbed her by a wrist and tugged her behind him on his way to the quarterdeck. The size difference was comical. She felt like a ten year old following a fully grown man.

Their piloting station was a bit different from Phineas’s but still similar enough that she could guess what served what purpose and which line went where. She noticed the deck had recently been repaired, with newer planks set against older, probably where the *Brass Baron*’s anchor had dropped.

“Will you not ask what our destination is?”

She crossed her arms and turned away.

His chuckle made the fine hairs rise on her nape. “Arousing me is not a game you should play.”

Full Steam Ahead

A groan of pain escaped her when Thorne roughly turned her around and leaned into her face. His milky eyes were shot with twisty blood vessels. She couldn't look away.

“I intend to break humanity's back. Not completely, of course. But enough to cripple their admiralty. And when humans are on the brink of extinction, with their brittle cities burning and their tiny ships plummeting into the sea, then I shall stay the killing blow and show the magnanimity humans think we are incapable of. After all, humans do fill many basic needs like food and pleasure.”

It was only then that Laurel looked beyond the grimy handrail. The sky was filled with Varangian drekkars.

“You'll never make me help you,” she snarled. She was toast. On both sides.

Thorne dug a length of silvery cord from his pocket. She'd seen that stuff before. Laurel's toes curled when Thorne licked her cheek in one wide, upward pass. “A common attitude. At first. But given time, you shall do everything I ask, even turn on your brothers and sisters to help me claim what is mine. And Orabilis shall be first to fall.”

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 9

A storm massed all around them. To Phineas's relief, it seemed to form a sort of tunnel through which he steered the ship. Behind them, Orabilis was nothing but a dark shape shrouded in fog and clouds. No doubt the Admiralty was preparing to send a couple of ships to intercept. He would be long gone by the time they took off.

The wheel felt cold and unfamiliar in his hands, as if he hadn't touched it in a while even though he had handled it all his adult life. Laurel's hands had been the last on that wheel. He caught himself stroking one of the handles with his thumb but stopped with a disgusted snort.

Pockets of blue sky up ahead lifted his spirits. Somewhat. He kept repeating to himself that he'd left nothing behind, yet he couldn't find the inner peace he would have expected. He could feel the crew's sullenness and knew Ian or Nina must have told everyone Laurel had been left behind. In the span of a couple of days, she had gone from distrusted foreigner to darling guest. Had she not also gone from suspect to lover as well? Curse her. Curse them all. The look in her eyes as she stood by York's side—arrogance, regret, hurt. Only moments before, she'd looked at him with affection.

He should put her out of his mind. Nothing good would come out of any affiliation with the intractable woman. She was stubborn, for starters, and barely comely with her Varangian hair and eyes, and though her skill at the wheel had eclipsed even his own, she still wouldn't have made a very positive addition to his crew. Nor his life. Nor his bed. Her bold personality, the way she

questioned him on every blasted order. Insufferable! Phineas closed his eyes. How sunlight had made her hair into gold silk, how her short and strong frame had felt tucked neatly into him. Her warm and moist flesh.

“Demoness,” he hissed. What had she done to him?

Phineas Hamilton, you are a complete ass.

He was saved from deeper examination of his motives when Virgil unexpectedly cried that several ships flew due north of them. Had the Admiralty already deployed its fleet?

Shouts and taunts rose and covered what Virgil said next.

“Repeat,” Phineas hollered. He patted the air for his crew to quiet down.

“Varangians, sir. An armada.”

Silence descended so fast it was almost comical. Almost.

A barbarian *fleet*? So close to human territories? Unprecedented. A few enemy marauders, sure. It would not be new. But a fleet?

“How many?”

“Dozens,” Virgil replied. The silence became a palpable thing hanging over the ship. Like an invisible plague.

“They are heading north? Toward Orabilis?”

“With full aerofoils, sir.”

Dame Augusta came to the ladder and looked up in his direction. “Prepare to tack,” he told her. “I want a closer look at this armada.”

“Prepare to tack,” she yelled without turning away. “Should Orabilis fall...,” she continued for his benefit only.

As the largest human city for days around, if Orabilis fell, the consequences for commerce and for survival would be disastrous.

Aerofoils fluttered for a moment as he waited for his crew to lower the topmost spars. Hand over hand, he turned to portside.

Full Steam Ahead

The *Brass Baron* creaked and groaned. Steam hissed out of the boilers and shot from the copper pipes his crew had recently fixed after their recent encounter with the enemy. Within moments, the armada came into view. Indeed, dozens of them. With a lead drekkar he recognized well when he put the proculars to his eyes. Blacker than the rest, larger and more heavily armed as well. Thorne's monstrous ship resembled a black dragon. Fog and thick, dark clouds could not hide the Varangian might. Without warning, Orabilis would have no chance.

To his and his crew's shock, Virgil slid down the mainmast in his harness and landed gracefully despite the man's stout and short frame. As far as he could remember, the shy man had never come down during the day watch in front of everyone. But here he was now, rushing across the main deck and clambering up to the quarterdeck.

"It's the lead drekkar, sir." Behind the goggles his globular eyes blinked repeatedly. These sharp eyes of his had saved the ship on many occasions.

"I know." Phineas gritted his teeth. He could only hiss the name. "Thorne Sankliver."

Virgil nodded yet stood there and shifted foot to foot.

"What else?"

"It's Lady Laurel, sir. I saw her on the drekkar. At the wheel—"

His world vacillated.

"*What?*" Phineas punched the handrail and Virgil shrank back. "Are you certain?"

"She was at the wheel, sir but—"

"That traitoress."

She had betrayed her own species. Just like his brother, who had turned to the enemy hordes in exchange for the captaincy of a ship, something he would not have otherwise earned because of Phineas

Full Steam Ahead

being the older brother. Had he known his younger brother's intent, he gladly would have relinquished the *Brass Baron*. If that would have meant working on another's ship, under another's command, then so be it. Instead, he'd watched his brother doom himself and his fiancée. The cruel images that had plagued his nights for years blazed in his mind.

Despite his best efforts, Phineas could not hold them up. The rope he'd entwined around his arm for support burned his skin off as he struggled to keep the couple out of the water. The pain was horrible. And the smell of burnt flesh was worse. But the more he pulled, the more Thorne lowered his drekkar closer to the raging ocean. Until Phineas lacked the strength to pull any longer and watched impotently as his brother—Garrick, it had been so long since he had even thought of the name—and the lovely Lizzie both sank into the corrosive ocean. Except for an initial yelp of pain, their descent was silent. The line suddenly tugged free under him and Phineas pulled out nothing but a singed stump of rope.

Above his head, Thorne leaned over the rail and grinned.

"To the wheel, sir."

Phineas shook his head. "What?" he growled. There was much work to be done and standing around like an idiot would accomplish nothing.

"Lady Laurel," Virgil said. "She's shackled to the wheel."

Shackled?

Dame Augusta, who had joined them on the quarterdeck, put a hand in front of her mouth. "They took her. *Alive.*"

The bullet around his neck grew suddenly cold and sharp. *No. No. No.* Was he doomed to do to Laurel what he had done to Joy? Even to save her?

He could not. He could never.

Full Steam Ahead

Laurel's pale eyes, which sparkled so in her anger or animation. They had also shone brilliantly as they shared their bodies in the back alley of Orabilis. She had enjoyed his touch, she had said, and would have done it again. Yet he'd felt awkward, uneasy with his own brutality, enough so that he had snapped at her, knowing subconsciously that with her temper he would drive her away, would force her hand. He had for all intent driven her right into York's arms.

"York." His snarl created a pocket of silence. Virgil stared in succession at Dame Augusta and his captain, clearly not understanding. But his mother did.

"York," Dame Augusta echoed. Her lip curled in scorn.

"It was him," Phineas said slowly, events lining up in his head and pointing in a horrific direction. "He *sold* her to them. He must have known Thorne would notice her skills at the wheel and he would have kept his eye open for such a lucrative transaction. This sort of trading is not unheard of. And when she landed in his lap, he made his move."

"What now, son?" Dame Augusta asked.

He shared a long look with his mother, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Now," Phineas replied in a loud and clear voice. "Now, we go back and fight for what we hold dear."

Virgil grinned and ran back to his harness. With a pull on the lever, he was hoisted back to his post.

Dame Augusta placed her hand on his forearm and squeezed. "She's dear to me, too." Turning, she barked orders at the unfortunate deck hand who had slowed on his way to his duties. She had him running again with only the power of her voice.

"Navigation," he called into the first funnel. "The lead drekkar. Dead center. And send a bird to the harbormaster's to warn them

Full Steam Ahead

about the enemy. With any luck, they'll sound the horns before the monsters fire the first volley. That should give us a cycle or so."

"With pleasure, sir." Miss Carmina's voice had never sounded so cold. Or so resolute.

"Full steam, dead ahead!"

His roar had the crew running faster, pulling harder. As much as silence had marked the news of an enemy armada about to attack Orabilis, clamor and taunts greeted his order. They all knew what it meant. They all knew they had little chance of victory. They all knew they were about to pick a fight with a dragon.

Laurel was dead tired. She'd been forced to teach Thorne some of the maneuvers that had doomed his convoy two days prior. She hadn't wanted to at first, but if he knew one thing, it was how to scare her. He hadn't been violent. Just very, very close and intent and gifted with a sordid way with words. So if only to keep him at arm's length, she'd showed him a couple of moves. Like how to steal another ship's wind. He'd loved that one and had her do it again and again. She was drained by the time he called for the fleet to tighten ranks and head for Orabilis. He wanted to attack them in late afternoon, when daylight would begin to fade. That had been hours ago.

The silvery cord dug in her wrists as she surreptitiously tugged on it. No luck so far, but with Thorne hovering around her, it was hard to give it a real shot. She'd probably have more luck squeezing her hands out because the loops weren't as tight as the ones Phineas's crew had put on her. Thinking of him made her eyes sting, so she pushed him out of her mind. He'd probably wonder what had happened to her. Or then again, maybe he'd never give it a second thought. Her ego argued against that but her rational side wouldn't let it go. He didn't care. If he had, he'd kept

her from going to York in the first place, would've fought for her. If he cared....

Give it up.

Thorne stopped pacing and crossed his massive arms. So she looked up and in front of them, spotted the ghostly outline of Orabilis. Her heart sank. Could they see the Varangians coming, she wondered. They must have had some method of surveillance or something. They were still a fair distance away, but still.

As soon as the thought registered, a long and deep note blasted out from the general direction of the city. The first horn was joined by another, then another.

Beside her, Thorne punched the rail and cursed long and hard. His anger made her want to go hide somewhere below deck. He turned furious eyes at her but suddenly seemed to calm down. A mocking grin pulled one side of his mouth. "They know. How inconvenient."

In silence she concentrated on keeping her shaking hands on the wheel.

"A human ship!" one of them cried from his perch on the foremast. He had none of Virgil's rich, tenor quality. Just a thug yelling stuff.

"Only one?" Thorne narrowed his eyes at her, as if she knew anything more than he did.

"And it's getting ready to—"

Boom.

Laurel recognized the sound of the *Brass Baron's* cannons a second or two before a whistling sound moved from left to right. The cannonball didn't come close enough to cause damage but the line clearly had been drawn.

"Phineas," she breathed. *What is he doing?*

Full Steam Ahead

“They’re engaging us?” For the first time since she’d met him earlier that day, Thorne appeared apprehensive, even worried. He gripped the back of her jacket and hoisted her clear off the deck. Her hands, tied to the wheel base, kept him from pulling her higher. She grimaced in pain. He shook her. “What have you done?”

“I didn’t do anything.” She sounded like a mouse suddenly gifted with human speech. She cleared her throat. “I was here, remember?”

He dropped her to rush down to the main deck. Another *boom*, another whistle. But this time, it hit something. The drekkar to her left suddenly pitched down and disappeared into the thick cover of storm clouds. Horns from the city resounded anew, louder for the diminished distance. From Orabilis, beams of light swept left and right, up and down. She could barely see the city’s outline now. She grinned despite her precarious position. So the brutes wouldn’t have the free ride they thought they’d get.

“Do not change heading,” Thorne called up to her. “For any reason or under any situation. Orabilis is our target. Not one *human* ship.” Derision made the word sound like a disease.

Laurel wanted to flip him the bird but caught herself in time. He wouldn’t react the same way Phineas had, she was sure. He wouldn’t look at her with those grave, serious eyes, trying to understand.

She’d been so stupid for going with York. She’d blown him off earlier in the day and should’ve stayed the course. He was oily. She’d seen it clearly. Damn that honey wine. She’d never drink it again. Not that she’d ever get the chance, because she was about to die tied to the wheel of a flying Viking ship. From bad to worse. The *Brass Baron* seemed like a resort to her now. And that crew

hadn't looked at her as though she were a juicy sausage. She'd made a friend in Carmina, even the Headmistress.

And Phineas.

She leaned her forehead against the wheel arc. "You idiot. You damn *idiot*."

A deep tremor traveled along the deck, gathered speed and intensity and culminated in a violent burst of steam coming from port side. Those devastating javelins again. A row of them shot out toward the smaller ship coming at them from the left. She had to do something. Subtly so as not to alert Thorne or any of the crew, she turned the wheel. Just a couple degrees, from four o'clock to maybe four thirty. Just enough to send the javelins a bit too much in front of the *Brass Baron*. The sails didn't even register the minute change. But an inch here would mean a dozen feet off the target by the time the missiles reached Phineas. A big difference in life or death. His shields had been repaired, and were already deployed, from what she could see, but still. If a single javelin hit the dirigible part....

"What-ho! It's the seagull eaters! Had any good meals lately?"

Laurel grinned despite her impending doom. The guy with the megaphone. My god, but was she happy to hear him.

To her shock, the Varangian crew reacted with fury. So what if some guy yelled insults at them from across another ship? Clearly, they'd never heard of psychological warfare, even as tame as a megaphone. But the guy's insults, perhaps coupled with their ruined stealth attack on Orabilis and the city's defensive barrage of light beams and horns, seemed to get under the giants' skin because some of them left their posts to go get weapons from the many, many racks interspersed along the deck. They lined the handrail, brandishing swords as long as her body, and returned the *Brass Baron's* taunts with some of theirs. Thorne was yelling

Full Steam Ahead

himself hoarse to get them back to their positions. Not the fine crew that Phineas had, for sure. Brutes.

And still Phineas's ship was flying for them. Sails bulged along the slender masts. She could even see crewmembers sitting astride the spars, ready to haul or drop sails as needed. Above the dirigible part, the superstructure also bristled with people. But these were standing beside strange contraptions that looked like catapults. Laurel gaped at their propulsion method. She knew who they were—the mavericks, the boarding party.

Another tremor, another volley of javelins. They flew far ahead of the *Brass Baron*. She ignored Thorne's stare when he turned back toward her and instead pretended to be completely focused on the wheel. She wouldn't fool him for long. She guessed that the next volley of misguided javelins would bring Thorne running back to her. It wouldn't be pleasant.

Someone spoke to Thorne. Smiley, she thought. The captain pushed him back, growling. "No. We make for the city. Hold your ranks and maintain heading."

Smiley ran to another man perched on the bowsprit. After hearing what Smiley had to say, he pulled out a sort of lantern and flicked the cap on and off several times. A nautical code. Another drekkar signaled as well. Then more afterward. Smiley looked back at Thorne, who didn't seem to see him, and shrugged.

If she had to guess, Laurel thought the rest of the fleet wanted to engage the *Brass Baron* and attack the city afterward. But Thorne was right. If they lost what little surprise they had, the city's defenses would really kick in. She'd heard mentions of the admiralty and guessed it must have been some sort of navy protecting the region.

Yet within moments, a couple of the drekkars tacked to meet the *Brass Baron*. Thorne ran to Smiley, pulled the man's sword from

Full Steam Ahead

its scabbard and without warning ran him through. Smiley folded over the blade, slowly, silently. With a violent tug, Thorne pulled it out of the dead man and leveled it at his scowling crew.

Laurel could only stare in mute horror. Bile rose in her throat.

“We stay the course,” Throne said just low enough to be heard above the din. Even she wouldn’t have crossed him at that point, and so she avoided his gaze.

Phineas had his cannons fire another salvo, then another. More Varangian ships sank into the clouds. It must have been the proverbial last straw. Despite Thorne’s orders, the fleet disintegrated when half of its drekkars began to turn to meet the human ship.

“No!”

A cannonball flew directly across the deck and took with it part of the mainmast’s shroud and a bit of lower sail. Laurel yelped and ducked as best she could. The crew roared in rage.

Through the handles on the wheel, she could see the *Brass Baron* clearly now. And spotted Phineas not at his usual post at the wheel, but standing on the handrail with a collection of pistols at his belt and holding on to the mainstay. She was close enough to see his wild long hair flying around his face. Her heart thudded as a wave of heat overtook her throat and cheeks. She smiled at him. Silly in the situation. Couldn’t help it. And her heart beat even harder when he waved.

Steam erupted from the side of the Varangian ship. Javelins shot out. Most hit the human ship’s shields. To her horror, the *Brass Baron* didn’t slow down at all but kept coming. They were barely three hundred feet to the left now. And getting closer. Enemy rifles thundered, answered by the more distant pop of human weapons. Cannons were silent now, javelins absent. This would require man-

Full Steam Ahead

to-man combat. Laurel pulled on the bonds and managed to slip the cord past one of her wrists. It hurt so *bad*. Like fire.

“Maintain heading,” Thorne shouted at her. She froze. He ran to the fore of the drekkar, grabbed the lantern from the signalman and began to send his own orders to those ships that had obeyed him.

And still, Phineas’s ship grew closer. Too close. Way too close. She let the wheel loose a bit when the human ship suddenly veered and swerved to offer its side instead of its prow. Carried by the momentum, it sheared closer until both ships flew parallel, hulls barely a hundred feet apart. She adjusted her own heading to make sure she wouldn’t ram the smaller human ship. As she’d predicted, her maneuver had Thorne running back to the quarterdeck. Back toward her.

“What did I tell you?” he roared. Fury deformed his ugly face.

Laurel stared at her imminent death. At least it would be quick. She prepared to be cut in half. Only Phineas’s face in her mind, smiling that crooked grin, kept her from dissolving in a puddle of tears.

As Thorne rushed toward her, a shot clacked.

Midway into the deck, the giant stumbled but kept going. Ruby-red patches appeared on the shoulder of his white cape. Rhythmically. Arterial blood. She traced the shot’s direction to Phineas, who’d just dumped a pistol and was pulling a second. Thorne had reached the base of the ladder, was about to climb up to her position. Wild fury deformed his face. He growled something.

Another shot clacked.

Laurel screamed. Most of Thorne’s face burst open like an overripe melon and sprayed the ladder and deck in one long, uneven blotch. And all she could do was watch, unable to turn

Full Steam Ahead

away, to think, to process the image. Thorne collapsed in a pool of his own blood.

Chaos erupted on the drekkar and broke her trance. Rifles, crossbows and pistols fired from both sides. Chunks of wood flew. Sails fretted when lines were cut.

Above her, several forms arced from the *Brass Baron* to her ship. “*Cheese-brains!*” the megaphone announced. “*Black tooth!*”

It seemed that they were being boarded. And this time, she didn’t mind at all.

While the rest of the barbarian crew was busy dealing with the small fires the boarding crew set amidst the blood-red sails, Laurel resumed tugging on the silvery cord. She freed one hand. Her skin was raw and bleeding. Along the handrail, Varangians prepared to board the *Brass Baron*. Smoke and cries filled the air.

In an instant of panic, Laurel yelled a name. Phineas. He heard and turned to her.

She was so happy to see him she waved with her one free hand.

Phineas leveled another pistol at the giant clambering over the rail and fired. The man’s head snapped back and he strummed down the rope ladder.

“You left me there!” he called accusingly. “To go with *him!*”

Of all the times....

“You were being an ass!” Laurel shuffled around the base of the wheel, finally managed to squeeze out of the silvery cord binding her other wrist. That thing hurt. But she was free. “You left, too! The city, I might add!”

His hair flying wildly, Phineas grabbed one of the staying lines, wrapped his forearm around it once. His greatcoat parted with the wind. “That was because *you* were being an ass, madam!”

Full Steam Ahead

Laurel gasped when he jumped off the *Brass Baron* and arced gracefully toward the drekkar. Hope turned to fear when one of the enemy crew knelt on one knee to take aim with his pistol.

Oh no, you don't.

She ran across the quarterdeck, leaped over the balustrade and hoped her aim was true. Because landing on the deck would hurt. A lot.

Instead, she landed on the man's wide back and got a faceful of smelly, oily dreadlocks. But he'd missed his shot and nothing else mattered, even when the man reached back, gripped her by the back of her jacket collar and peeled her off him like one would a wet towel. Kicking and screaming didn't help. He tossed her to the deck, reached to his waist for his curved sword. A tiny hole that oozed dark red suddenly appeared in his forehead. He crumbled.

"Retreat!" blared the megaphone.

Phineas pointed to the dead man. "Come. Hurry."

Never in her life had she been so glad to hear a particular voice. She scooted on hands and knees—her back was killing her, must have hurt it during her tackle—and stumbled back to stand by Phineas's side.

"Hold on to me."

She did. Gladly.

Phineas watched in mute awe and horror as Laurel leaped over the balustrade and landed on the creature, messing his shot. The bullet ricocheted off the wood right between Phineas's feet. This bullet had been destined for his heart.

The horns of Orabilis resounded anew. He caught a glimpse of hulls poking out of the fog. Admiralty ships. He grinned despite the situation.

"Hold on."

Full Steam Ahead

Laurel's strong arms squeezed him tight around the torso and shoulder. Amidst shots from rifles, steambows, cannons and the Varangians' dangerous ballistae, he wrapped the line around his gloved hand and leaped over the divide once more. This time toward his own ship. Laurel screeched a curse but held on.

He should have known good fortune would eventually leave him. Fickle demoness.

Midway, his worst nightmare materialized. Without anyone at the wheel, the enemy drekkar had begun to turn on itself, its prow coming dangerously close to the *Brass Baron's* vulnerable dirigible. So his crew had taken corrective actions. Unfortunately, the line on which he hung gathered speed at the least opportune moment. Instead of aiming for the deck, they were now in a crazy pendulum heading straight for the hull.

They hit hard. Rivets dug into his side and tore a groan of pain from him. Laurel slipped down to his waist.

She frantically scraped at the planks with her boots. "Don't let go. Don't let go."

His nightmare threatened to make him lose focus of the situation. He could not drop her. Not this time. Not her.

The pain in his arm was blinding and seared his muscles. "The gun doors," he snarled. "Laurel! The...gun...doors."

Below them, about four feet down, the open gun doors would provide their one and only chance.

Before they could reach the closest door, the *Brass Baron* began to dip. Fast and hard. He knew why when cannonballs landed in the midst of the enemy fleet. Fires broke out. The Admiralty could not know they were also firing on one of their own. Wind howled as they dipped lower. Lower still. Above their heads, the hulls of dozens of Admiralty ships broke through the clouds. The cacophony reached a new high.

Full Steam Ahead

“Man overboard,” one of his crew cried. Heads appeared over the handrail. “It’s the captain. He’s got her.”

“Reel them in, you fools.” That had been his mother’s voice. Phineas would have grinned had he been able to move a single muscle. The hit against the hull had dislocated something in his shoulder. He could barely feel his hand anymore. But he would not let go. Never. He would hold on until the end of his days if need be.

Laurel’s weight unexpectedly lifted. He looked down and saw her with the very tips of her boots wedged on some rivets. Her eyes were huge when she looked up. Their excruciatingly slow ascent began as deck hands grabbed the line and heaved. So slowly. Inch by agonizing inch. He felt each bump in the thick coil as it crested the handrail. He helped as he could, using his legs to wedge his boots into what little recesses he could find, a rivet here, a too-small dent there, until someone grabbed his wrist in an iron grip. He looked up into the globular eyes of Virgil.

“Get her,” Phineas grunted. “Her first.”

Hands, arms, shoulders and heads surrounded them, reached for them, caught wrists and belts and fistfuls of garments. Laurel was hoisted onboard, followed by him.

The ship shuddered.

“Direct hit.” Dame Augusta’s voice was tight. Everyone looked up in fear at the dirigible. Intact. The hull, then.

Phineas stood and helped Laurel do the same. “Drop deeper. Laurel, the wheel. Virgil, I need your eyes up above, the rest, man your post.” As the crew scattered, he yelled after them, “Free grog for everyone at the next port!”

Cheers erupted. Together, Laurel and he rushed to the quarterdeck where she grabbed the wheel from the temporary helmsman, who seemed beyond relief to pass the duty on to her.

Full Steam Ahead

“Miss Carmina,” Phineas called into the navigation voicepipe. “Plot a course for Ka Brae.”

After the last Varangian had been thrown overboard, they dove further, leaving the din of battle behind, where Admiralty hulls soon outnumbered drekkars. They weren’t abandoning humanity. They’d done all they could, and the first warning had come from the bird he had dispatched. Without that warning, the Admiralty would have seen the fleet too late. The enemy would have had time to dock some of its drekkars. The damage would have been massive and lasting. Phineas would keep that card up his sleeve until he needed to make nice with Orabilis again. He needed to dock there again, if only to pay York a visit. His heart squeezed at the memory of Laurel standing on that drekkar. Thorne’s ship. Had he...done anything to her? He looked at her, noted the defiant set of her chin, the sparkle in her eyes, and he knew that whatever they might have done, it hadn’t broken her. The monstrous enemy couldn’t break his favorite foul-mouthed, hard-headed, sea demoness. Heat spread through his chest. His shoulder and scarred arm hurt so much he wanted to gag. But compared to what she had gone through, the knowledge he had abandoned her, his bodily aches were nothing. First, he had to accomplish an important task.

Phineas turned toward her. Faced her fully. No half-measures for this.

“Laurel,” he began slowly.

She looked up at him. In her eyes, suspicion mixed with guarded hope.

“I have acted unfairly and I gave you no reason whatsoever to feel anything but distrust and resentment toward me. York was not to be trusted, not with someone as dear as you, yet I chose to let you go to him. I apologize for this and for letting my wounded man’s pride cloud my judgment. And I shall endeavor to take you

Full Steam Ahead

home, wherever your home may be. In the meantime, perhaps we can start over.”

The last word rose. He had meant a statement but instead a question came out. If she wanted nothing to do with him or his ship, he would take her to whatever place she deemed appropriate, no matter if it was across the world. He hadn't lied. She was dear to many in his crew. And to him.

To his shock, Laurel's eyes welled and her nose turned red. “I don't think I can.”

His heart sank. His apologies had been too late.

She must have seen his reaction because she spared a hand from the wheel and wiped her nose with the heel of her palm. “No, no.” She smiled through the tears. It broke his heart. “I mean, I don't think I can ever go back home. I think it's in another.... But I'd love for us to start again. I'm so not making any sense. Sorry.”

And just like that, Phineas knew his heart had mended. This woman with nothing but words could throw him down or make him fly. He would change nothing. She might be a sea demoness, but she was *his* sea demoness.

Full Steam Ahead: Chapter 10

Laurel felt slightly better after a meal of soup, tea and hard biscuits. Following a long argument, Phineas had finally gone below to see the cook about his shoulder. Turned out it was dislocated. Word spread fast on a ship, here just like anywhere else. The crew was extra nice to her. Carmina's hug lasted so long that Climber—Ian—made a comment about being jealous. Even Virgil the Vigil came down from his perch, placed a shy little peck on her forehead, and, throwing a look of longing at Dame Augusta, rushed back to his lonely post. She'd have to have a talk with the Headmistress. The man obviously liked her. Maybe she didn't even know about his secret crush. But when she caught Augusta looking up into the sails, a ghost of smile on her painted mouth as she hooked a strand of hair on her ear, Laurel knew Virgil just might get lucky one day. She quickly looked away when the Headmistress scowled at her and stomped off to yell at some unfortunate deck hand.

Night had pretty much caught them all by surprise because everyone had been busy inspecting the ship for damages. When she asked, she was told the captain had returned to his cabin.

"You think I should?" she whispered to Carmina.

The young woman nodded emphatically.

Laurel adjusted her clothes and made her way to Phineas's cabin. She knocked twice and cringed when the sharp rap rattled the door in its frame. Man, she was discretion personified. Sometimes, she'd like to have a bit of finesse, like Carmina or Nina, the one who'd lost her sister. So feminine and graceful,

whereas she acted with the elegance of a bobcat. The mechanized kind.

“Enter.”

He sat at his desk, still wearing his greatcoat and assortments of belts, bent over a messy pile of loose parchment. The pen scratched noisily in his right hand. He looked up, smiled awkwardly. “You seem better.”

“You, too. How’s your shoulder?”

“Cook set it back.” He worked his shoulder gingerly.

As she approached, she noticed how untidy his handwriting was, like the scrawl of a child. It shocked her yet at the same time made him more human, more fallible. A vulnerable side to the guarded man behind the captain. “Writing your memoirs?”

He shook his head. “Pleas, mostly.” He let the pen rest on a silver cradle. He made a moue when he looked down at the text. “Because of my injury, I had to learn to write with my other hand. I fear I’ve never mastered it.”

“What happened to your arm?”

Phineas stood. “Would you like a mug of wine? Tea, perhaps?”

“I just had one, thanks. And I’ll stay away from wine if you don’t mind.” She dropped the subject of his arm. He’d tell her on his own time, if he decided to share. She wouldn’t push it. She hated when people pushed her.

He poured himself a tall and skinny glass of something amber. She grimaced when he drank it in one long swallow. He spoke with his eyes closed. “Garrick was my brother. A few years ago, he met a lovely girl named Lizzie and because our mother did not raise fools, he asked for her hand, and she accepted. The *Brass Baron* belonged to Dame Augusta at the time, and was due to come to me on my twenty-first birthday. I couldn’t care less if it did or not. I ran a successful courier enterprise and sailed other people’s

Full Steam Ahead

ships. Garrick cared. Greatly. We were not getting along in the end, and I never realized how much he yearned for a captaincy until it was too late. One night, Varangian marauders took both Garrick and Lizzie from Orabilis. We set off after them. Three ships with a full complement of sailors each. We were all duped, all betrayed. When we finally caught the ship and boarded them, Garrick was there, a free man. So was Thorne Sankliver, who offered me the same deal. In exchange for allegiance and information on human defenses, he would give us a captaincy. There was a fight. We were winning, but Thorne is not a man of principles. He used my brother and Lizzie as example. I tried to save them.”

Laurel hadn't been graced with the most patient temperament around. But she didn't interrupt him to ask question or exclaim her horror or sympathy at his story. She let him speak. He told her about the toxic sea taking the young couple, how Thorne had watched and laughed, taunting Phineas to dive after them, which he'd been tempted to do. He told her about how Dame Augusta had withdrawn into herself and had taken to the bottle to ease the agony of losing a son. He'd injured his arm during his failed rescues attempt, had burned off the skin on the rope as he tried to hoist two adults plus his own weight. Still, she let him talk. When Phineas looked almost deflated by the release of all this poison, he leaned a hand against the wall and rested his forehead against it. By the way he carried himself and held his shoulders tight, she knew he must have been in pain. From what little she knew, burns hurt for years, even after scarring and apparent healing.

“You should take it off more often,” she murmured. “The glove, I mean. Let the skin breathe a little.”

A shrug was all she got in answer.

Full Steam Ahead

She joined him, took his gloved hand and guided him to his cabin behind the red velvet curtain. A narrow bunk of simple planks occupied a corner and a deep wash basin that turned out to be a real lavabo with a brass spigot protruding from the paneled wall. On the wall, a window without any covering created a rectangular tableau of twinkling stars against inky black canvas. Beautiful.

“Sit here.”

He seemed too tired to argue and just sank on the hard bunk. Laurel unbuckled the many belts, the three pistols, some sort of single binocular, and odds and ends. He wore more belts than a Goth teenager. The greatcoat followed the rest in a corner of the cabin. The boots, too. Soon, she had him in only his shirt and pants.

Velvet pants.

It wasn't funny anymore. It was just the way people dressed around here. Plus, Phineas was the hottest guy for miles around and there was nothing comical about that. She was in a sweat trying to keep from hugging him. But she knew it wasn't the right time. Not now. Maybe later.

He looked up at her, opened his mouth but said nothing. Weariness darkened his eyes and created shadows in his cheeks.

Laurel unlaced the deep vee of his shirt, helped him pull it up over his head, which created a nice mess of hair that she loved combing back with her splayed fingers. Phineas must have enjoyed it too because he sighed deeply. Around his neck was that silver bullet tied by a leather cord.

“What's that for?”

“A promise I made long ago.”

She didn't ask details. Later. For once in her life, she wasn't in a hurry to get to the bottom of things. She wanted to take her time

discovering this man, all the many complex, frustrating layers of him.

The network of lean muscles played under his pale skin. The row of buttons holding his pants up glistened like molten gold. She tried not to stare. Failed. But the sight of his scarred chest and shoulder drove every other thought away. Angry, blotchy red strips of flesh, scarred and glossy, began near his left pectoral and snaked up to disappear under his black leather glove, which came up to his biceps. Tiny buttons along the underarm seam to the wrist allowed him to take it off or put it on by himself.

Laurel kissed him on the forehead. "Stay here, okay."

She rummaged inside the tiny dresser under the lavabo and found a square of quilted cotton. If this wasn't a facecloth, it was about to become one. This man was no diva, that was for sure. The basic necessities. Spartan would be luxurious compared to his style. She wet the facecloth nice and cool.

Phineas watched her as she sat by him. She was about to reach for his glove when he placed his hand on top of hers and stopped her.

"It is ugly. Not something a lady should see."

Laurel tried very hard not to snort. Partly succeeded. "Phineas, I've seen injuries before. Bones sticking out, a flap of scalp dangling, my friend's C-section."

"Still."

"Just relax, okay, and let me play nurse while the urge is there. Because I'm telling you, it might never come back."

He shook his head and let her unbutton his glove. Laurel did it slowly, carefully, for fear of hurting him. Beneath the glove shimmered raw skin that had badly healed from a burn. Tiny surface lines covered his arm, and no hair whatsoever had grown back. Deeper red creases from where the glove had dug into the

Full Steam Ahead

flesh looked painful and swollen. The scars looked like a collection of snakes coiled around his arm and up over his shoulder. She could almost see the hemp rope's pattern. It must have hurt so bad. She stretched the washcloth out and lightly wrapped it around his arm, like she'd seen a doctor do on one of the thousand medical shows she used to watch. Phineas closed his eyes and shivered.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No."

She did it again, was making a third trip with the cool cloth when he cocked his head at her and smiled that corner grin she'd loved to hate but now loved, period.

"I could kiss you."

"What's stopping you from doing it?" Laurel thought she was cool enough to hide the jumble of emotions but cringed when her voice came out tight and high-pitched.

"I swore I would never touch you in this way again."

"Touch me with passion, you mean?"

"A nice word for brutality."

"You weren't brutal. And yes, between people who love one another, it's called *passion*."

The L-word had just slid out of her. It shocked her probably more than it did him. She froze, waited for his reaction.

"I can't come to terms with it, Laurel. Yet, I would give my good arm to be with you again. Guilt is a powerful thing."

"No need for guilt. Live now, for the present. Plus, things are different between us."

"How so?" He opened his eyes and all but set her hair on fire with the heat of his gaze. Damn, serious heat wafted out of her jacket and shirt. She was so hot and wet.

“We’re both sober, for starters,” she quipped. “And we both want it.”

“And what if my restraint slips me again?”

Laurel kicked her knee over his lap and straddled him. “I liked how you touched me.” She kissed him square on the mouth. “I liked how you made me feel. There isn’t a thing wrong with that, Phineas. Okay? It’s natural, it’s beautiful and it’s our true selves, without all the stuff we layer on so we’re decent in public.”

She bent to kiss him again but he beat her to it and clamped his mouth on hers.

While she joined her hands behind his nape, he covered her butt and squeezed hard. He had nice long hands that he worked around her thighs and hips in slow, circular motions, ’round and ’round against her lower back. Laurel closed her eyes. So unlike the lover she’d tasted in the back alley of Orabilis, Phineas delicately unbuttoned her jacket and parted it on her shoulders, pulled it low and left it there with her arms behind her trapped still in the sleeves. She liked how it elevated her breasts. He took the invitation. Parted her shirt with the missing buttons. Covered her throat and chest in languorous kisses.

“This is what I wanted to do that other night.” He blew on her skin, licked the warm spot he created. “This is how I wanted to touch you.”

She liked both the brutal and the tender lover. Laurel bent to kiss him, to run her lips across his, that decadent, wicked mouth. While he kept caressing her lightly with the tips of his fingers, his mouth turned more demanding. His kiss deepened. Tongue and teeth dueled with hers. She opened to him. Wide and free. Rolled her hips with need. He took her mouth, worked his right hand into her shirt and bra to curl fingers around her nipple. She realized he

only touched her skin with his right hand, never with his left, injured hand.

Laurel wrapped hers around it and placed it on her exposed chest. Looking at him square in the eyes, she pulled her shirt and bra aside to uncover a breast and guided his hand until his hot palm pressed against her hard point. "Touch me."

He seemed reticent at first to touch her with that hand, but soon let it run freely over her skin. She meant to undo her shirt completely, but he did it for her.

Phineas's gaze stole her breath. Raw, intense, almost solemn. "I want to taste you."

She stood and let him take her shirt off. When she reached back to unclip her bra, he stopped her. "Leave it. I like it."

She'd seen women with gorgeous corsets, yet he wanted to see her in that faded-by-too-much-bleach sports bra?

"But these must go." He slipped his four fingers into the front of her pants and gave a little tug that curled her toes in her boots. The look he gave her through the bangs had her out of those pants within seconds. Her boots had barely thudded when Phineas gripped her by the hips and forced her against his face so he could kiss and lick and bite her. The sounds he made had her in a sweat. Guttural, man sounds. Mumbles and growled words she couldn't understand. A yelp escaped her when he pressed his palm against her sex and parted her through the panties.

"These *definitely* must go."

She would have yanked them down to her knees had he not forced her to do it slowly, inch by inch. "*Finn*," she warned. She'd never called him that except in her head. "Pull them off. Now."

"Finn?"

"Sorry, I meant Phineas."

"No, I like it. But not in front of the crew."

Full Steam Ahead

“Then it’ll be our thing. Just ours. *Finn*.” She felt his teeth against her skin when he smiled. “Now, you need to take them off or I’ll have to tackle you down or something.”

He kissed her belly. “Not this time, madam, we do things *my* way.”

Warm moisture gathered in her pussy. She rolled her hips against his face, made figure eights. Through the thin cotton, he licked and nibbled, raked his bottom teeth and blew hot breaths that evaporated any argument she might have had about how his way was taking too damn long. Finally, the panties were gone. He stopped for a moment to look at her sex, waxed to a nice and neat pie shape. Her juices coated her.

“I want you,” she whispered.

While she raked his long hair back from his handsome face, he filled his hands with her butt and thighs, which he forced wider apart with his thumbs in the crook of her knees. She stepped outward to give him better access. He left her legs so he could pull the skin outward, part her and stretch her wide for his mouth. Laurel held her breath. The first lick to her clitoris made her squeeze her eyes shut. Wet warmth seeped from her. He gathered it with his injured hand and carefully rubbed it against her vulva. She arched her back with the pressure building in her belly. That was so good.

“Again. Please.”

He did it again. Then again. One hard lick, then he pulled back. Over and over. She’d never had it done to her like this before. Phineas knew his way around a woman’s body. She tried not to pull on his hair too much but still wanted to let him know he could—should, definitely *should*—come back for another pass of tongue.

“Please.”

Full Steam Ahead

Phineas clamped his mouth on her sex just as he had on her lips. The sudden heat and pressure created a long frisson up her spine. She came just as he toppled her onto the bunk. He was on top of her. Everywhere. His hands, his mouth, taking, giving pleasure, exploring and claiming. He lifted her legs up straight in front of her. His elbows stuck out of either side as he undid his pants. Hurried movements. Brusque tugs. The faint sound of fabric made her salivate. Still with her legs vertical against his chest, he pulled himself out of his pants. Hot and hard, his cock pressed home into her. She would have spread her legs wide but he held her knees together. She burned for him. Arched off the bunk, clawed at the sheets and soft, velvety blanket. The only luxury in the cabin.

He curled his hips and slid inside in one long and leisurely push. Laurel moaned, “Ohh.”

With his long hands he gripped her by the ankles and gradually spread her legs in a narrow vee. Another thrust. This time, quicker and harder. Phineas kept spreading her legs with each penetration. By the time she'd reached her maximum, he knelt on the bunk with his arms wide out, an ankle in each hand. Her thigh muscles burned. But she would change nothing. He thrust hard. Into her. In. In. The burn, in her sex, her belly, the shivers. Her thighs cramped. She bowed off the bunk. Her voice rose in proportion to Phineas's hip work. Planks rattled when he shoved himself into her, to the end, strong and knowing and precise. The length of his member rubbed and rolled her hard little pearl. Close now. So close.

“Look at me.”

Laurel stared as he worked those magnificent hips and took her and took her. Took her. A low groan rose from him, accentuated. His deep voice mixed with her little cries. Ah. Ah. Ah. A powerful thrust rocked her. For a brilliant moment, the world ceased to exist. No stimuli other than Phineas's cock into her reached her

consciousness. The sensation crested and claimed every inch of her flesh. Her muscles shuddered, gripped him, and wrung his orgasm from him. He erupted with a growl so deep, she knew it came from the most true part of his soul.

She flopped down onto the pallet and *oomphed* when he dropped on top of her. His heart hammered against her shoulder. He panted her name. Always her name. She couldn't help it. Laurel kissed his neck and buried her face in his hair.

Rolling off her, Phineas yanked the sheet down and under and tucked them neatly over them, making sure her naked butt didn't touch the wall. Attentive. She liked that.

"What now?" He grimaced as he worked his injured shoulder.

Laurel smiled up at him. "Sleep?"

The gas lamp in the cabin beyond the curtain cast a halo around his head when he leaned up on an elbow. "Later. We must set a course. Ka Brea will probably take our bribe to dock, but we could divert first and take you home."

She sighed. Where *was* home? She couldn't even tell him which way was which. She didn't know anything about this. Where was she, another world? What could she tell him? That she wasn't in a hurry to get back home, especially if it meant leaving him behind? But in her gut, she knew what she wanted.

Laurel turned to face him. That bunk was *narrow*. "Who knows what's out there and if I can ever go back home? For now, I'm taking things nice and slow."

Hair fell in jagged bangs over his eyes. Sexy. "Nice and slow does not seem to be your general approach to life."

"I'll make an exception in this case."

"What if you can never go back home?" His budding grin turned into a grimace. "What if you become trapped here?"

"If this is a prison, then they can throw away the key."

Full Steam Ahead

“I am serious. What about your life there? Your family? Your racing crew, your colleagues and friends.” He raised himself on an elbow. “Won’t they worry?”

A pang of regret made Laurel seek the warm crook of his neck. She didn’t care about the ruined skin, the scars covering his shoulder and arm. She didn’t care about giant Viking-like beasts and steam-powered flying pirate ships. She just wanted to be with him. The rest could wait. “They’ll know I left doing what I loved the most. They’ll understand. Plus, I’m here now. And so are you.”

“I *am*.”

She returned his fierce hug and for once, let silence speak for her.

About The Author:

I write high-octane romance. No damsel in distress. My damsels, they kick the door down, bust the villain's kneecaps and look good doing it. What hero could resist? Be it science fiction, paranormal or steampunk, I strive to make each story the most unique, thrilling and memorable it can be. Visit me at www.nathaliegray.com to learn more about my books, or www.kanaxa.com to view my portfolio of book covers.

Special Bonus Section

Author Acknowledgement: The Naming of Thorne Sankliver
Ten Questions with Nathalie Gray
Nathalie's Poutine Recipe
Special Sneak Peek! "The Smiling Assassin"
More Great Stories from Nathalie Gray

The Naming of Thorne Sankliver

Author Acknowledgement

To celebrate its fifteenth birthday, on June 15th, 2009, Red Sage invaded Most Excellent blog *Bitten By Books*. There ensued much revelry and naughtiness, among that a truth or dare game in which I challenged readers to name the villain in my next book. The entries were numerous and oh-so-villainous. But in the end, there could be only one Baddie Namer. At 12:06pm EST, Beet proposed what would become—through an ultra scientific method involving my ten year old's index finger and the computer screen—Deh Winnah.

Drum roll please...

Thorne Sankliver.

So thank you Beet and all the others who supplied me with your odious and repellent names. I knew you were all as twisted as I am. Readers rock.

Ten Questions With Nathalie Gray

1. So what's with the guns and explosions? What draws you to scifi settings and themes?

Nathalie Gray: Shiny metal. Phallic symbols. Loud BOOMS and the smell of jet fuel. What's not to like?!

No, seriously, I'm drawn to the "what if". My stories almost always start with a What If. Then I sit there and drool for a bit, coming up with characters to inhabit my What If World... Even if I enjoy the space setting, it's always all about the people. Then it's the gear. Ah, got to have cool gear for my characters, you know. And clothes, too. I'm a visual person and when I read, I must be able to picture the settings, the people. I write what I like to read.

2. Your heroes tend to be deeply damaged men who never lose their personal dignity or integrity. Is that a hard balance to achieve?

My heroes?! Deeply damaged?! But! But! I object! Ah, okay, okay, I guess assassins, soldiers-for-hire, tormented bodyguards and deserters can be considered damaged men. Mmm, what does that say about me?!

3. Your heroines are always strong, smart and brave. What draws you to this character type?

Oh boy, my pet peeve. I love me some strong female characters! Because I know a LOT more women like that than those improbably proportioned, creamy-skinned, doe-eyed dolls that populate too many books I've had the misfortune to read. I'd much rather complain that a heroine is too loud and rough than one who's a doormat. The women in

my life were and are feminine, strong, opinionated. They took care of large families when the men went to both World Wars (also Korea, Afghanistan and everything in between), survived recessions and sugar rations, housefuls of hungry teenagers, heartaches and unemployment. So when I read about some bee-stung lipped nymphette whose spine is made of Jell-O, I just can't relate to that. It's not in me.

4. Describe your super-secret plan for intergalactic domination.

Shhhh! *looking both ways and under the desk* It's not ready for full disclosure yet but will involve planetary subjugation in alphabetical order, silver gogo boots, a Scepter of Doooooom and a Throne of Doooooom. And legions of cabana boys.

5. How old were you when you first started writing?

I wish I could say I've always wanted to write, that I had a pen in my chubby three year old self's hand and told stories to regale my teddy bears. But nah, nothing so artistic. I started writing in my late twenties during maternity leave from the army. Before I knew it, I had this monstrous 600-page Thing. I figured, if I push it out the door, surely there's room for another. And another...

6. What do you like to read?

Stories with a lot of action. I get bored easily and have a short attention span, two things that preclude me from going on deep and psychoanalytical journeys transcending the metaphysical... Man, just joking about it bores me. If nothing has happened by page, say, 10, then I close the book and start another.

7. Did you ever think you would be doing what you do?

You mean write stories that include but aren't limited to exploding spaceships and wild monkey sex in zero-g environment? That? Never in a million years. I thought after my military career that I'd become a

translator since I had experience (learned English at 18 from army guys...yes, that's why). How wrong I was!

8. How many times were you rejected before you sold that first manuscript?

Let's put it this way: I have a two-inch binder full of rejection letters that I can organize by publishers, genres and/or years (from 2005 to 2008 and counting). That should give you an idea of the sheer magnitude of my stubbornness. Pitt Bull anyone?

9. What do you like to do when you are relaxing?

I travel. Well, not for relaxation that's for sure but for recharging my batteries. I've visited countries I can't even spell (thank goodness we have the Olympics' parade of flags eh?) all over Europe and North Africa. Next on my list are Asia and South America.

10. Any advice that you think would benefit newbie writers?

Unless the advice comes from the editor who will publish your manuscript, don't take any. Especially not from the likes of me.

Nathalie Gray's Poutine

You thought I was going to give you some fancy-pants French recipe like crème brûlée or something, eh?! Nah, mine starts and ends with fries.

Recipe for Poutine: or, How to Die Young but Happy

Ingredients:

Fries, about a cup (either frozen and cooked or the kind you get from takeout

1/2 cup poutine sauce (they come in cans, but hot chicken gravy is good too)

1/2 cheese curds (preferably gouda, but mozza is good too)

In a bowl, dump half the fries, half the cheese, then the sauce. Repeat until you get a mound. Me, I put mayo on top of that. Yes, sir, yes ma'am!

Special Sneak Peek!

“The Smiling Assassin” by Nathalie Gray

Available now at www.eRedSage.com!

He lived shrouded in the shadows of a world gone mad, a lone hunter, a predator, an assassin with an archangel's name. No hope, no regret.

Until a woman reaches into the darkness and offers him solace and a warm place to be—her heart.

“A fun and fast-paced read!”

~ Mrs. Giggles, www.mrsgiggles.com

“I loved Uriel, who came across as the ultimate dark, dangerously sexy, alpha anti-hero. I would love to get my hands on him and do some very bad things!”

~ T.S. Peters, Just Erotic Romance Reviews

Excerpt:

He wasn't callous enough to kill the man while she still watched. But as soon as the skinny brunette scrambled off the bed to retrieve the rest of her ruined clothes, Uriel fired a single, economical bullet in the would-be rapist's heart. A small target, yes, but he was a good shot. Usually, he pumped another round in his target just for good measure—he was careful if nothing else—but this time, with the woman's gasp of shock and pale face, Uriel just let it be a one-bullet deal. He figured the poor woman had had enough. He wondered who she was, what had brought her up to infamous Foley's apartment. Not pretty enough to be

an escort, she was no prostitute or junkie either, not that it made a stitch of difference. There was something in the way she moved, in the way she yanked her clothes on with her back against the wall and her eyes on him and the dead prick. Nervous, understandably afraid yet alert. Judging from the dark mark over Foley's nose and temple, she'd placed a few good ones too. Good woman.

"Here," he said, ripping the sheet off the bed and proffering it. "Wrap that around you. It'll be windy on the way down." There was blood on one corner.

She took the offering without glancing into his eyes, for which he was glad. He may be an assassin—the best—who'd just caught his latest target but the sight of a woman's pain or fear always tore at his soul. Rage bubbled to the surface. He pushed it down. Nothing came out of anger. Or any other emotion for that matter.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked in a small, tight voice. Her dark eyes looked too big for her narrow face.

He hated the dead prick even more. What kind of voice did she usually have? What change would her ordeal bring? What else on top of her dignity had this scumbag stolen?

Uriel turned his back on her so she could adjust herself in her clothes and drape the sheet around her. "Down below," he replied, surprised his voice came out strangled. What the hell was wrong with him? "You can call station security there." He'd be long gone by the time they'd arrive.

She nodded, held the sheet around her shaking frame while he pushed the remnants of the door aside so she could pass. He always made grand entrances. Either by busting through something or, if the occasion called for it, by showing up like a ghost ship, slowly, silently. Deadly. With his height, either way worked.

For this present contract, he would've chosen the latter method hadn't he heard the woman's calls for help. He could've chosen to wait for a clear shot and usually did. Waiting for that one split second of perfect clarity was what differentiated him from the rest of the wannabes out

there who thought owning a fancy gun and having a good eye entitled them to the title of assassin. But he hadn't waited. Couldn't have waited.

Uriel threw a leg over the matte black air pressure bike's seat, extended a hand to the woman, who took it. It was cold and bony but firm. For a split second, their gazes met. He'd never believed in any sort of link, mojo, karma or fate sort of crap. That stuff was for those who didn't have the guts of asking for what they wanted, or taking it when it was available. But when he looked into those brown eyes, he couldn't deny what he saw. There was something there. Something special. Strength tempered with wisdom. This was a woman who wouldn't bend under the weight of life.

She opened her mouth, looked about to say something. He didn't want to hear it. In case it wasn't what he wanted to hear. In case it was.

More Great Stories from Nathalie Gray!

Available Now at www.eRedSage.com!

“Compromised” by Nathalie Gray

Jojo Da Silva always gets her man.

She’s been an elite extraction team member long enough to know second-guessing can kill you. Get in, secure the target, then get out. Anything in the way is to be shot, blasted or destroyed. Especially those vicious Elfs, Exoskeletal Humanoid Life Forms with a mean streak that seems to grow wider in torture chambers during interrogations. No human has ever survived an Elf interrogation. Never.

Jojo knows this time she has to get her man before the Elfs discover his true identity and interrogate him. He’s been undercover on their trading station, so deep undercover that even she doesn’t know his identity. All she knows is the yellow dot on her wristband monitor that shows his location.

But when her target turns out to be her tough, daring, disappearing ex, a man as handsome as he was shrewd, one gifted with amazingly skilled hands and an even more wicked mouth, Jojo can’t seem to follow orders as usual. Abandon the compromised mission? No way! She has two hours, and Jojo won’t let Mathias die. He disappeared from her life, and she’s missed his loving ever since. She won’t let him slip away again.

Because Jojo always gets her man, and this time, it's personal.

“Unclaimed” by Nathalie Gray

Deep space is no place to spend the holiday season, but freighter captain Maxine Fields has no choice. She has to make a special delivery, the kind that pays as much for her silent discretion as for her on-time delivery record.

So with nobody but the penguins on her favorite flannel pajamas to keep her company, she sets a course, pours a mug of eggnog, and contemplates what’s left of the ragged tinsel tree taped to her console.

If only Santa would leave a little gift under that tree. No, a big gift -- a tall, rugged, ready-for-action gift. One who would heat up the holiday and show her just what kind of stocking stuffer a naughty girl should get.

When Max responds to a distress beacon, she gets her holiday wish, and then some. Edmond Cabanesty might just be at the top of Santa’s naughty list. With growing dread, she reads the crimes etched into the side of his exile pod. Defection. Genocide. Murder.

Oh, Santa, whatever will you deliver next...?

“Agent Provocateur” by Nathalie Gray

He has been trained to infiltrate the enemy and kill it from the inside, a breathing weapon, a super soldier with genetic enhancements that brand him a freak. He doesn’t care. He needs no one. But when he meets another like him, a woman as beautiful as she’s dangerous, a strange thing happens to him—he starts to hope.

“Heartless” by Nathalie Gray

His fall from grace came in the year 117 A.D. Cursed for the last two thousand years, Gaius roams the earth, always one heartbeat ahead of his own personal hell, but always a step behind salvation. Until an

irreverent, modern woman crashes through his defenses and teaches him to never give up. Unfortunately, hope always comes with a price.

Be sure to visit Nathalie's website at www.nathaliegray.com, "Home of Nathalie Gray: Author, Goof, Chocoholic, Future Empress of the Galaxy." In fact, you might want to visit frequently -- it's the best way to keep up with Nathalie's constant torrent of great news!

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