

A woman with long brown hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a red and black corset with lace and a large black bow. She is positioned against a background of golden-brown clockwork, including gears, clock faces, and Roman numerals. The overall tone is warm and steampunk-inspired.

Regina  
Riley

Clockworks  
and  
Corsets

LYRICAL PRESS, INC.

## Back Cover copy

*Clockwork, steam and secrets power a passionate adventure in the skies.*

Everybody's looking for something.

Captain Rose Madigan of the airship The Merry Widow is looking for a paying job for her all-female crew. Gabriella Upstairs, her newest recruit, is looking for a reason to be glad she's on board. And Madam Ruby of the Red House Bordello is looking for the secret laboratory of a missing mad scientist--and is willing to hire the airship. When they find the lab and its single occupant, Atom Loquacious, danger and passion start steaming up.

Everybody's got a secret.

Captain Rose is secretly too ethical to complete this job. Gabriella's secretly attracted to Atom. Madam Ruby's secretly hungry for power. And the secret Atom is hiding might just threaten the lives of everyone on board.

## Highlight

Atom rose from his bow, and as soon as his gaze fell upon the young woman, he went quiet. Where he was a whirlwind of words a moment ago, he was now graveyard silent. He stood stone still, staring at Gabriella. She stood just as still, staring right back.

Neither spoke.

Neither moved.

After several seconds of nothingness Rose cleared her throat. “Atom, this is Gabriella Upstairs.”

“Gabriella,” he echoed.

Gabriella smiled at the sound of her name on his lips.

Rose recognized the smile for what it was. She dragged the child halfway across the world to teach her some independence, and the kid had to go and fall for some lunatic living in an abandoned laboratory. What would she tell Daniel?

Everyone seemed caught up in the chemistry between the pair. They stood in silence, watching Atom hold out his hand, while Gabriella placed her fingers into his open palm. Atom lifted them to his lips, grazing them gently before he looked back to her face again.

“Gabriella,” he repeated. “The feminine of Gabriel?”

“Yes,” Gabriella said.

“Like the angel?”

Gabriella nodded.

“Are you an angel?” he asked. His eyes twinkled with unspeakable affection.

# Clockworks and Corsets

by

Regina Riley

Clockworks and Corsets: Book 1



Clockworks and Corsets

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## Dedication

*This one's for Shirley.*

## Foreword

“Fly with me, forget the past.  
We can build the future in steel and brass.  
Those below we leave behind,  
Conquering the clouds as gears unwind.”  
Maiden Voyage- The Clockwork Dolls  
[www.myspace.com/theclockworkdolls](http://www.myspace.com/theclockworkdolls)

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# Chapter 1

## *Ship of Fools*

*In which we meet our heroines, our crew, and appreciate the talents of our Click.*

The rules change when you put the woman in charge.

This angry thought seized Rose Madigan while she stood before her cluttered desk, staring at the mess. Dock requests and cargo forms lay stacked about the surface in small mountains of mindless formalities, while the desk drawers threatened to burst with even more scraps of paper insults. There seemed to be so much paperwork for such a small venture. Too much bureaucracy for one, small ship. She was convinced that the big shipping companies were in bed with the port authorities, creating imaginary forms exclusively for her. At times there seemed enough red tape to keep Rose's ship, The Merry Widow, earthbound for good. Every harbor she docked at called for a new inventory log, despite the fact that every port from sea to sky knew the ship's hull was empty. Hell, had she cargo, Rose would be first in line for any form they could throw at her, just for the chance to boast.

It was never this hard when Bill was alive. There'd never been so many papers to fill out when she was the captain's wife, but now she was the captain so the rules had changed. Damn him. Damn them all. Rose closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. The burning memories of her late husband flared, threatening to light her fuse. She didn't want to face the crew angry, lest they think they were at fault. The girls were edgy enough as it was.

No need to grease that cog.

A cool draft spilled into the room. Seconds later, the sound of bare feet against the wooden floorboards echoed through the small chamber. Rose relaxed, pretending to ignore the whisper of shifting fabric while her lover stripped behind her. Playful fingers slid across her smooth flesh, tracing the lines of her taut muscles until they came to rest on her bare breasts. Her nipples rose to the touch of his toying caress.

She sighed. "I don't have time for this, Click."

Click kissed the nape of her neck, then raked his rough tongue across her shoulders until his breath was hot on her ear. "There's always time, my captain."

Rose savored his words. Bill had never treated her with such selflessness. Never made her feel so desirable. So wanted. In return, she wanted, no, needed Click, she just didn't have time for him.

"No, there isn't." She tapped her fingers against her leg, counting seconds that ticked by. Time was never on her side, but she'd spare the moments anyway, the pooling dampness of her core wouldn't allow her otherwise.

He ignored her, instead pushing his hips forward to pin her against the desk. She groaned as he continued to knead her breasts, worrying her stiff nipples. His rigid member pressed hard against the small of her back, poking, prodding, begging Rose for admission to her vessel. His readiness didn't come as a surprise. The island native was perpetually aroused.

"The crew is expecting me."

"And you'll join them," he purred as he flicked his thumbs across her nipples, "but not 'til I'm done with you."

"You can't just slip in here to take me when you want."

"I'm only fulfilling my function, my captain."

She lowered her eyes while he ran a hand across her belly. The bronze tone of his skin and intricate tattoos were a bold contrast against her ivory shade. His fingers disappeared between her legs. Rose gasped when he found her fortune, wet with desire. She tried to wriggle free, but Click held her in a firm embrace. He rocked behind her, sliding his cock along the cleft of her ass while he fingered her slick sex.

Her authority faded in a haze of lust. "Click, please."

"Yes," he said. "If you insist, I will please you."

He pressed her forward until she lay on the desk, across the demanding forms and insulting bureaucracy. He nudged a knee between her legs, spreading her wide to welcome him. While she lay face down against the very source of her worry, she closed her eyes, yielding to his desire, her need. Click trailed a line of gentle, hot kisses down the length of her spine, across the soft curve of her rear, until he stooped between her legs. Rose trembled when she felt the heat of his breath against her ginger thatch.

"You are sodden, my lady." He chuckled, as if it amused him to find her wet and ready for him. "Have you been thinking of me?"

Rose laughed. She rose from the desk in a quarter-turn to stare down at him with a smirk. "Yes, Click. I've spent all morning thinking about nothing but my cabin boy. I'm surprised you didn't smell my need and get here sooner."

"I spent the night with Miss Maggie." He paused to blow against her sex, sending her into another spasm of shudders before he added, "She lets me sleep late. She must have been a wonderful wife."

Rose smiled, always delighted to hear him speak of her crew with affection. The sentiment, however, cut into her arousal, shifting her back into control. "Really, I don't have time for this right now." Trying to wrench free of his grasp, she twisted.

Click lapped her puss in a soft, slow caress. With a whimper, Rose fell still. He prodded her again, stronger this time. She collapsed against the desk. Click took the cue to devour her. Stroke after glorious stroke, he tongued her with masterful precision. Moaning, she shuddered against his mouth, almost climaxing at the caress of each long, luxurious lick.

"Click," she said between pants. "You have to get up here and give yourself to me now."



He stood, his husky laughter filling the cabin. "I do like my women commanding. And you are the most commanding of all."

She pushed the mound of papers to the floor, then spun around to perch on the desk. Rose spread her legs wide while she curled a finger at the island native. "Now or never. I don't have time to argue." Rose gasped when Click pushed forward, shoving his cock into her all at once.

Resting deep within her, sheathed to the hilt, he lowered his mouth to her ear, whispering, "Is this quick enough for you?" He clutched her by the waist, pulling his cock from her hold only to shove it deep again in one hurried movement. With two, three, four shoves, he paused to ask, "Is this what you wanted?"

"Yes," she growled.

He stood to his full height, his cock still embedded in her, awaiting its orders. "Then command me, my captain."

Grinning wickedly, she wrapped her legs about his waist while resting her palms on the desk behind her, steadying herself for his attack. "Give it to me now, Click."

Five, six, seven, eight, then the thrusts were too fast, too furious to count. Rose shuddered. Her body burned with heat, need, and lust. Click hammered home hard, lifting to his toes with every shove, slamming the desk against the cabin wall with every thrust. She humped her hips against him, commanding him to go faster, begging him to plumb deeper.

He answered her command by snaking a hand between them, below deck.

His strumming fingers pushed her over the top. She exploded in pleasure, writhing under his quick strokes while milking his cock with her seizing sex. Click was on her heels, his climax always triggered by her satisfaction. He shoved one final time, deep and hard, unloading his lust into her hold before he fell against Rose with a contented sigh. They gasped in unison, pulling ragged gulps of hot breaths while they shared the downward spiral of a nearly mutual climax.

Across the room, a speaking tube rattled with an excited voice. "Captain! Captain! Are you there?"

Rose shuddered when the ever-stiff Click withdrew. Pressing her mouth to his, she snaked her tongue over his in one quick burst before she turned her attention to the collection of tubes. She lifted the brass cap marked *lookout*. "What is it, Magpie? I'm a bit busy here!" The creak of bed slats filled the room while the native made himself at home. He leaned against the headboard, stroking his stiffening cock in her direction, awaiting her return. Rose bit her lip. Her pussy quivered at the gorgeous sight.

The lookout's southern drawl echoed up the tube. "I'm sorry, sir, but you said to alert you the moment we were in sight of the island."

Rose smirked at the sound of 'sir.' She could order the crew call her ma'am, or mistress, or even master if she wanted. Bill once said 'sir' was the privilege of a captain. He had a list as long as his arm of other things he'd claimed were captain's privileges. Indiscretions aside, 'sir' was a privilege she intended to keep. "Then why are you calling?"

“We are in sight of the island, sir.”

“Assemble the girls. Take us in low. I’ll be down in twenty minutes.”

“Aye-aye, Captain!”

Click glowered at Rose with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

She laughed. “What on earth is wrong with you?”

“I’m not done yet.” His cock twitched with his words.

Rose looked at the ceiling before she climbed onto the bed. “Click, my love, you’re never done.” She crawled to him, slid between his legs, and planted a loving kiss on his lips. “Besides,” she said, then paused to kiss his muscular chest, “if you help me lace up...” Her tongue traced a path down his tattooed stomach. “It won’t take me but a few minutes to get dressed.” Her lips fluttered over the patch of hair just above his pleasure. “So that leaves you...” Her final words were muffled by a mouthful of Click.

Click hissed while lifting his hips to meet her skillful lips. “All the time in the world, my captain. I only want all the time in the world with you.”

\* \* \* \*

Gabriella Upstairs stood on the ship’s deck in the early morning hour, staring at the dark patch that fluttered across the ocean below. The shadow of the Merry Widow skimmed along the white peaks of the waves, dipping, then rising with the ocean’s swell and ebb, all while the ship hovered several feet above the churning water. The vessel was a magnificent contraption, the flagship of a once thriving shipping company that now, for reasons Gabriella didn’t understand, sailed on its own with a nearly skeletal crew. It was also the first airship Gabriella had ever set foot on. At the time, joining an all female crew of an adventure seeking airship seemed like the best idea in the whole world.

Now she was left to wonder if she had made a mistake.

She heaved a worried sigh as she shifted her gaze across the deep, endless blue. Her skirts swirled in a flurry of fabric. The breeze picked up strands of her hair, causing wisps to fly askew in a dance that was sure to cause a tangled mess. In violent thrusts, the ocean reached high to pitch against the ship’s hull, spraying Gabriella’s face with a fine mist. Licking her damp lips, she considered the flavors she found there—the salty depth of the ocean mixed with her own bitter tears. She didn’t want to cry, but the ache in her heart betrayed her feral desires. Gabriella scolded herself for feeling homesick. She was a different person now, just barely eighteen, on the threshold of this, her new life. Once she sought freedom, and with the bridges she burned along the way, there was no going back.

Gabriella licked her lips again. She decided that freedom tasted exactly like remorse.

“Whatcha doin’?”

Gabriella jumped at the sound of the voice. She turned to see the shadowy form of Maggie Prunella, the ship's quartermaster, lookout, and communications specialist, making her way across the groaning wooden deck. Maggie was many years older than Gabriella, her face bore the proof of a life hard lived. She also carried the coarse scent of her messenger birds, lending her a nickname that seemed to suit the big woman fine.

"Magpie, you startled me." Gabriella heard the hitch in her own voice. God, she hoped the ocean's spray hid her free flowing tears.

"Sorry," Magpie said. "Didn't mean to scare you, child."

"It's all right."

"I see you still favor skirts."

Gabriella looked down at her plain brown skirt. "I'm sorry, but after so many years of them, I can't seem to get used to the idea of wearing anything else." She fingered the patch sewn to the left breast of her brown blouse, tracing the tiny silver outline of the ship amongst the clouds.

"No apologies needed. The Cap wants you to know you have an option. You're not confined to skirts anymore." Magpie smacked the knee of her brown breeches to emphasize the point.

"I know."

"I just wished we didn't have to wear these corsets. I'm not the right shape for 'em." Magpie held each side of her large bosom, jiggling the contents until she was satisfied with the fit. "I think Cap gets a kick out of the play on words. The crew of The Merry Widow, dressed in our merry widows? Eh?"

Gabriella gave a half-hearted nod. Magpie joined her at the railing. They gazed across the glittering sea. The perpetual drone of the spinning props filled the silence between them.

After a bit, Magpie drew close to ask, "How's our newest recruit holding up?"

"I'm fine," Gabriella whispered.

"Not out here weeping your woes into the ocean, are ya?"

"No."

"Now, now, Guppy. Nothing to be embarrassed about."

Gabriella smiled at the nickname.

"Homesickness gets the best of us," Magpie continued. She sighed while looking out at the water again. "You know, the old sailors used to say that the ocean was our first home, our mother, and that she weeps for us eternally because we up and left her behind."

"I've never heard it put like that," Gabriella said.

"But I always think that maybe the ocean tastes so much like tears because she's seized the sorrow of so many a sailor before us." The pair fell quiet again for a few moments before Magpie asked, "Whatcha doing out here so early anyways?"

Gabriella nodded to the wooden panel she had spent the last hour fighting with. “I was trying to get a bearing on where we are. I haven’t gotten much practice. Jayne seems reluctant to let me near this thing.” In theory, the panel was a highly developed navigational system, created by the ship’s tinker to simplify course-plotting. In reality, Gabriella thought it was a wild collection of gears and switches that served no real purpose except to inflame the user.

“I supposed you can’t blame the girl. She put a whole lot of hours into that contraption. Like the rest of her creations, it’s one of a kind. Like the rest of them, it’s bound to blow up in our faces. Eventually.”

Gabriella giggled.

Magpie gave an impish grin. “You laugh, but you haven’t been here long enough to appreciate just why we call her Calamity Jayne.”

“The navicom seems stable enough,” Gabriella said. “In a way, it does what it’s supposed to. What could go wrong?”

“Ah, famous last words.” Magpie grinned. “I don’t understand how it works, but she says it does, so it must. I’ve known the girl long enough to trust her instincts. I just don’t trust her inventions. Know what I mean?”

“Is there a difference with her?”

“Point taken.”

Gabriella toyed with the longitude lever before she heaved an exasperated sigh. “I don’t think I’m operating this thing right.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because it says we are out in the middle of nowhere.” She paused to look overboard, at the water that roiled beneath the ship. “But we’re flying so low it suggests we’re preparing to land.”

“Well ain’t you the observant one?” Magpie laughed aloud. “Naw, girly, you’re doing it right. I’ll bet the farm your readings are good.”

“I don’t see how. What business could we have all the way out here?”

“I don’t rightly know myself. I reckon the captain will tell us when she’s good and ready.”

“I suppose so. Do you have any idea why we’re flying so close to the water?”

“Maybe that has something to do with it.” Magpie pointed over Gabriella’s shoulder. Gabriella turned once again to face the vast ocean.

To the tropical coastline moving steadily toward them.

In the excitement of the view, Gabriella forgot her homesickness. If the navicom hadn’t lied, then the coastline in the distance wasn’t just another familiar port. The land she was squinting at was someplace new. Somewhere she had never set foot on before. The thought of it was terribly, terribly exciting. After all, she hadn’t ran away from home, not to mention the altar, only to be tethered to some foul smelling port, waiting around for someone to trust the crew enough to hire them.

Yet that was just how she had spent the last six months.

When she'd first joined the Widow, the captain explained that employment was few and far between for the all female crew. Gabriella thought she'd understood. She appreciated that a freelance shipping crew had to take what work was offered, when it was offered. She imagined the crew's downtime was filled with exciting trips to foreign countries or distant islands.

Shopping in Paris. Lunching in Madrid. Relaxing in Timbuktu.

It turned out there was no downtime. When they weren't on a legitimate job, the girls trolled the lowest, filthiest ports of the East Coast looking for work. Gabriella felt like a common streetwalker, passing out pamphlets or hanging flyers. Even worse than that was her turn at standing watch. All day confined to the deck of the Widow just to ensure no one unwelcome boarded. Which was ridiculous because the crews of the other ships gave the Widow a wide berth with or without a guard.

"Good morning, ladies," Jax said.

Gabriella turned away from the promise land of beach when the tall blonde joined her at the railing. "Morning, Jax. We've arrived. Somewhere."

"Yes," Jax answered. Her voice pulsed in a thick, foreign inflection of rolling consonants paired with throaty vowels. "I see that for myself. I wondered why no one showed for the breaking of the fast. I thought I was to eat alone."

Magpie cleared her throat. "That would be my fault. The captain requested that we gather on the deck. I imagine the rest of the crew is on their way up."

To say that Jax frowned was quite the understatement. Jax's mouth seemed set in a permanent frown, so when she deliberately frowned, it was dramatic. Like a scowl with a healthy side of grimace and just a touch of glower.

"So you fetch rest of crew? Did you forget Jax?"

"No, no." Magpie laughed for a moment. "Lordy, how could anyone forget about you, woman? I was just about to mosey down to the kitchen and tell you, but I got waylaid by Guppy here."

Jax turned her scowl on Gabriella. "I am first mate. I should be given messages before fledgling recruits."

Gabriella shrank while sky blue eyes bore down on her with burning hatred. Gabriella didn't know much about Jax except that she was a top rate scowler and a professional sneerer. Her exotic accent placed her origin in or around Romania, yet her blond hair and blue eyes belied this. The fact that she was first mate made sense because she was shrewd, strong, and deviously clever. Her position in the kitchen, however, was a mystery. Jax was the worst cook Gabriella had ever seen in action. Maybe it was the very qualities that made her an excellent first mate that also kept folks from telling her how horrible her cooking was.

"Don't take this out on her," Magpie said. "I tried to raise you on the tubes, but you bang them pots and pans so loud you never hear me. Guppy here just happened to be on the way."

“Maybe,” Jax said. She narrowed her eyes at Gabriella, switching from glare to glower in one smooth move. “Maybe I will remember this when lunch time returns. Guppy is allergic to the fish with shells? Yes?”

“Maybe,” Magpie said in a sterner voice, “you should just let it go.”

Jax turned her gaze back to Magpie. The two women locked stares. Gabriella worried her skirt between her shaking hands.

The big blonde puffed out her chest, drew herself to her full height, and put on her best sneer. “Maybe, you would like to argue with fists?”

“And maybe,” a younger woman said, “Guppy should fight her own fights.”

“Girls,” a much older woman added, “that’s enough of that.”

The first voice belonged to the ship’s tinker, Jayne Octasept. She was just a tiny slip of a girl, all freckle-faced and blue-eyed, with a surprising shock of snow-white hair. Jayne reminded Gabriella of her own father—genius, yet socially inept. Yet unlike her father, Gabriella just couldn’t seem to get along with Jayne, no matter how much she tried. Gabriella loved and missed her father more than anyone else...but that life was over. These people were her family now, and she had to make it work.

The other voice belonged to the resident medic, Dorothy Johnson, or Dot as she preferred to be addressed. The gray headed, stooped at the shoulders, porcelain doll, frail matron looked like she should have been home knitting socks for her grandchildren instead of sailing around the world playing the part of an airship’s surgeon. Dot wasn’t just the ship’s medic. She was the crew’s moral compass too. One of Dot’s severe looks would set your blood cold, forcing you to consider the difference between right, wrong, and whatever it was you thought you were going to do.

The appearance of the rest of the crew snapped the tension of the moment. Jax stepped away with a sharp snort, stalking a few feet down the railing. She turned her back, pretending to ignore the others.

“What’s up her nose?” Jayne asked.

“I’m afraid I might have offended her sensitive nature,” Magpie said.

The women paused for a moment before breaking into a wave of cackling laughter. Jax looked over her shoulder with a glare, which only pressed them to laugh harder. Gabriella grinned at the idea that a woman as stoic as Jax could have anything that resembled a sensitive side.

“I’m glad you’re in high spirits,” Captain Rose said.

“Captain on deck!” Jax shouted.

The small crew of the Widow snapped to attention, falling into a neat line.



## Chapter 2

### *Stand and Deliver*

*In which we learn of the dubious job our captain has undertaken on our behalf.*

Captain Rose Madigan strode across the deck, eyeing her crew while giving them a wide, knowing smile. Although she was nearly a foot shorter than Jax, she somehow seemed taller. She dressed in the same drab brown as the rest of the crew, setting off the woman's fiery red hair and sea green eyes. The captain was everything Gabriella wasn't—worldly, charming, and most of all beautiful.

"Stand down, ladies." The captain smirked. "If I wanted to spend the morning being saluted, I would have stayed in bed with Click."

The crew relaxed into easy laughter.

"As you're all aware," the captain said, "we've arrived."

A general grunt of approval rounded the women.

Dot raised an eyebrow. "Where exactly have we arrived?"

"Guppy," the captain said.

Gabriella swallowed hard. "Yes?"

"Would you please tell the crew where we are?" the captain commanded.

Gabriella turned to Jayne, who looked on with an amused smile.

"Guppy?" the captain asked.

Fidgeting, Gabriella cleared her throat before she said, "Based on a rough estimate of our longitude and latitude, and our relative position on the navicom, I guess we're somewhere in the South Pacific Ocean."

"You guess?" The captain crossed her arms, looking down at Gabriella as if expecting more.

Gabriella could only nod. Give her a sextant or just the stars and she could plot a worldwide course to her heart's content. Without proper training on Jayne's crazy contraption, Gabriella's mathematical mind was useless. There was no way she could be sure the readings were correct. No way could she answer her captain with anything more than just a guess.

The captain crossed the deck with slow, deliberate steps, her boots clapping hollow against the planks. She came to a halt, looming over Gabriella. "Young lady, did I hire you to guess? Or did I hire you to navigate my ship?"

Gabriella lowered her gaze. "Navigate your ship, sir. But Jayne won't show me how to properly—"

"Don't blame your incompetence on me, little rich girl." Jayne scowled.

"But—"

The captain lifted her hand, silencing Gabriella mid-excuse. "I put it to you again. Where are we?"

Gabriella drew a deep breath. "We are currently located in the South Pacific Ocean. Sir."

The captain's firm frown shifted into a partial grin. "Good girl."

Gabriella smiled while her insides uncoiled.

"Big deal," Jayne said, clearly annoyed by the captain's show of confidence in Gabriella's favor. "We've been in this area plenty of times."

"What is work now?" Jax asked. "Are we to return Click to his native soil? Get big reward for saving chastity of entire western culture?"

Laughter rolled across the Widow. The crew enjoyed the jab at the oversized cabin boy.

"Ladies," the captain said. "I have kept the point and purpose of our employment from you long enough. Magpie? The details, if you please."

Magpie stepped up to point at the distant shore. "That island you're all looking at has no name, no known residents, and no clear ownership. It lies between so many borders that it would be impossible to pin down which nation has rightful claim, but the point is moot because most countries aren't even aware of its existence. It is, however, the last known home of the infamous Doctor Grant Loquacious." She paused, expecting a response.

Gabriella didn't recognize the name. She glanced at the others, relieved to see everyone else also looked confused. Except the tinker.

"No," Jayne said, her eyes widening as she stared across the waters. "It can't be." For a moment, her face lit with incomprehensible joy.

"I thought *you* would have heard of him," the captain said.

The moment Jayne realized she was the subject of scrutiny, the smile faded to a cool smirk. "Doctor Loco?" She shrugged, insinuating the familiarity she took with the man's name was nothing. "Sure, I've heard of him. Any cogsmith worth her weight has heard of Loco. The tales say he's nuttier than a fruitcake, and the president himself had the man locked up to preserve the safety of humanity. I heard he could slap together a mechanism like nobody's business. If he's on that island, then we're all in for a treat. A crazy, mad filled treat, granted, but a treat nonetheless."

"I hate to disappoint you," the captain said. "He isn't on the island. At least not anymore."

"That's a shame. I would've loved to meet the man. I wonder what became of him."

"From what I've been told, the president tried to put him away. For good."

"Real genius is never truly appreciated."

"Actually," Magpie said, "there was some proof that he was linked to Mr. Booth's attack on our Lincoln's life last year."

"That doesn't sound like him," Jayne said. "I heard he wasn't really big on political garbage. Besides, I thought they topped everyone involved with that."

"Topped?" Gabriella asked.

Jayne pulled an imaginary noose tight around her neck. Her eyes rolled, looking heavenward while her tongue protruded obscenely from her mouth. Gabriella frowned at the garish display.

“Yes,” Magpie agreed. “No one’s been able to find the doctor since, or any trace of his whereabouts. It’s as though the man has vanished from the face of the earth.”

“Now that sounds like him,” Jayne said.

“If world famous doctor is not here,” Jax said, “then why are we?”

“Because,” the captain said, “although the doctor has moved along, we believe he left something behind.”

Jayne’s eyes went wide again. “His lab?”

The captain gave a curt nod.

“Intact?” the tinker asked as her forehead scrunched.

“There’s a good chance,” the captain answered, with another nod.

The tinker rubbed her grease smeared hands together in what Gabriella thought was a most unbecoming manner for a young lady. “Oh my. My, my, my. Captain, you have no idea what this means.”

The captain rolled her eyes. “Yes, Jayne, I rather think I do.”

Jayne swallowed hard enough for Gabriella to hear. The redness in her cheeks and meek look on her face showed that she was remembering her place. The other woman tipped her head to the captain. “Yes, sir. Of course you do.”

“In fact,” the captain said, “we aren’t here just to plunder the missing man’s lab. We’re here for something very specific. We have been hired to locate and return with one of the doctor’s creations. Some kind of artifact.”

“Artifact?” Gabriella echoed.

“What kind of artifact?” Dot asked.

“You officially know everything I do,” the captain said. “The employer said we would know it when we saw it.”

“We don’t know what we’re after?” Gabriella asked.

“Not really,” the captain said. She raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like fun. Doesn’t it?”

Gabriella was forced to agree. It did, indeed, sound like fun.

Magpie raised her hand. “Permission to speak freely, sir.”

The captain sighed. “As though I could stop you.”

“Who are we working for?” Magpie asked.

“Is it so important?” the captain asked, her voice taking on a clipped edge.

Unlike Gabriella, Magpie neither fidgeted nor squirmed under the captain’s scrutiny. Someday, Gabriella knew she would stand just as firm in the face of authority. She just knew it.

“Yes,” Magpie said. “I think it does matter. Especially since we really don’t know what we are after. Maybe if we knew who we were employed by, we’d have a fairer time of finding whatever it is we are looking for.”

With a sigh, the captain turned away from the crew. She strode to the far side of the deck and stooped over the railing, grasping it with both hands, staring overboard at the water below. Gabriella knew it wasn't out of form for the captain to keep the name of an employer to herself. Especially if the work in question was questionable. Ransacking an island for a mysterious artifact sounded dubious to the debutante in Gabriella.

After several moments of breathless anticipation, the captain returned. In a flat voice she said, "Madame Ruby."

The crew gave a collective gasp. Everyone, that was, except Gabriella.

She had no idea what all the gasping was about.

\* \* \* \*

The women stood on the deck, staring open mouthed at Rose. It didn't take long for the wide-eyed gaping to turn into frustrated grimaces. While the crew hated the idea of working for Ruby, Rose despised it. She had lost more than a few good nights' sleep over the whole affair. When it came down to it, there was no other choice. With employment at a premium, any job was a good job. She only hoped the girls could see the logic of it.

Magpie covered her face with both hands. She groaned. "I thought that last carrier pigeon was from The Red House."

"I'm not working for that woman," Jayne said.

"Madame Ruby asked for us by name," Rose responded.

"That hussy?" Dot asked.

"Yes, that hussy," Rose said. "She made us a very generous offer for very little work, so I took it."

"I wouldn't take her money if my life depended on it," Jayne snapped.

"It may very well be," Rose answered.

"She's right," Magpie agreed. "We haven't had a real job in almost six months, the food stores are pitiful, our sundries are nearly all used up, and I'm guessing the fuel has seen better days."

"We might get another few days out of the coal we have," Jayne admitted. "If we don't stop and get some more soon, the boilers will run cold. We'll be back on the sails."

It had been a while since the ship had to run on sails, but everyone aboard knew it was a less than desirable state to be in. While the giant airbag kept the ship in the sky, it was the massive props on either side of the vessel that gave her movement and control. A complex array of complicated boilers in her belly provided the necessary steam to push the propellers about, but if needed, the ship could cast sails from runners that lined her sides, harnessing the wind. Yet Rose would do whatever it took to keep from resorting to the sails. Such an act was not only hard work, it was also unrewarding in terms of lift and power.

"The sails won't get us a quarter of the speed we need to keep up with the competition," Magpie said. "We're near dead in the water without more fuel."

“And there is no stopping for fuel,” Rose said. “Because there’s no money for it Soon, there won’t be any funds left. The fact of the matter is simple. If we don’t complete this job...” She paused to look down, as if unable to face her crew when she said, “I’ll have to let all of you go.”

A chorus of “no” rose from every throat.

“Captain,” Magpie said, “I think I speak for everyone here when I say that we don’t just consider this ship a place of work. We consider it our home.”

Nods all around agreed.

Warmed by their dedication, Rose’s lips twitched ever so slightly. Loyalty, however, didn’t pay the bills. “I appreciate the sentiment, but the fact of the matter remains. We are a working crew, and we need to accept employment if we wish to remain in the sky.”

“Then let’s do it,” little Guppy said.

Rose narrowed her eyes at the young girl. This kind of outburst from the demure child was unusual. It pleased Rose to hear the girl speak her mind.

“I don’t see what all this distress is about,” Gabriella continued. “We needed a job. We we’re offered a job. So let’s just do it.”

“Honey,” Dot said, “it isn’t just the work that’s the problem. It’s the association with The Red House that we don’t want.”

Jayne snorted. “Yeah, it’s bad enough that everyone thinks we’re in the same line of work.” She set to pacing across the deck in a nervous measure. “If we actually do a job for her, the gossip will never cease.”

“What line of work?” Gabriella asked.

Everyone fell silent, staring at one another rather than answering the question.

Magpie leaned close to Gabriella to say in a voice so low Rose almost didn’t hear her, “The Red House is a bordello.”

Gabriella covered her mouth as she gasped in surprise.

“Yes,” Jayne said. “You can see why we’re so reticent.”

Gabriella’s cheeks glowed cherry red, yet the glint in her eyes told Rose it was the scarlet hue of anger, not embarrassment.

“No, I don’t see,” Gabriella said. “I don’t see at all.”

“Guppy?” Rose asked. “Are you well?”

Gabriella clenched her fists, puffing out her chest as she stepped forward to address the rest of the crew. “I don’t understand you lot. All you ever do is talk of freedom and equality and how we should have the right to choose our own paths.”

Rose smirked, amused by the turn of events. Gabriella’s outburst was odd enough, but a speech of this nature was unheard of. What had gotten into the young thing? Rose cocked her head at the child before she asked, “I’ll take it our idea of freedom disturbs you?”

“No,” Gabriella snapped. “But who are you to pass judgment on what another woman does for her pleasure?”

The argument came to a grinding halt when every mouth fell open. The sudden silence was sliced by the hum of the props, punctuated by the occasional slap of a wave cresting against the ship's hull. The women shifted their stances, doing their best to avoid each other while Rose tried to tame her own smirk. She lost. Her grin spread wide.

"I don't understand," Gabriella said, "how this Madame's money is different from anyone else's? Just because of how she earned it?"

Jax cleared her throat. "The little fishy has a point. Ruby's money is just as good as anyone else's. Better than any man's for sure."

Magpie chuckled. "Unless she offered trade?"

"No," Rose said. "The offer was cash on delivery. I don't like to talk so openly about finances, but there are quadruple digits involved here, ladies."

Eyebrows raised. Lips curled.

Anyone will buckle for a great bottom line. It was the single good thing she learned from Bill.

"It sounds like a good offer to me," Gabriella reasoned.

Rose was rather sure the young woman wouldn't know a good offer if it landed in her lap and started to sing church hymns.

"What I want to know," Jayne said, "is what a woman like Ruby wants with Loco's legacy."

"Does that mean you're willing to find out?" Rose asked.

"You know me better than that, Captain," Jayne said with a toothy grin. "I'd go for free if it means getting a look at the man's lab. You just try to stop me."

Rose thought her tinker would react favorably. Still, it was nice to be reassured. She turned her penetrating gaze on the rest of the crew. "What about the rest of you? Do you disagree with my decision?"

"No," Jax said. "Guppy is right. You are right. We do the work that is needed. No questions asked."

"I don't like the idea of working for that woman," Dot said, "but in for a penny." She shrugged, letting the cliché trail off.

Rose looked to Magpie.

The communications officer shrugged as well. "I'm sure you know what you're doing. I just hope you ain't mad at me for asking."

"I would've expected nothing less," Rose said. "So, now that our little drama is over, shall we proceed?"

"Aye-aye, Captain!" the women shouted in unison.

Rose basked in their loyalty.



## Chapter 3

### *Mysterious Island*

*In which we risk life and limb for the object of the Madame's desire.*

Gabriella thought the task sounded impossible.

An insane man's laboratory hidden amongst the overgrown jungle of an untamed island? A laboratory, mind you, that he had no intention of ever showing to anyone when he was there. How were they supposed to find the thing now that the doctor had been missing for years? Surely the island had swallowed up its prize.

Fortune smiled on the crew in two useful ways.

In the first place, the crew had, among their number, an asset that proved to be invaluable on a wild island—a wild island native of their own. Click, and it really was just Click because as far as Gabriella knew the man had no surname, was Polynesian by birth. He was also handsome enough to border on beautiful. With a height a little taller than the captain, which put him at least a foot above Gabriella, his smooth skin glowed in a healthy shade of terracotta, with sprawling designs of dark ink covering his arms and chest, which he showed off every chance he got by going shamelessly topless about the ship. Wild, dark hair hung in thick bunches to his shoulders. His hands were twice the span of Gabriella's, while his feet were enormous. She only knew this because the man spent so much time barefoot, as if his position aboard the Widow couldn't afford him a simple pair of shoes.

On the official duties roster, Click was supposed to be the ship's cabin boy, or in his case cabin man. The reality of the matter was quite the stuff of torrid tales. What went on between Click and the all female crew was a scandalous notion in all of the port gossip circles. Gabriella didn't believe it until she'd seen him sneaking out of Jayne's quarters, up the ladder that led to Magpie's loft, and even, on the rare occasion, slinking away from Dot's berth. It was all an exciting, scandalous notion indeed. It was also one that not a soul had bothered to share with the new recruit. Not that she would take him up on such an offer.

Well, not right away, but it would have been nice to at least have been asked.

Click was valuable, true, yet even he could only do so much for the crew without an idea of where they were headed. That idea came in the form of a map, courtesy of the Madame. Where the owner of a bordello had gotten a hold of a map to a hidden laboratory on a nameless island was a question the captain wouldn't answer. Jayne, on the other hand, insinuated that the Madame was well known for using her bedroom based talents to get whatever she wanted. Gabriella ended up with a flushed face before she decided not to ask for details.

So, map in hand and native on their side, the women plunged into that heart of darkness in search of whatever it was they were in search of.

“We really have no idea what we are looking for?” Gabriella asked again, for what she knew had to be the fortieth time.

“No, Guppy,” the captain answered. “And if you make another sound, I’ll send you back to the ship with Dot.”

Gabriella went silent. The last thing she wanted was to be stuck guarding the ship when the rest of the crew was out adventuring.

What an adventure it was turning out to be.

The island was a tropical paradise with its white sandy beaches, beautiful waterfalls, and tranquil lagoons. Yet, at the same time, it was a veritable death trap. The jungle grew thick, almost impenetrable in places. The passable areas lay rife with hungry wildlife. To make matters worse, the parts of the island not dominated by overgrowth seemed to be composed of nothing but quicksand. Gabriella quickly learned the key to survival in the stuff was not to struggle when sinking, despite the fact that all instincts screamed otherwise.

Even with her bloomers full of sand, she was having the time of her life.

“Captain!” Click shouted from a few feet ahead. “There’s something up here.”

The captain sighed with a glance to the heavens, as if seeking help. Gabriella couldn’t blame her. The native had repeated the same line for almost four hours. Every misshapen rock, twisted tree, or rotting animal carcass was something to him. A series of portends to his warped, heathen mind.

“I swear,” the captain said, “if that’s just another piece of indistinguishable jungle, I’m going to break him in two.”

“If the map is correct, this should be it, sir,” Magpie said, folding the worn parchment.

“Very well. Let’s see what he’s found this time.” The captain pushed past Magpie, tromping ahead to join Click with his latest discovery.

Gabriella obediently fell into line to follow her captain. Whistles and gasps echoed through the underbrush. When she slipped between the vines into the clearing beyond, she saw what all the commotion was about. A great stone wall rose from the jungle floor, reaching high into the canopy of banyan trees, running end to end as far as the eye could see. Gabriella stood in awe of the thing, amazed at the impossible size of it. Jayne, however, caressed the obstruction with pale, trembling hands. The woman pawed at the wall, occasionally pausing to put her ear to it, listening for heaven knew what.

“Wow,” Click said. His voice seemed a sudden intrusion on Jayne’s private moment. “What do you suppose is beyond?”

The captain waved her hand at the cabin boy, flashing him a dirty look, silencing him as she turned to Magpie, who already had the unfolded parchment in hand. “Is this thing on the map?”

Magpie held the parchment close to her face. “No. Must’ve been put up by someone since. Unfortunately our goal is just on the other side. I guess somehow we either need to get around it or over it.”

“How do you suppose we get around it?” Jax asked.

Gabriella wondered the same thing.

“We’re not supposed to.” Jayne stepped back from the wall, turned to the crew with her hands parked on her hips. “Not around it. We’re supposed to get inside. It’s not just a barrier. It’s a building.”

“Oh, I see,” Magpie said. “This is the lab.” Poking at the map, she frowned. “I just assumed the little rectangle here would be, well, little.” She dipped her head in submission to the captain. “Sorry, Cap.”

“No harm.” The captain smirked. “Jayne? How can you tell?”

“Because,” the tinker said, “barricades of this size don’t usually sport conveniently man sized doors.” Jayne hooked a thumb behind her toward the wall.

Gabriella stared at the spot the tinker pointed out. At first it looked like just another part of the impressive stonework. The more she stared, the more it changed. Soon, she saw what the tinker saw. Beyond the mossy age laid the faint outline of a large door set on wide hinges.

“Well done,” the captain commended. “Now, do me one better, Jayne. Get us inside.”

The tinker threw her hand up in salute. “Aye-aye, Captain.”

Gabriella got a sinking feeling that was easier said than done.

\* \* \* \*

Rose sat on a rotting trunk, moaning while Click worked her shoulders with his strong hands.

“So tight, my captain,” he said. “You should relax.”

“I wish I could,” Rose whispered.

“I know how to relax you.”

She shuddered when he feathered the back of her neck with soft kisses. “Not now. We need to find a way in before the sun sets, otherwise we’ll have to trek back to the Widow and the whole day will be a waste.”

Rose assumed Jayne would have the door opened in moments, but she’d been wrong. When they cleared away the wildlife, there was no handle. The hinges were not only bolted to the stone, they were welded in place. The door bore a strange carving—the open-mouthed face of some kind of demon with a square of marble mounted just below the beast. Although interesting, it was no help in getting the damnable thing open. For the last forty-five minutes, the crew poked, prodded, and pried at the door with no success. Rose was beginning to think they would return to Ruby empty handed. That wouldn’t do. Not at all.

“Relax, my captain,” Click cooed in his lilting accent. “We shall get in soon enough. You’ll see. You just have to believe we will.”

"I don't know, Click." Rose leaned against him, her shoulders sagging. Fear of failure left her stomach churning as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Click's silence only enhanced her tension, forcing her to speak again to still her nerves. "I suspect it will take more than just optimism to get us past that door." Rose glanced in the direction of the hindrance. At the door, a sweaty Jax with a large crowbar was trying her best to best the obstacle.

"She's going to pull a muscle like that," Click whispered.

"Jax!" Rose shouted. "Give it a rest!"

Her first mate ignored her, instead groaning while she bore down on the metal bar wedge into the doorframe. The door didn't even have the decency to at least groan in return.

"Take a break, Jax!" Rose shouted. "That's an order!"

"Yebat!" Jax yelled. She yanked the bar free, hurling it across the clearing.

Rose's ears burned at the sound of the foreign curse.

"Stupid doctor and his stupid ideas!" Jax shouted. "Who makes door no one can use? I ask that!" She stomped away from the impossible task to slump against a boulder.

Rose looked to the skies.

"I told you force wouldn't work," Jayne said. With a smug smile on her freckled face, the tinker lay down. She stretched her legs across a patch of mossy vines.

"Then tell us what will," Magpie said.

"I told you already—" Jayne started.

Magpie cut the tinker off in mid-sentence. "Yes, we know. It's probably some secretive combination lock or puzzle."

"Jayne," Rose said. "I appreciate that you, out of all of us, understand how Doctor Loquacious's mind worked. We have yet to see any signs of a puzzle."

"Not true," Jayne said. "That beast on the door is too obtrusive. It means something."

While Rose assumed the carving was just a poor choice in décor, she trusted the clever mind of the tinker. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Jayne confessed.

Rose huffed in frustration.

"That's the confusing part," Jayne said. "I expected something fairly recognizable from him. I mean the man was a genius, but so am I. Logic dictates we should think alike."

Movement caught Rose's eye. Gabriella stood before the huge door. The young woman craned her neck to the carving, shifting her weight from leg to leg, which she often did when she was deep in thought. Rose wondered if Gabriella could succeed where Jayne had failed. Yes, she could, because Gabriella was her clever father's daughter.

Rose smiled at the pleasant memories of Daniel Upstairs. There was a man with class. Not much in the looks department, mind you. Still he was stable, secure, and sweet. Oh, so very sweet. Rose could have married him. No. She should have married him. The lure of being a captain's wife

over the spouse of a brilliant mathematician was too great for the young Rose. She snuck away in the dead of night, married that bastard Bill only to live with the regret of it ever since. Now here she was, a lifetime later, where circumstances and incidents had left her in charge of Daniel's daughter.

She hoped she could keep her promise to the first man she'd ever truly loved.

"Maybe we use explosives," Jax said. "Boom. Door gone. Problem solved."

Magpie snorted a small laugh. "Not everything can be solved by blowing it up."

Jax shot the smaller woman a dark look. "Most problems can be solved by going boom. As well as most people."

Rose frowned at Jax's threatening tone. Were Jax and Maggie arguing again? She thought she had settled their differences eons ago. Magpie's cut-you-to-the-bone sneer said differently. Rose didn't have time for this. Not now. Not ever. Click's lips against her neck broke through her worry.

"Come with me," he whispered.

When he ran his hands across her breasts for the briefest of moments before returning them to her shoulders, she smiled. "What are you on about?"

"Come with me," he whispered. "I'll show you."

The obvious offer was tempting, but this was hardly the time or place for such frivolity. She pushed his hands away. "Not now, Click. I swear that's all you ever think about."

"That is where you're wrong, my captain," he whispered. "You are all I ever think about." With that, he stood and walked into the thick of the jungle. Before the wildlife swallowed him whole, he turned to face her with a flash of his seductive smile.

Rose clambered to her feet in excitement. "Jax, keep working on that door. Ladies, if you'll excuse me, I have something to discuss with our morale's officer."

"Oh, sure," Magpie said. "You have a word, or two. Three if you like. No sense in limiting yourself to just oral explorations either. Might as well take on his full body of work while you're at it."

The women sniggered, except for Gabriella, who once again looked like a fish out of water. Her cheeks puffed and huffed while a profound look of confusion crossed her face. Rose followed Click's path into the jungle.

The vines closed behind her, forcing her deeper into the undergrowth. She wandered for a few minutes before she got the feeling she had lost him. "Click? Where are you? You stupid man."

She reached a small clearing before she decided to head back, leaving Click to his ridiculous notions. The snap of a twig to her left snatched her attention. Stopping, she realized it must be him. "Click? Are you trying to sneak up on me?"

The low, throaty growl of some wild animal was her answer.

Rose's eyes grew wide with panic. Before she could turn to run, a hand slipped over her mouth. A strong arm wrapped about her waist.

"Shhh," Click hissed into her ear.

Rose grunted underneath his hot palm, more terrified than she'd felt in years. The animal growled again, only this time the sound was much closer. Click held her tightly to his hard body. She tensed under his grip, the terror melting into desire.

"Don't speak," he whispered. "Don't even breathe. Understand?"

"Yes," she mumbled under his hand.

He snapped her head back, gripping her tighter. "I said don't speak, my captain. Unless, maybe you want to be its next meal?"

The growl rolled out across the glen. Rose shuddered with need.

"Then be silent and be still." Click released her mouth. He ran his hand down her neck, trailing it along her throat, along her cleavage until his fingers disappeared under her blouse. He worked his hand into her corset, taking her breast into his strong grip. He flicked his fingertips across her nipple despite the tight fit. Between hot kisses down her neck, he said, "He can smell your need, my captain. He has been tracking you all day because he could smell your heat and desire. They overpower his senses in the thick of the jungle." He traced the shell of her earlobe with his tongue before he plunged it into her ear to lick her deep. "He wants you. He wants to mount you and take you. Make you his. Like the animal he is." Click pushed his hips into her, laying his hard cock against her.

Rose squirmed against him when the growl rose again. Her pussy quivered while her heart thumped wildly at the sound of this animal stalking her, seeking her, wanting her. She pushed back against Click with a groan. Lightening quick, he slipped his hand from her corset, snapping it back over her mouth.

"Keep quiet," he whispered. He ground his cock against her body, dry humping her while they stood in the open afternoon. "He is close. And he wants you so badly. I don't know if I can hold him off. How about it, my captain? Would you like to see this wild animal? This beast you have brought out?"

Rose nodded. She closed her eyes when his growl met her ears again.

Once more, Click's hand disappeared from her mouth, this time leaving her body entirely. Rose wondered what he was up to. She didn't have to wonder for long. The undeniable click of buttons and familiar rustle of fabric rose from behind her. His free hand wandered to her breeches, working the closure with one-handed expertise until an impatient Rose joined him to finish the job. When she bent to push her pants and soaked bloomers to the jungle floor, she felt the tip of his cock brush her sex. His hand landed square on her back. When she tried to stand, he held her down, bent double with her palms in the dirt and her ass in the air.

"He wants you, my captain," Click said. He growled again.

She smiled at his game, keeping her mouth shut to play along.

"Will you take him?" he asked.

Remaining silent, she nodded.

"Good girl," he said. Grabbing her by the hips, he pushed forward.



Rose wanted to shout in delight. Click pulled out of her, then pushed in again, growling and grunting like some out of control beast. She pushed against him, meeting him thrust for thrust, longing to scream, to moan. Instead, she turned her groans inward, dreaming a stream of obscenities while he took her. The glen filled with the sounds of slick sex, the slap of Click's balls against her wet pussy, the flat smack of his hands on her ass as he had her entirely for his pleasure.

Click was much more masterful than he had been with her in the past. Perhaps it was the danger of outdoor sex, or the return to his native soil. He rode her heavy, grunting commands at her to stand taller, squat lower, for her to keep still so he could pummel her pussy, or for her to hump faster while he remained motionless. It was as though he was the captain and she just a common wench. To her surprise, Rose loved every second of it. She whimpered, trembling under his towering bulk, letting him have his way with her.

Soon, she felt him tense within her, his orgasm approaching quicker than usual. Rose dipped her hand to her pussy, rubbing her clit hard, seeking her satisfaction before he could finish. This was also a first in her history with Click, yet one she found to be an exciting race instead of the worrisome battle it had always been with Bill. She circled her clit in quick bursts while she squeezed Click's cock within her pussy.

"Rose!" Click shouted. He pushed into her once more. His balls lifted against her hand. His cock jumped in a passionate spasm.

The very sound of her name from his lips proved too much for her. She rose to full height and cried aloud, screaming his name into the jungle while her orgasm ripped through her. Click wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly to him, adorning her depths with his endless desire. The world twisted, dipping in fantastic colors when he came with her and she seized around him, melting together into one orgasmic being. They froze for a moment, linked by their amorous union, paired in their desire, passion, and heat.

It was several moments before either of them remembered to breathe.

"Click," she said between gasps. "You never call me Rose."

He silenced her with a slim finger, nuzzling his face into her neck. "The jungle makes a man wild. A wild man like me, it makes an animal. It was the animal that was so vulgar, so impatient, too quick..." He paused as if it hurt him to say the words.

"Don't," she whispered. "I loved it."

Click kissed her neck before he cleared his throat to add, "Click will always love you slow and true. And he will always call you his captain. For you are the captain of his soul."

Rose was both warmed and worried by his words. On the one hand, she enjoyed the commanding yet tender relationship they shared. But this new Click, this animal, was someone she wanted to see again—to feel again and soon, if she had her way. "How can a woman like me trap and keep such a creature?"

Hugging her tighter, Click smiled against her neck.

“The beast will follow his prey anywhere she goes,” he said. “You’ll have to tread far more carefully now that he has your scent. He is ardent, and his passion is devoted to you now. If you will have him, he will stay.”

“Oh, I’ll have him.” Rose wiggled her naked ass against his groin.

“Captain!” Jax’s voice drifted into the glen.

“Looks like we are out of time, my captain,” Click said.

Rose sighed when he slipped free from her. She bent to pull up her pants again, shouting, “Coming!”

“Again so soon?” Click ran his fingers over her soaked pussy with a laugh. Rose shivered at his contact. She pushed back to welcome his wandering touch. Click’s laughter shifted to a groan. He slipped his fingers past her lips, deeper into her sweetness. She squealed. He growled.

“Be quick!” Jax shouted. “We found something new!”

With much excitement, tinged by even more regret, they scrambled to dress and ran to join the others.

“What’s the big deal?” Rose demanded when they returned.

“Words,” Jax said.

“Words?” Click echoed.

“The little fish found writing,” Jax said.

“Where?” Rose asked.

Gabriella motioned to a series of faint lines. “These markings here, above the frame.”

“Big deal,” the tinker said, nonchalantly. “I saw them when we first got here, but you don’t hear me shouting on about it.”

Rose turned to narrow her eyes at the tinker. “You saw this?”

“Aye, Captain,” Jayne said.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Rose asked through clenched teeth.

Jayne sat up and shrugged. “Because it’s just a bunch of nonsense.”

“So,” Gabriella said. “What is it?”

“Latin,” the tinker said.

“I can see that,” Gabriella said. “I’m just not very good with the language. What does it say?”

Jayne sighed. “*Ostendo Nonnullus Mos.*”

“Which means?” Rose asked.

“Roughly translated?” Jayne asked. “Show some manners.” With that, she returned to her sprawled position.

“I see why she kept it to herself,” Magpie said.

“Indeed,” Click said. “Not a lot of help there.”

“Words are never of good use,” Jax said. “Only action will get us inside. Boom.”

Rose was inclined to agree with her. In fact, almost every head nodded in agreement. The young Gabriella looked like she felt differently on the matter. She stroked her chin, tilting her head from side to side while she eyed the door.

“Something’s missing,” she said.

“Yeah,” Magpie agreed with a nod. “Like a handle.”

The crew chuckled.

“No,” Gabriella said. “I mean here.” She pointed to the face of the beast and the marble slab beneath. “Something was between the two. In this space.”

“I’ve been giving that some thought,” Jayne said. “I think that’s where the opening mechanism was. I hypothesize that Loco dismantled it when he fled the island.”

Rose sighed. She returned to her place in front of Click. “When were you planning on sharing this hypothesis with the rest of us?” She motioned to her shoulders and the native returned to kneading them.

Jayne rolled her eyes. “I thought I just did.”

Rose bit her tongue. This was becoming tiresome.

Gabriella shook her head as she said, “No, I don’t think that’s it.” She dropped to her knees.

“Guppy?” Rose asked.

Gabriella ignored her. Instead, she ran her hands through the thick wildlife at the base of the door. “Ah ha!” She stood again, holding out a large, rusty metal ring.

“What is it?” Rose asked, joining Gabriella’s side.

“A knocker,” the young girl said.

“You’re joking,” Jayne said, and then laughed. “As if it would be that simple.”

Gabriella shrugged. She turned back to the door, held the ring aloft and pushed it into the demon’s mouth. The rung snapped into place with a loud click. Gabriella looked over her shoulder, past Rose, to smile at the tinker.

“Tell me this is just a joke,” Jayne begged.

Gabriella lifted the ring. She brought it down once, twice, three times against the marble pad. Each time the ring connected with the marble, a hollow, ominous knock echoed through the jungle. Rose held her breath, suspecting she wasn’t the only one, and waited. And waited. And waited.

After a full thirty seconds of counting heartbeats while exchanging furtive glances, the crew heaved a simultaneous, disappointed sigh.

“I told you so,” Jayne said.

No sooner had the tinker spoken than a great rumble rolled from the door. The trees shook. The ground shivered. Rose grabbed a surprised Gabriella by the shoulders, lurching away from the door. Vines snapped. Tree roots shattered. A wave of birds crested across the clearing in search of safer climes.

When the shuddering and shaking was over, the door stood wide open.

“A knock!” Jayne shouted. “Why would he set it up to open with just a knock?”

“You have to admit, it was a very polite knock.”

Every woman turned to Click, because the voice they just heard was distinctly male. Although it sounded like the kind of lighthearted observation the native would make, it lacked his strange accent.

“Wasn’t me, loves,” Click said, answering their unspoken question.

They each turned back to the open maw.

“Please, come in,” the stranger said.

## Chapter 4

### *Loyalty and Liberty*

*In which we meet our host, and make an unexpected friend.*

Within moments of the mysterious voice beckoning them inside, Jax and Magpie whipped out a pair of matching sabers. The captain suddenly sported a blunderbuss of impressive size, while her cabin boy bore a dagger. Jayne held aloft a small weapon that was obviously her own design—a foot long tube of metal covered in wires and cogs with a barrel full of sharp shards of scrap metal.

It took a moment for Gabriella to realize that she was the only one empty handed.

The crew of the Widow fell into an arc formation around the unarmed Gabriella with the captain at the front. They held this arrangement for a few moments before the captain nodded at Jax.

“Come out, with hands where we can see them!” Jax shouted.

“Please,” the stranger begged from beyond the dark opening. “Lower your weapons and come inside. No harm will come to you. I promise, I’m unarmed.”

“Likely story,” Jax whispered. “Mysterious voice beckons us into the dark. No, thank you.”

“Does he think we’re stupid?” Jayne asked in a low voice.

Gabriella didn’t think the voice sounded mysterious at all. She thought it sounded warm, inviting, and somehow familiar. It was the kind of voice she could listen to for a very long time, growing neither bored nor tired of it. This thought made her smile. She noticed that she wasn’t the only one smiling. Click grinned wide, as though he was enjoying the whole thing. Who knew what the heathen thought of the proceedings? Gabriella never understood the native’s weird ways.

“Who are you?” the captain called out.

“I should probably ask the same of you,” the stranger answered.

“What do you want?” Jax asked.

“Again,” the stranger said, “I believe that is my rightful question.”

“Where are you?” the captain asked.

“I’m where you want to be,” the stranger said.

The captain closed her eyes. Gabriella could only guess that she was weighing her options. What choice did they have?

“You can either lower your weapons,” the man said, “and come in, or I can close the door, leaving you locked outside. You’re free to try to get inside for another forty-seven minutes, nineteen seconds and ten milliseconds, or you can join me now. Which will it be?”

The two parties were at an impasse. The crew was unwilling to trust the stranger enough to lower their weapons, while the stranger was unwilling to join them in the clearing. Surely the man would close the door again. Gabriella knew a simple knock wouldn’t reopen it this time. The

entire trip would have been a waste, the crew would lose yet another job, and even worse than that, Gabriella would have to go home. Unwilling to face that fate just yet, she knew she had to do something desperate.

Drawing a deep breath, Gabriella ducked between the shoulders of Jax and Click, pushing her way past the crew, daring to step away from the safety of the group. She made her way toward the opening, intent on showing the rest of the crew what she already suspected—that the stranger wasn't going to harm them. Gasps and shouts rose from behind her.

"Guppy!" the captain shouted over the crew's outburst. "Stop right there, little missy. That's an order."

Gabriella came to a halt just outside the opening. She narrowed her eyes at the wide doorway, silently begging the stranger for help. When none seemed on its way, she turned to the crew again, swallowing hard before she said, "Captain, I don't think he means us any harm."

Keeping her gun trained on the dark passage, the captain locked eyes with Gabriella. "Get back over here. Now."

Gabriella didn't want to get back over there. She wanted to dash down to the opening, find the owner of the voice, and continue her fabulous adventure. Yet she couldn't bring herself to disobey her captain. "I know it sounds crazy, sir, but I feel like we can trust him."

"Jax trusts no one," Jax said.

"I think she's right," Click said.

"You think everyone is right," Jax snapped.

"I do not," Click argued. "I just think our stranger has an honest voice."

Strengthened by the upsurge of partial unity, Gabriella tried again. "Captain, please. We might not find another way in. He promised not to hurt us."

"Kid's got a point, Cap," Magpie said. "He does sound sort of, I don't know, polite?"

A ghost of a grin flickered across the captain's lips for a moment before she gave Gabriella a single, short nod. "Lower your weapons." She lowered her own gun. She motioned for Click to sheath his blade.

"Captain, I don't think—" Jax said.

"I said lower your weapons," the captain repeated.

Jax did so with a grunt. She glared at Gabriella.

"Excellent," the stranger said. "Now that we're planning on acting like civilized beings, perhaps you would like to join me for a cup of tea?"

The captain motioned the crew forward. They stepped into the opening. When they crossed the threshold, the door rumbled back to its closed position. Jax tried to prop it open with her blade, but the weight of the door snapped the tempered steel in two before it swallowed the last of the daylight. Now they stood in the cool of the darkness, one weapon less than before.

"Don't worry," the stranger said. "You are free to leave at any time. Just say the word and I'll reopen it for you."



"Then open again," Jax growled.

"So soon?" He chuckled softly. "No. I don't think your captain is ready to go just yet. Now, let your eyes adjust and come to the end of the hall when you are ready. I shall be waiting for you."

"Adjust?" Magpie scoffed. "To what? The blackness or the total darkness?"

After a few moments, Gabriella realized it wasn't total darkness at all. A soft glow along the walls lit what appeared to be a hallway. She ran her fingers over the spongy, damp glow

"Phosphorescent moss," Jayne explained.

"Captain," Jax said. "Are you sure this is wisest course of actions?"

The captain seemed to ignore the question. Instead, she strode with her head held high to the hallway's end. She looked over her shoulder at the crew. "Shall I collect Ruby's money alone?"

The crew quickly fell in line behind her.

The hallway emptied into a foyer, complete with an umbrella stand and boot scraper, both of which were rusted with age. A small bench stood in one corner, looking like a single touch would cause its collapse. Another closed door lay across from the entrance. Before the captain could reach it, the door gave a click. It swung wide, welcoming the party further inside. They followed through to a receiving room.

Here, the furniture was also tattered. Dilapidated curtains hung from bricked up windows. The carpet was bald in arching paths around the room. Aside from the wear and tear, the room itself was very neat, lit by the glow of a roaring fireplace. Gabriella looked around in wonder. This was not what she'd expected to find in the middle of the wild jungle.

Then again, nothing could have prepared her for what she saw next.

Standing beside the fireplace, with one arm propped against the mantle and the other hand thrust into his jacket pocket, was the handsomest man Gabriella had seen in her life. He was tall, even taller than Click. An amber wave of short locks spilled from his crown, giving him the appearance of a halo in the low light of the room. Flickering shadows danced across his regal face, showing pale marble features, he had a broad, prominent brow, a stout, bold chin, and a commanding, yet still quite kissable mouth. The handsomest thing about the man was his eyes. The color of polished copper, the man's eyes shone bright and friendly, with a hint of the mysterious and mischievous echoing from deep within. Gabriella thought they were the kind of eyes that could pierce a woman to her very soul.

Gabriella looked down at her filthy brown uniform. She worried at the grime under her unkempt nails. She was a mess. What she wouldn't give for one of her finer dresses right now. To have her hair done in a proper way. Her nails buffed to a shine. She hated to think it, but her mother was right. One never got a second chance at first impressions. Even in the tropical wild!

So, unwilling to face the young man, Gabriella hid behind Magpie.

"Finally," the stranger said. "It is so good to have company."

"What are you doing here?" the captain asked. Her hand wandered to her gun.

"Please," the man said. "There is no need to draw your weapons. You can see I am unarmed." He stood straight, spread his arms wide, turning in place. He then held out his empty palms. Gabriella noticed that one hand was bare while the other was hidden beneath a crisp, white glove. "Certainly you are not afraid of me?"

"I fear no man," Jax snarled. "It is you who should fear me!"

"Jax," the captain scolded.

Jax crossed her arms, adopting one of her many scowls.

"You're obviously a skilled warrior," the man said. "I must admit that yes, I am afraid of you." He spread his hands apart again before he bowed.

Jax furrowed her brow at first. This was soon followed by a half grin and nod at the stranger. "That's more like it."

"Who are you?" the captain asked.

The stranger returned to his full height while clucking his tongue. "Where are my manners? I'm sorry, these years of solitude have left me clumsy as an ox." He stepped forward, offering a hand to the captain. "I'm Atom Loquacious."

\* \* \* \*

"I don't understand," Rose said. As she shook the man's hand, the rest of the crew exchanged confused glances. The stranger was an unexpected surprise in the wild of the jungle, especially since the laboratory was supposed to be deserted. What was even more surprising was his graceful charm. Not to mention the fact that he seemed glad to see them.

"It's rather simple," the man said, pumping her arm for all it was worth. "Atom with a t and an o. Like the eye of the nucleus, not like the first man."

"Not that," Rose said after he released her hand. "I'm sorry if we're intruding. We didn't expect you to be here, Doctor."

"Captain," Jayne said. "This man isn't Doctor Loquacious. He's too young for starters."

"I'm afraid she's right," Atom said. "I'm no doctor."

"But your surname," Rose said. "Just who are you, exactly?"

The man looked to the ceiling for a moment, as if unsure of how to answer the question, before he settled back into a broad grin. "I think the easiest explanation would be that Doctor Loquacious is my father."

"Impossible," Jayne snapped. "Doctor Loquacious didn't have any children."

"That as it may be, it really is the best explanation I can offer," Atom insisted.

"Sounds like son of mad scientist," Jax said. "Talks in circles, like Jayne."

Jayne snorted at the remark, but kept quiet.

"If you aren't the doc," Click said, "why hang around here?"

"I'm under strict orders not to leave the laboratory," the young man explained.

"Mr. Loquacious," Rose said.

"Please, call me Atom, Captain."

Rose couldn't help her smile. It wasn't often that she was offered her correct title, much less by a complete stranger. She was still very wary of the man, though she suspected that wouldn't last long under his silver tongue and agreeable humor.

"You are the captain of that glorious airship? Yes?" he asked.

Rose nodded, silenced by his flattery.

"And this is your wonderful crew?" he asked.

"Right again," Rose said.

To everyone's surprise, Atom pointed to each member of the crew, correctly identifying them. "The tall one is Jax, yes? Then there is Magpie, and Jayne. And you, my friend, must be Click. It is so wonderful to meet all of you. Please have a seat. Make yourselves comfortable."

"Too right," Click said, making for the sofa.

Rose grabbed him by the arm to stop the native from making himself at home. She shook her head, trying to free the disjointed feeling Atom's naming act had given her before she lifted a finger at the man. "How do you know who we are?"

"Because I've been watching you since you departed the ship. There is one more among you? A Guppy? The young woman who worked out the door puzzle, yes?" He narrowed his eyes while he walked around the room, scanning the crew.

"What puzzle?" Jayne snapped. "That wasn't a puzzle. It was a joke."

"Captain, I'm not liking the sound of this," Jax complained.

"What do you mean you've been watching us?" Rose asked.

"Ah ha!" Atom shouted over them. He stopped before Magpie and bowed nearly to the ground before he said, "Madam, I am honored to make your acquaintance."

"Ain't you just the bee's knees?" Magpie asked. Over her shoulder, she added, "Guppy, honey, as much as I'd love to be the object of such affection, I think he means you." The large woman stepped to one side, exposing a trembling Gabriella.

Atom rose from his bow, and as soon as his gaze fell upon the young woman, he went quiet. Where he was a whirlwind of words a moment ago, he was now graveyard silent. He stood stone still, staring at Gabriella. She stood just as still, staring right back.

Neither spoke.

Neither moved.

After several seconds of nothingness, Rose cleared her throat. "Atom," she said, "this is Gabriella Upstairs."

"Gabriella," he echoed.

Gabriella smiled at the sound of her name on his lips.

Rose recognized the smile for what it was. She dragged the child halfway across the world to teach her some independence, and the kid had to go and fall for some lunatic living in an abandoned laboratory. What would she tell Daniel?

Everyone seemed caught up in the chemistry between the pair. They stood in silence, watching Atom hold out his hand, while Gabriella placed her fingers into his open palm. Atom lifted them to his lips, grazing them gently before he looked back to her face again.

“Gabriella,” he repeated. “The feminine of Gabriel?”

“Yes,” Gabriella said.

“Like the angel?”

Gabriella nodded.

“Are you an angel?” he asked. His eyes twinkled with unspeakable affection.

Gabriella giggled.

“For heaven’s sake!” Jayne shouted, clearly the only one unmoved by the touching scene. “She’s no angel. She’s just a spoiled little rich girl.”

Gabriella snatched her hand away from him before she went bright red from cheek to cheek.

Atom took on a severe look while he dipped his head. “I apologize if I made you uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t,” Magpie said. She shot Jayne a burning look. Rose wanted to applaud Magpie for her defense of Guppy. She knew the woman felt motherly toward the girl as they all did, but Magpie had taken the role to heart.

“Mr. Loquacious,” Rose said.

“Atom,” he corrected her while he raised his face to Gabriella again.

“Yes.” Rose sighed. “Please, let’s get back to the matter at hand.”

“Which is?” Atom asked, his eyes never leaving the blushing Gabriella.

“Tell us how were you watching us from all the way in here?” Rose demanded.

Atom finally turned to face Rose. “I can do better than that. I’ll show you.”

## Chapter 5

### *Interlude at the Red House*

*In which we have a moment alone with our antagonist.*

Never send a man to do a woman's job. That had been Ruby's first mistake.

No, she thought while she tightened the straps on the counselor's wrists. Her first mistake was choosing a second rate group of weak willed cronies with no ability to follow-through. Sure, they had killed the president, but little good it did. A new figurehead was in place within hours, and the country ticked on. A little sadder, yet none the worse for wear. All because that two bit hired hand panicked at the last moment, running instead of completing the entire plan.

This time she was sure to succeed. No more toying with political intrigue or long term schemes. All she needed was the product of one mad mind—Doctor Loquacious's last great work. A weapon of unfathomable destruction. Of unimaginable devastation. Then she would have ultimate control.

The counselor groaned when she slipped the last cuff into place. Ruby ran a hand down the man's chest, past his belly, pausing to grope his cock for the briefest of moments, teasing him into an even harder state. Her mind continued to wander while she fondled and stroked him. She should've had the entire country in her hands by now, or perhaps, the entire world. Instead, here she was with another handful of what amounted to the brains of this nation! Enraged by the thought, she brought her other hand down, open palmed, on the man's thigh. The snap of flesh on flesh echoed through the bedchamber.

"Oh, Ruby," the counselor groaned while he pulled against the restraints. "You always know how to hurt me just right."

"Shut up, Garrison," Ruby snapped.

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled wistfully at her, his cock twitching as if nodding in assent.

Ruby slipped off the edge of the silk bed sheet, leaving the naked man alone for a moment while she went to her table of implements. She eyed the cat o' nine tails, the various paddles, the feathers, the oils, the leather straps, and the cotton gags. There was nothing that could cause pertinent markings, nothing that would leave a lasting result.

"What will it be today, Ruby?" the counselor asked.

"Whatever I please," she answered.

"Of course," he said. "But if you favor the crop, I wouldn't mind. Just so you know, I am willing to include a generous tip."

She snatched up the leather riding crop with an aggravated huff. Plans for world domination were expensive, so Ruby made her money by the only means she knew. In some ways, it amused her that the very powers that be were unconsciously funding their own destruction by visiting her

little bordello. Ruby cracked the air with the crop, sneering when the man whimpered in delight. She turned back to him before she allowed a small smile to surface. The man was at her mercy, rock hard, ready for his weekly lesson.

Soon she would have the doctor's weapon, then the entire nation would be at her mercy. Then she would take great pleasure in teaching everyone who was in charge. Ruby supposed it both grated and relived her that Booth took the fall for the assassination. The nation may not yet appreciate her brilliance, but at least she had been far enough from the eye of the storm to escape unscathed when it went to hell. Snapping the crop against her naked thigh, Ruby relished the pain matched by the burning reminder of her failure.

"Are you okay, Ruby?" the counselor asked. "You seem like you're somewhere else?"

"Nonsense," she lied. "How could I be anywhere else when you're here?"

The counselor smiled wide.

"Are you ready for your lesson?" she asked her client.

"Yes!" he shouted. "Teach me! Teach me so hard!"

Ruby looked at the ceiling before she slinked back toward the bed. The counselor drooled. He was all bug-eyed and open mouthed at the hourglass cinch of the lacey corset and thin panties. She paused to snap the crop again. The counselor shivered in what she knew to be anticipation. They had played this game so many times, Ruby knew his every emotion, could predict his every response. Unlike her, the counselor was unable to hide his true reactions, his real feelings. It was a weakness she despised. Ruby crawled onto the foot of the bed, easing her way up the restrained man's body. She paused to smack his feet with the crop, then his calves, until she loomed over his hard manhood. She pinned his legs under her, sitting on his knees while she leaned over him.

"Now," she said, "what do you say?"

"Please?" he begged.

Ruby slapped his right hip with the crop. "You know better than that."

"Please suck my cock," he begged. A pearl of desire oozed from the tip of his waiting steel.

Ruby brought the crop down with a loud crack against the man's left hip. He groaned and shuddered.

"Louder!" she screamed.

"Please suck my cock!" he yelled.

She struck him again. He yelled the phrase even louder. She worked the crop from hip to hip until each side of his waist was the color of her namesake. All the while, the high paid lawyer screamed, begging for her to take him into her mouth. To suckle him. To stroke him. To please him.

After a few measly minutes of this, the man was done with the game. He didn't have to say it. Ruby recognized that broken point in him. His pitiful squirming and shifting beneath her illustrated his vulnerability. She was never surprised by how frail people were. Her own limits were much higher. Much stronger.

"Please, Ruby," he said, on the verge of tears. "I can't take anymore."

Ruby nudged his quivering cock with the crop. "I don't know..."

"Please, for the love of all that is holy, woman. Just let me come already!"

Ruby smiled when the blasphemy rolled from the counselor's lips. She leaned in to engulf the man's shaft all in one swoop. When the head of his cock touched the back of her throat, he gave a mighty yell and tensed from head to toe. Ruby closed her eyes while his hot need rushed to fill her mouth. She swallowed it all. After a few spurts, a few grunts, and the counselor was done. Ruby pulled away with an audible pop.

"Oh, Ruby," he said in a weak voice. "That was amazing, as usual."

"Yes," she agreed. She reached behind her to pull free the pitiful excuse for restraints.

"Let me make love to you," he said.

Ruby shook her head. "Not today."

"I want you. I need you."

"No."

"Please, Ruby. I want to make you as happy as you always make me."

Ruby eyed him. The only way a man like the counselor could ever make her happy was if he got down on bended knee to swear his fealty to her. She imagined he would do just that and more, some day. Today was not the day to find out. That day would come soon enough. When she freed his wrists, he reached up, pulling her into his arms. He buried his face into her cleavage.

"I could give you such pleasure," he murmured, his breath warm on her breasts.

"I'm sure your wife would appreciate that."

The counselor's body stiffened at her words. He lifted his head until he was eye to eye with her. He furrowed his brow, as if hurt. "Why are you so cruel?"

"Because you pay me to be. Now get dressed, Garrison, I have another client in an hour."

While the counselor dressed, Ruby glanced at the meeting notes he had brought to her. She could hardly wait to inspect them closer, to see if there was anything useful said behind closed doors this week. Later she would add them to her ever growing collection of White House transcriptions.

"That last page has all the names of the candidates for the next election," the counselor said.

"That's years off," she said, then almost bit her tongue in two. It never paid to let on how much she understood about what was going on. Better he assumed her interest was a hobby and nothing more.

Thankfully, the counselor seemed oblivious to her understanding. "Things move fast in the political arena." He waved his undone tie at her.

"I can't thank you enough for the notes," she cooed while she worked his tie into place.

"No problem." He cocked his head at her, clearly amused. "I admire a woman who takes interest in politics. It's...well, it's downright charming."

Ruby's nostrils flared at the insult, but she held her tongue. "Some of us women just like to know what the great men in our nation are up to. That's all. Again, thank you for the notes. I know you risk so much getting them to me."

He caught her up in his arms again. “Ruby, honey. I would risk just about anything for you.” He pushed his lips to hers.

Ruby smiled under his sloppy kiss. That kind of submission was what she liked to hear. “I know. I’ll see you next week.”

The counselor nodded, then left her alone so he could return to his wife, his job, and the pathetic play he called a life. While she watched him go, she mused on how everyone was, at heart, just an actor. Some people just understood their place on the stage better than others while some changed their parts as readily as clothes. Ruby had been disappointed by more than one performance in the past. This time she had chosen her actors more wisely, giving them each such suitable roles.

Like Bloody Rose Madigan and her crew of merry widows.

Ruby returned to her bed, smiling at her own ingenuity. Hiring the all female crew to retrieve the weapon was a stroke of brilliance in this new scheme. Ruby needed Doctor Loquacious’s invention, Rose Madigan needed work. One hand washed the other, and the men of the world were none the wiser. So what if they were? What was more innocuous than an airship crew of women? Who would suspect they carried cargo that would change the very power structure of the world?

A weapon so powerful that it could level an entire city in less than a minute.

The very idea of it made her want to come. Ruby dropped down to her bed, spreading her legs for her own satisfaction. She ran her hand under the triangle of fabric that covered her dripping sex. Closing her eyes, she envisioned a new America with her at the head. The promise of power was the only thing that could ever satisfy her. Her fingers fluttered over her slick clit. She groaned at the thought of the weapon, and how close she was to ultimate control. When her orgasm came, she rode it slow, trying to hang onto the high for as long as she could. Then it was over. She was back in her bedchamber, just another whore ready to turn her next trick.

Ruby clutched herself with a sigh while visions of world domination danced in her black heart.



## Chapter 6

### *Open Arms, Empty Arms*

*In which we find the laboratory as vacant as our coffers.*

In the low lamp light of the laboratory, Rose squinted at the massive mirror mounted on the stand. Before her was the image of The Merry Widow, tethered to the beach almost five miles away. Rose tapped the glass before she shook her head again. "I don't understand how it works."

"It's very simple," Jayne and Atom said simultaneously.

Atom motioned for Jayne to continue.

Jayne seemed unmoved by his gesture, as though she expected nothing less from him. "Smaller mirrors are arranged all over the island, each one pointed at the other, until their images reach the end point here at the lab." Jayne motioned to the series of lenses, ranging from a few inches to a full foot across, which hovered just over the mirror. "With the magnifying lenses, he can pinpoint the section he wishes to see and amplify it, thus eliminating the stacked image effect that multiple reflections are known to cause."

"You're very correct and very clever," Atom said.

"I know," Jayne said. "I feel it's only fair to admit that I've seen it in action before."

"Where?" Atom asked.

"The Orthinological Society in Atlanta employs a similar system to keep up with the bird's mating habits without intrusion. I believe it was Doctor Loquacious who set that one up also."

"You seem to know a lot about the doctor."

"Yes, I...did a dissertation on him. When I was..." Jayne paused, looking to Rose before she added, "In school."

"Ah," Atom said. "An educated woman. Excellent! Tell me, what university did you attend?"

Jayne's guarded look melted into panic. Like the rest of the crew, Jayne was on the run from a sordid past. One which, unlike the rest of the crew, she didn't care to discuss.

Rose came to the young tinker's rescue. "How many of these are on the island?"

"About fifty or so. I can adjust the main receiver to pick up five distinct reflective patterns." Atom pushed the brass stand with his gloved hand. The whole frame swiveled in response while the image on the glass changed to some non-descript part of the jungle. "It was sheer luck that you just happened to stay right in my path most of the way." He stopped to eye Gabriella, who blushed again before she looked away. Atom added with a whisper, "Luck or fate."

Magpie leaned in close to whisper, "Actually, Captain, I'm thinking that map is based off the course of these mirrors."

"Makes sense," Rose said in a low voice. "It would explain the roundabout path to get here." Rose wondered if Atom had witnessed her rendezvous with the wild side of Click. She decided there was no use worrying over it. Besides, she had to admit it was kind of exciting to think someone had watched them make love. From the grin on Click's face, she knew he was thinking the same thing.

"Names," Jax said. Her voice sounded flat and commanding in the nearly empty room.

"I'm sorry?" Atom asked.

"How did you know our names?" Jax asked.

"Good question," Rose concurred, narrowing her eyes at Atom.

"Isn't it obvious?" Atom asked. He looked to Jayne for an answer. She just shrugged.

Rose shook her head.

Atom smiled again. "You stood outside my home and shouted them at each other for almost an hour."

Rose groaned. *Some captain I make.*

"Atom?" Rose asked. "What are you doing here? When we set out on this venture we were informed that this laboratory was abandoned." She felt strange asking because in all sense of the word, it was abandoned. Whereas the living quarters were well lived in, there was nothing at all in the lab. Not a single retort. Not a single beaker. Not a single note or other scrap of paper. The enormous place was empty save for the mirrored device.

"I've been his lab assistant for years," Atom said. "One day he came to me and said he had to go, that I was to stay until he returned. He left. So here I wait."

"Did he say where he was going?" Jayne asked.

"I didn't think to ask."

"You haven't heard from him since?" Rose asked.

Atom narrowed his eyes. "Didn't he send you?"

"I'm afraid not," Rose said. She bit her lip while looking at Click.

"Bad news, my friend," Click said. "No one has seen your papa for a long time."

"I don't understand," Atom said.

"He's missing," Rose said.

"Missing?" Atom cocked his head.

"And..." Rose paused, not wanting to finish the thought. "And presumed dead."

"Oh," Atom said. "I see." He slumped into a chair and hung his head, falling quiet.

Rose felt bad for the young man, whether he was the doctor's son or not. She didn't expect to have to deliver such awful news to anyone, let alone a possible relative. Gabriella seemed just as pained by the news, edging toward Atom to pat him on the back. Atom looked up at the young girl. Even in his sudden grief, he still had a smile for Gabriella. It was sickeningly sweet. Magpie gestured for Rose's attention. Rose signaled for Jax and Click to join them, leaving Jayne to ponder the mirror, and Gabriella to comfort Atom.

Magpie pulled Rose aside and whispered, "Cap, I think it might be best if we mosey on back. I do believe that the doctor cleaned house before he bolted. I doubt there's anything of value left."

"I was afraid of that," Rose said. "Maybe we'll get lucky and Ruby will at least pay for the fuel. Eh?"

Magpie and Jax looked doubtful.

Rose didn't blame them. She nodded to Atom. "So, what about our gentleman here? Do you think he's telling the truth? I mean is he who he says he is?"

Magpie eyed the distraught man. She shrugged. "Maybe. He seems sincere enough. He's certainly brainy enough. I ain't seen someone give Jayne a run for her money like that in a long time."

"Yes, but cleverness doesn't mean he's the son of Loquacious," Rose said.

"True," Click said. "Why would the man lie about such a thing?"

"We should take him with us," Jax suggested.

The other three stared open mouthed at her.

Jax shrugged. "What? He has sharp mind and a good grip. Not to mention he just lost his father. Bad time for anyone to be left alone."

"I see," Rose said. "What about you two?"

"I have to agree, Cap," Magpie said. "He seems like a nice enough guy. I'd hate to leave him here waiting for someone who might never return."

Click added, "I think he seems taken with Guppy."

"Then maybe," Jayne said, joining the discussion, "it's not such a good idea to bring him aboard."

"Jealous?" Jax asked.

"No," Jayne said. "I just think he would distract our debutante from what little work she manages to get done. Besides, I think he's a bit off his toast. What's with the one glove? I mean, really. Who wears just one glove?"

"Maybe," Magpie said, "he has a grotesque scar that he doesn't like to show."

Jayne fell quiet at the remark.

"Everyone in favor of giving Atom a ride back to the mainland?" Rose asked.

Click, Magpie, and Jax raised their hands.

"Any against?" Rose asked, looking to Jayne.

"Mark my words," Jayne said, "he'll bring nothing but trouble." She shook her head, stalking away.

"I was wrong," Jax said.

Rose raised an eyebrow in question.

"She's not just jealous," Jax said. "She's very, very jealous."

Rose couldn't agree more.

\* \* \* \*

Atom Loquacious was the stuff of dreams.

Erotic dreams.

Gabriella blushed as she shuddered at the racy thought. He was handsome, charming, clever, and simply wonderful. She had never met someone who made her feel both comfortable yet flustered at the same time. She wondered what had her so upset about the man. She knew it wasn't love because her mother had been very clear on how love worked.

Love, her mother told her, was the careful arrangement of a prosperous union. It was the willingness to overlook one's own needs in favor of her future husband's, because, after all, he was to be a lifetime of security. Love meant putting aside childish things, including her abacus, while taking on the roles of mother, maid, and mistress. Love was the necessity of allowing the body to be ravaged by a husband's animal lusts, then by the bearing of the children such acts were meant to bring. Love had nothing to do with affection, desires or any feelings whatsoever. Love, in a word, was work. A woman had to work at love to make it succeed.

Yet the way Gabriella felt about Atom wasn't work. It came easy. Natural. Even though she had just met the man, she got the feeling that Atom Loquacious would simply be too easy to love. So logic dictated that it was anything but love. She wondered what that left.

"I'm sorry about your father," she said while she stroked Atom's back.

She wanted to say more. Her tongue tripped her words before they left her lips. She also wanted to do more than just stand here and pat his back. That's what scared her the most. Even a week before the wedding, she had been happy with just a nightly kiss from Thomas. Yet this man ignited something deep within her. Just his presence set her soul aflame. She knew a simple kiss wouldn't be enough to quench it.

Atom flashed her a weak smile. Gabriella's stomach fluttered at the sight. Her yearn burned deeper.

"It's okay," he said. "I supposed I should have guessed as much. I've been waiting here for him for five years."

"Five years?" Gabriella repeated in surprise. "You've been living alone here for five years?"

Atom nodded. "He said he would return. He said to wait..." He lowered his head, the words trailed off into mumbling.

"You poor thing," Gabriella said. She patted the back of his hand.

Atom rolled his palm upward, catching her fingers in his own. Gabriella froze, unsure of what he would do next. She shot a glance to the rest of the crew, who were raising their hands as if in vote. When she looked back at Atom, he was clutching her hand to his chest, staring up at her with a profound look of sorrow.

"Why would he just abandon me? Why would he just leave me here?" His copper eyes glistened with the threat of tears.

"Maybe he didn't," Gabriella said.

Atom narrowed his eyes at her.

"Maybe he intended to return, but couldn't," she explained.

"So you're saying he might be out there?"

Gabriella didn't know what she was saying. She just knew she wanted Atom to smile again. If the idea that his father was somewhere out there made him happy, then so be it.

"That he might be in need of help?" Atom asked.

"Well, maybe not—" Gabriella started.

"Then I have to find him," Atom said over her.

Gabriella worried that she may have pushed the idea too far. Atom smiled and her worried thoughts faded behind the sound of her thumping heart.

"You're right. I have to find him," Atom repeated. He squeezed Gabriella's hand before he released it. "Captain?"

"Yes?" the captain answered.

"I would like to hire your crew," Atom said.

The captain lifted a brow at the man, then shot a look at Gabriella that chilled her to the bone. Gabriella swallowed hard, lifting her shoulders in a sign of unsure denial.

"Of course when you are finished with your current labor, I mean," he said.

The captain continued to eye him in silence.

"I realize that you might need an advance," Atom said. "I have a little bit of money here with me, but I promise that when we reach our goal there will be a reward greater than money could ever buy. That of saving a human life."

"What would you have us do? Exactly?" the captain asked.

"I have to find my father," he explained. "If what you say is true, then he's in trouble. He needs our help."

"I don't want to seem like a doomsayer, but people have been looking for him for years. What makes you think we will have any better luck?"

"It's meant to be. Your magnificent airship. My overwhelming need. Your crew's sudden appearance. Don't you see? This has the kiss of kismet all over it."

"Is very coincidental, Captain," Jax said. "Perhaps is destiny?"

Gabriella was surprised to hear that Jax believed in anything beyond her blade or fists. Or cooking pot.

"I think you should know," the captain said, "we didn't just come here by chance. We were sent here. I'm almost ashamed to say why."

Atom would have none of it. He waved his hands in the air, dismissing her argument. "Nonsense. It doesn't matter what brought you here. The fact remains that you *are* here. Now please, will you take my offer?"

"Yes," Jayne said. Everyone turned, surprised by her sudden outburst. "Captain, you have to say yes. Doctor Loquacious is a national treasure. If he is in trouble he should be rescued."

"Great, now it's a rescue mission," the captain said.

“Captain,” Magpie said. “We ain’t got much else on the burner. We could certainly use the money.”

The captain turned back to Atom with a sigh. “I’ll tell you what. We’ve decided to offer you transportation back to the mainland. The trip will take a few days. When you get there you should seek out someone professional to handle your problem.”

“I don’t want anyone else—” the man started.

The captain raised her hand. Atom fell quiet. “We are a delivery service, Mr. Loquacious. Not a detective agency. Not bounty hunters. Now, do you want the ride or not?”

Gabriella wanted to be angry with the captain for turning the work down. She supposed she understood where the woman was coming from. How did you look for a man who didn’t want to be found? Especially one who had abandoned his own son in an effort to remain hidden. The idea of it was heartbreaking. It was also familiar because she had abandoned her entire family in pursuit of her own happiness. Gabriella pushed the idea away before her guilt could bring forth tears. Instead, she placed a hand on Atom’s shoulder.

“The captain knows what’s best,” she whispered. “She’s never failed me.”

“As you wish, Captain,” he said. “I’ll pay for my fare of course.”

“That’s not necessary,” the captain said.

“I insist,” Atom said.

“You people are going to drive me absolutely mad one of these days.” The captain sighed again, running her hands through her thick hair. “Suit yourself, Mr. Loquacious. I’ll never have it said that I turned down a fare. You have an hour to gather your things. The rest of you fall in and prepare to return to the ship. We need to get back before Dot thinks the jungle swallowed us all.”

## Chapter 7

### *Lovers, Liars and Lessons in Linguistics*

*In which we are waylaid by unexpected events, and Atom shows his true nature.*

By the time they made for their return, night had fallen, hard. The jungle canopy left the route back to the ship black as pitch. The crew had sense enough to bring a number of lanterns, but the jaws of the jungle devoured the light the moment it left the lamp. They traveled in a few tight circles, painstakingly slow.

Atom traveled light. Too light for Rose's tastes. He packed his entire life into a single rucksack, the contents of which seemed to weigh nothing with the way he carted it with ease. He also eyed Gabriella in a worrisome way. Rose didn't mind the idea of the young girl falling in love with the stranger, but Atom's smoldering looks made even Rose's blood boil with desire. She could only imagine what it did to the virgin in Gabriella.

Rose smiled when she thought of the workout Click was going to get when they got back to the Widow.

"You want him," Click whispered.

"What?" Rose whispered with a start. "Don't be silly."

"Of course you do, my captain." He shot a quick glance backward. "I can't blame you. He has a certain charisma. A certain charm. And he's not half bad looking. Not as handsome as me, but then again, who is?"

Rose shoved an elbow into Click's side. He reacted with a comical gasp and fake stagger.

"You two okay?" Magpie called out. She traveled with Jayne at the back of the line. Jax traveled ahead—alone.

"Good," Rose said, then laughed. "We're good."

"Yes, we are," Click said, wrapping his arm around her waist.

She shrugged him off, and then glanced over her shoulder to the puddle of light that glowed around Atom and Gabriella who were just behind her. The couple walked closely, whispering what were sure to be sweet nothings, but the pair never touched more than hands. Rose smiled again, charmed by Gabriella's chasteness. She remembered her first date with Daniel. How he planted a single, nervous kiss on the back of her hand before she closed the door on him. Rose hoped that Atom wouldn't push the girl too far, or too fast.

"What's on your mind?" Click asked.

"I was just thinking about us," Rose said in a low voice. "How quickly you got me between the sheets. I must've seemed like such a wanton slut."

"You? Never. Why, it took almost a whole bleeding month."

Rose missed a step out of surprise. “What? Have you forgotten so quickly, you rogue? As I recall, I fell into your arms in two days. Three tops.”

“My arms, yes,” Click said. His grin spread wide. “But it was nearly a month before I had you on a proper bed, my captain.”

Rose laughed aloud before she could muffle the sound with her hands.

“I had you on the beach at first,” he continued in a teasing whisper. “Then the ship’s deck. Of course the ship’s railing. And there’s always your desk, my personal favorite, by the way.”

Rose chuckled while Click quietly recounted their experiences.

“Then there was the engine room. I think Jayne still suspects we had a tryst on her cogs and clockworks. Then there was the time I made a meal of you on the mess hall table. Then what...about...the...” Click’s voice trailed off. His steps slowed.

“Click?” Rose asked.

“Someone is watching us,” he whispered. He returned to his previously brisk pace. “Keep smiling and laughing.”

Rose had learned long ago to trust Click’s natural instinct for trouble. Aside from the fabulous sex, it was one of the main reasons she kept him around. She forced a high, tittering laugh before she asked, “Who is it?”

“I’m not sure.” He unsheathed his dagger, holding it low. “Keep walking. Don’t let on that we see them.”

She kept her pace with Click while freeing her gun. As casually as she could manage, she held it across her shoulder. She heard the murmur of the rest of the crew behind her, then the soft snick of blades unsheathing. Jax already bore a blade, having commandeered Magpie’s saber for her own, leaving the lookout with only a dagger and a long face.

“How far are we from the ship, Atom?” she asked.

“About a half a mile, Captain,” Atom said. “We should arrive at the beach head any moment.”

Without warning, Jax came to a halt. The blonde tilted her head to the left, then the right, as if listening for something only she could hear. She turned back to the crew, saw the drawn weapons, and nodded. Click lifted his hand to hold out four fingers. Jax smiled a wicked grin while she shook her head. She lifted both hands, raising eight fingers. Rose grimaced. Eight enemies lurked in the inky blackness, and the crew was still a half a mile from the ship.

“Huddle up,” Rose commanded. The crew gathered in a tight formation, each facing outward, each brandishing a weapon of some type. Except Atom. When Rose suggested that he might want to bring a weapon, that the wilds of the jungle at night were nothing to be gentle with, he balked.

“Weapons are the last bastion of the savage,” he had explained.

Rose wondered how he felt about weapons now.

“I thought this island was deserted,” Jayne said, aiming her homespun shrapnel gun into the trees.

“Atom?” Rose asked.



“Yes?” he answered.

“A little help here?”

“Oh. It must be the natives.”

“Natives? You didn’t say anything about natives.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“We didn’t see signs of anyone on our way in,” Gabriella whispered.

“Because they didn’t want us too,” Click said.

“Keep tight,” Jax said. “They’re on all sides now.”

“Cap?” Magpie asked. “What do you want us to do?”

Rose searched her mind for the best course of action. Could they outrun eight enemies in the dark of the jungle? Probably not. She knew her girls would rather die trying get back to the Widow as opposed to being taken captive. Just when she was about to give the order to make a break for it, the vines before her parted and a tall man stepped out.

Rose thought she was used to the idea of a wild island native, having shared a bed with one for so long now. Click had her spoiled with his obsession of modern technology and his yen for western ways. The stranger emerging from the darkness of the jungle was the genuine article. A real island native. He made Click look like a New England schoolboy by comparison.

The man stood at least seven feet tall. He had a series of winding tattoos all over his naked torso, arms and legs, similar to Click’s only more numerous. Even his face was a myriad of designs, with blocky swirls layered across his chin and cheeks. A series of thin white tubes laddered down each ear, piercing the cartilage. Each ended in a large hollow piece that stretched his lobes to an unbelievable degree. A similar white tube rested in the man’s nose, just above his upper lip. The man leaned against a long, sharp spear. Rose’s eye wandered down for the briefest moment. When she saw his unclothed loins, she snapped her eyes back to his wild grin.

The man grinned in silence at the crew for a moment, then grunted something in his native tongue. Seven similar spear-wielding natives emerged from the underbrush, surrounding the crew. The men stared at the intruders, but made no moves against them.

“Click?” Rose whispered.

Click said something to the tallest native, who cocked his head and listened, never losing his grin. When Click was done, the native said a few things in return. Click shook his head and furrowed his brow.

“No good, my captain,” he said. “Their dialect is too far from mine. It seems almost familiar, but then it slips away. I’m very sorry.”

“Great.” Rose turned back to the grinning native and smiled. Between her teeth she whispered, “Jax? Any ideas?”

“Yes,” Jax said. “I have idea there is more than what we see.”

“How many now?” Rose asked.

“I lost count after fifteen,” Jax admitted.

Rose groaned behind her smile. The tallest native, still grinning at her in return, motioned to his brethren and said a few words. He then looked back to Rose, made a wretched face that twisted his tattoos into hideous proportions while he pushed his tongue between his lips at her until it hung from his mouth like piece of dead beef.

She stared at his awful face, wondering what the gesture could possibly mean. A sharp pain bit at Rose's neck and she raised her hand to the spot, but before she could question the nature of the nip, her eyelids grew heavy, her legs buckled beneath her, and her world went black.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriella eyed Atom. He peered between the wooden bars of the cage at the flickering firelight and the shadows of the natives beyond. Pounding drums filled the jungle air. The wild call of their captors rose in the night. Looking back at the still form of the captain spread across Click's lap, Gabriella fought her lurching stomach for control of its contents. She wanted to be strong, to believe they could get out of this. Yet for the first time since she'd joined the crew of the Merry Widow, Gabriella was truly afraid for her life.

Turning back to Atom, she tapped his shoulder. He didn't respond. Gabriella peered at him, seeing that his attention was focused on the scene beyond their cage. She was fascinated as she stared at him. While he watched the natives in their vulgar celebration dance, his copper eyes followed the action at surprising speed. Occasionally his lips moved as if to speak, but he never said a word.

"Still not talking?" Magpie asked, sitting down beside Gabriella.

Gabriella shook her head.

"What did he say before he went like this?"

"He said he would get us out of this after he learned what it was all about. Then he just...I don't know, shut down. Oh, and he said to trust him." He had added something more affectionate at the end, but that wasn't any of Magpie's business.

"Trust him, huh?" Jayne asked from her post at the far end of the cage. "To what? Go mad on us?"

"Jayne," Magpie said. "That's enough."

"What?" Jayne asked. "It's not my fault her little boyfriend has lost his mind."

Gabriella gasped. "He's nothing of the sort."

"Sure," Jayne said. "It's a real shame you two won't have time to get better acquainted since he let us walk right into a trap."

"Jayne!" Magpie shouted. "I said that's enough."

A loud moan sounded between them.

"She's awake," Click said.

"Finally," Jayne said. "Someone with some sense."

The captain groaned again before she sat up. Looking around the cage, she rubbed her eyes, as if unsure of what she was seeing. She got to her feet and teetered for a moment before she fell into Click's arms.

"Please sit, my captain," he said, lowering her to the ground. "You still need rest."

The captain rubbed her neck. "Exits?"

"Not going to be simple," Magpie said. "The cage is tied to a whole bunch of weights with vines several inches thick. It'd take some pretty sharp blades to cut us out of this. Even if we could, there's a whole island of natives to deal with."

"What...hap..." the captain tried to say.

"Near as we can figure," Magpie said, "they hit us with some kind of drugged dart. We were out for about an hour. You've been down for nearly three."

The captain narrowed her eyes at Magpie.

"We think they hit you with more than one dart," Click said.

The captain raised an eyebrow.

"They must have seen you two as threats," Magpie said. She tipped her head to the opposite corner.

The captain swung her head around to Jax, who was still snoring in the far corner of the cage. "Her I understand. But why would they see me as more of a threat than anyone else?"

"It's the hair," Atom said.

Everyone turned to him. Gabriella was surprised to find him seated with his back to the cage, watching the rest of the crew curiously.

"The red hair." He motioned to Jayne, then Jax. "The blond and the white hair they have seen before on past visitors. But they have never seen that shade of red before. They think she's a demon of some kind."

Click sniggered under his hand. The captain cut him a harsh look.

"Atom?" Gabriella asked. She could hardly believe he was back from his self-induced trance, not to mention the fact that he was talking out of his mind.

"Yes, my angel?" he asked in a soft voice.

Gabriella's stomach fluttered at the sweet nickname.

"How do you know all of this?" Magpie asked.

"I'm afraid I owe you all an apology," he answered.

Jayne stood over him, jabbing her finger into his chest while she shouted, "You're damned right you do, You knew about those savages! Yet you let us walk around the jungle like nothing was wrong. This is all your fault."

Atom stared at Jayne for a moment as if unsure what she meant. "Oh, you think I had a hand in this? Please believe I assumed that you either knew about the natives or they didn't care about you because you made it all the way to the lab without being bothered by them."

"You say that like it's uncommon," the captain whispered.

"It is. Usually they attack anyone who lands on the beach. Sometimes they toy with visitors by letting them roam, but the natives end up slaughtering anyone within an hour of landing."

Click whistled low.

"Yes," Atom said. "As it turns out, I was wrong. They have been trailing you since you first set foot on the beach. I'm sorry for the miscalculation."

"Miscalculation?" Jayne asked with a huff. "You'd think with your own private peepshow spying on us all the way from the Widow, you'd have seen a bunch of spear wielding maniacs hot on our trail."

Atom lowered his gaze. "I should have, but I was...distracted. I don't get visitors very often." He returned his look to Gabriella, adding, "And never such beautiful ones."

"So," Magpie said, "if getting us all strung up by a bunch of barbarians ain't what you were planning on apologizing for, what is?"

"I lied," Atom said.

Gabriella started. A lie. He had known her for just a few hours and already he'd lied to her? "You lied?" she asked.

"Twice," he said.

"About?" the captain encouraged him.

"I didn't hear you outside the lab," he explained.

Jayne gasped in awe. "You read lips."

"Lip reading?" Click asked.

"He can make out what you're saying by the shape of your words when they leave your mouth," Magpie said.

Jayne snapped her mouth closed, robbed of the chance to explain. Gabriella enjoyed the rare sight.

"My cousin is deaf," Magpie explained. "It took him years to learn how, and even then, he ain't much good at it."

"I've never heard of such a thing," the captain said, her voice gaining some strength.

"It's an uncommon skill true," Atom said. "But I have always seemed able to do so. In fact, I have been watching our native friends out there, and I'm sorry to say that I know what they intend to do with us."

"Lip reading," the captain said. "Who knew that was even possible... Hey, wait! You understand them?"

Atom nodded.

"Then why didn't you say so when we were still free?" the captain asked.

"Because you didn't ask."

The captain groaned and fell back into Click's arms. "He's going to be the death of me."

Click chuckled. He gathered the captain close to him with such affection that it made Gabriella's heart swell to bursting.

"I may very well be," Atom admitted. "Because they have no intention of releasing us. In fact, there was mention of having us for a midnight snack."

"Great," the captain said. "Just how I want to leave this world. In the belly of that grinning maniac."

"You said you lied twice," Gabriella said.

Atom turned to her and sighed. "I'm so sorry, my angel. I never wanted to deceive you, but I didn't know what you would think of me otherwise." He pushed a stray hair from her face. "I'm still afraid you will hate me."

She trembled under his touch. "I could never hate you." She clutched his hand in her own, staring into his angelic eyes. They shared a brief smile.

"Just come out with it," Jayne said.

Atom frowned, his gaze never leaving Gabriella. "I'm armed."

The women all heaved a sigh. Gabriella furrowed her brow. She didn't understand what all the concern on his face was about.

"Geesh," Magpie said. "The way you were carrying on, I thought it was going to be something bigger."

Atom turned to Magpie with a solemn look. "You don't understand. I am armed. Even now."

"They left you with a weapon?" the captain asked, quicker than the others.

"Yes," Atom said.

"Let's have it then," Jayne said. "We might be able to get out of this yet."

Atom turned back to Gabriella. He laid a single trembling hand on her face. Her heart rose to her throat when he drew close to her ear and whispered, "Please promise that you will be honest with me. No pretense. I want the truth about how you feel after I show you this."

Gabriella smiled, yet had no idea why. She had never been more confused in her life. "I promise."

Atom let her go. He hung his head as he got to his feet. After undoing the buttons of his jacket, he slipped it off, leaving him in his vest and long-sleeved shirt. He held up his hand, the perpetually gloved one. "I want to make it clear that this was the doctor's idea. Not mine."

With that, he slid the glove from his hand.

## Chapter 8

### *Mechanical Ministrations*

*In which we join our antagonist as she takes in an unusual show.*

Ruby rushed along the quiet hall of the Red House's lower chambers in a hurry to make her meeting. She slipped past a line of closed doors, behind which a multitude of sins were taking place all while making her a very wealthy woman. Lifting her dress by the handfuls, Ruby picked up the pace to a light trot. It wasn't out of respect for the individual that she rushed. She was never shy about making a man wait. No. Ruby was in a hurry because she was excited.

Today she entertained Mr. Black.

By the time Ruby reached the last door, she was quite out of breath. Pausing to gather herself, she smoothed out the lace of her dress and ran her hands over her hair to make sure nothing was out of place. She had learned long ago that it was the little things that bound a man's service to you. Ironically, perfection was something that Mr. Black admired, so perfect she had to be. Assured that all was well, Ruby pushed the door open and found Mr. Black seated, as usual, waiting patiently for her to join him.

Once, not long ago, Mr. Black was the talk of the town. He stood tall and muscular, with a dashing smile and bedroom eyes that had helped him loosen many a corset, including Ruby's. While the man was a devil in the bedroom, he was pure hell in the business world. A shrewd mind and easy morals helped him to become one of the most powerful men in the country. He was wealthy, handsome, and more while in his prime.

The man that waited for Ruby was a mere ghost of his former glory. Ruby supposed a near death experience could do that to a man. Well, that and a spinal cord injury that had robbed him of nearly everything below the waist. After his accident, Mr. Black had found his life forever altered. Rejected by his peers, spurned by friends and lost in a cloud of self doubt, a man like him seemed useless to the rest of the world, but Ruby recognized his potential. Where others saw weakness, she saw opportunity. Others saw a scarred and ugly man bound to a wheelchair, waiting for his time to die. Ruby saw a powder keg of anger, anxious for a spark to light it.

Of course, Mr. Black was just a moniker chosen by the man himself. Ruby knew better than to even imagine his real name, lest she slip and call him so. Such a transgression could be the undoing of her carefully woven plans. Her strategy pivoted on the usefulness of Mr. Black, on his knowledge and proclivity. Not to mention his identity. Like a guarded hand of cards, Ruby held his name close to her, waiting for the right time to use it.

Sliding the door closed behind her, she paused for a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the low light of the room, although she could have navigated the place in the pitch dark, she knew it so well. The single chair parked beside Mr. Black, the glass partition that separated this room

from the one beyond, the brass tube that ran between the rooms, the thin braided rope that hung in one corner, all were installed by her design. Normally it served as a theater for one, for exclusive private shows.

Ruby took the empty seat, saying, "Mr. Black."

Mr. Black didn't look at her. "Ruby."

"Any news?"

"My men say her crew reached the island a few hours ago."

"And the weapon?" Ruby cursed herself for seeming so eager, but she couldn't seem to help herself. The idea of possessing such a powerful thing made her as giddy as a schoolgirl, and as wet as freshly fucked whore.

"I won't know anything until their ship gets in the air again. If all goes well, they should be back within a few days."

"With the weapon."

"Maybe." He shrugged. "We'll have to wait and see."

"Do you think they'll run into any trouble?"

"How should I know?" Mr. Black frowned and tapped his chair while adding, "I'm here. Remember?"

Drawing closer to him, Ruby ran a hand along one metal wheel, tracing the length of the cold, curved metal before she said, "Yes, you are. Would you rather be somewhere else?"

He snorted. "Out of this damned thing for starters."

"Your chair is one of a kind. It gives you the kind of freedom that men in your position would kill for. Speaking of which, was it worth it?"

Mr. Black shrugged, as if the acts he had committed for her in the past were as common as breathing. "It's a wheelchair for an invalid. It does what it should."

"You should learn to enjoy the fruits of your labor."

"I'd rather be on my feet."

"Most people spend half their life trying to get off their feet."

"Most people have a choice."

Ruby smirked as she eyed the crippled man. Melancholy was a dangerous enemy, but one she knew how to best. "Of course. And you will too, in time. Everything will come in time." She slipped her hand lower, to squeeze his stirring cock. "Some things will come sooner than others from the feel of it."

"Lucky me."

"At least you haven't lost control of everything."

Mr. Black finally turned his scarred face to her, his mouth a thin line of frustration. "Remind me to thank heaven for small favors."

“And the big ones,” she said as she squeezed him again. He grew harder by the handful. “Besides, if I have my way, if everything happens like it should, then you’ll not only be on your feet, you’ll be better. Stronger.”

“At what cost?”

Surprised by the sound of worry in his voice, Ruby asked, “Not having second thoughts, are we?”

Mr. Black grinned. “About handing you the keys to the world? Not a chance. A woman can’t do much worse than the men in charge now. You’ll just have better tits.”

Ruby barked a sharp laugh. That was the Mr. Black she knew. “I really do appreciate your help.” She squeezed his cock again.

Mr. Black snatched her by the wrist, lifting her hand away from his growing desire. “Don’t mistake my loyalty for affection. As long as you keep paying, I’ll keep helping.” He returned his gaze to the glass partition. “Damnation, I’d do half the jobs you want for the fringe benefits alone.”

“Certainly, but I want you to know that I find your assistance priceless.”

“And I find your flattery suspicious. I’m not some naïve child you can toy with, Ruby. I know you too well.”

“Point taken,” Ruby said, pulling herself from his grasp. “Shall we enjoy your fringe benefits?”

His nod was barely perceptible, almost as if he didn’t want his reward. Yet the man had earned this treat. After all, every dog deserved a bone for a job well done. Ruby leaned toward the glass partition and pulled the velvet rope, at which the curtains parted.

The room beyond the glass was well lit, revealing a center stage upon which stood a comfortable looking lounge chair, as well as an uncomfortable looking machine. Olivia, one of Ruby’s best girls, sat perched on the edge of the chair, naked with her legs spread wide, waiting for her chance to perform. She toyed with her nipples as she chewed her lower lip, eyeing the mechanical monstrosity parked beside her with desire, not dread. Her bare breasts sat high on her thin frame, her small waist and narrow hips giving the young lady an almost prepubescent figure. Yet the red thatch that rested between her legs exposed her adult passion, already glistening with anticipation. Olivia was one of the few girls who enjoyed using the device.

One hundred pounds of cold, hard steel, the device was a mastermind of pistons, pivots, and pleasure. Powered manually or by steam, thousands of tiny gears throughout the machine moved together with the dual purpose of driving forth a free swinging arm, while also setting it to vibrate at ungodly speeds. The last nine inches of the arm was coated in a thick layer of soft, fleshy material, the origin of which was as much of a secret as the whereabouts of its creator. One might be confounded by the application of such a machine, as if the cock-like shape of the tip didn’t give the whole purpose away with a single glance.



The majority of the Red House ladies despised the construct, many of them refusing to perform in the theater, and the others willing to do so only when requested by a client. Ruby was a fan of the device herself, having paid many a late night visit to the lower chambers to try her hand at its cold affections, favoring it to contact with another human being. She often wondered how her girls could prefer the grunt and grope sessions of a lust driven man to such a refined purpose that the device possessed. Then again, few women shared Ruby's tastes. Few men either.

Mr. Black, however, was an exception to that rule. He had developed a fondness for the machine that nearly rivaled Ruby's, only in a different application. Where Ruby enjoyed employing the device, Mr. Black found his satisfaction in a non-participatory manner.

He liked to watch.

"You may begin," Ruby said into the tube.

Olivia moved into position with a wide smile. The girl was eager today, which was good, because from the feel of things so was Mr. Black. The quicker this was done, the sooner Ruby could get back to more important matters at hand. Laying down on the lounge, Olivia straddled the machine's protruding arm. Once on her back, the girl reached between her legs to grasp the tip of the arm, where she rubbed the faux cock against her puss in slow passes. She hissed with each slip, rolling her hips against the extension until it was as wet as she was.

Mr. Black's cock sprang to attention at the sight. He hissed along with Olivia, matching her grunt for grunt as Ruby squeezed him through his trousers.

Well lubricated and ready for more, Olivia scooted down the length of the lounge, taking the fleshy tip of the machine deep within her pussy. She moaned as she moved, her groans rattling the brass tube as she slid down the device, allowing the well-endowed shape to invade her. Ruby responded in kind, unbuttoning the man's slacks to free his growing erection. She wrapped her fingers around it, keeping her fist tight, holding his real sex as Olivia held the fake one.

What happened next was a feast for the eyes. Olivia stretched one leg forward, toeing a small switch just within her reach. There was a hush of steam at first, followed by the chuff of the machine coming to life. A rhythmic pounding filled the rooms as the gears began their steady turning. Pistons flexed in time to the gears, moving the tip of the arm out of Olivia's puss, only to plunge it back in again. Olivia cried aloud at the first few thrusts, then braced herself against the lounge, readying herself for what she was sure to know would follow.

Ruby slipped her closed hand down the length of Mr. Black, from tip to balls, fisting him in strokes that matched the metal lover. All the while his eyes never left the scene before him, nor did he move to assist Ruby in her efforts. Within a few passes, the young woman on the lounge cried out again. She twisted, writhed, and bucked against the machine in a beautiful display of eye-popping pleasure.

In a throaty whisper, Ruby said, "She's coming."

"I can see that," Mr. Black said, between gasps.

The machine thumped in double time, then triple, gaining speed with every thrust into Olivia and out again. Grabbing the edges of the lounge in white-knuckled fists as the machine fucked her with abandon, Olivia rose to eye the glass partition with a wicked grin. She licked her lips, then pursed them in a brief kiss before she turned her attention to another orgasm. In a heated string of obscenities mixed with screams of delight, she praised all the hosts of heaven and hell, saints and sinners alike, even thanking the mysterious maker of the machine for his contribution to her satisfaction. Ruby could not have been prouder of the girl, nor more impressed by the man she'd had put the device together.

Mr. Black was not as vocal, but nevertheless, he appeared to enjoy the show. His cock stood in proud defiance of his unmoving limbs. Ruby stroked him faster, keeping time with the violation of Olivia, until all too soon, the tell-tale throb of his cock called the game. With nothing more than a single grunt from its owner, the handful of hard flesh erupted in her palm, leaving a sticky trail of passion in its wake.

"Enough," Ruby shouted into the tube over the rhythmic pounding of the machine.

With a grimace, and undoubtedly a great deal of self-control, the girl switched off the device, then fell back onto the lounge in a pool of sweat. She turned to face the window, her wicked grin replaced by a dreamy, satisfied smile. "Would you like to come again? I'll wait 'til you are ready."

Mr. Black shook his head.

"That will be all," Ruby said before she pulled the cord, closing the curtains and ending the show.

The pair sat in silence for a few minutes, waiting for the man to come down from his high, to return to his broken body. At length, Mr. Black pulled his kerchief from his jacket, offering it to her. She nodded, taking the fabric to clean her fingers off, before she turned her attention to him. As she wiped his cock clean, a thin smile worked its way to her lips. In her willingness to keep him satisfied, Ruby would have licked him to another orgasm. All he had to do was ask.

Her smile spread wider as she reminded herself to thank heaven for small favors.

## Chapter 9

### *Atom Lends a Hand*

*In which we plan our escape and our young lovers worry over nothing.*

"This is amazing," Jayne cooed. "Simply amazing." She held Atom by the wrist, turning his hand over again.

Was it a hand? Could one call it such a thing just because it looked the part?

Rose would never have guessed that Atom's entire right arm was clockwork. Tiny levers and gears made up his delicate fingers, whereas larger pistons and cogs formed the forearm, elbow, and upper arm. The works merged into his shoulder where a thin red scar marked the end of the metal and the beginning of the man. Jayne fingered the contraption in awe. Atom bore her attention with good humor. Gabriella, however, sat in the opposite corner of the cage, eyes wide, looking confounded. Rose wasn't sure what had the girl flustered, the fact that her potential suitor had a mechanical arm or the sight of Atom's naked, muscular chest that glistened in the glow of firelight.

"I mean, I've seen it before," Jayne said. "Never in such perfect execution. This is just...just..."

"Amazing?" asked the newly risen Jax.

"Yes," Jayne said. "It is. You cannot fathom how beautiful this piece of work is. It's like fine art. Living art."

Jayne's voice had a nuance of appreciation in it that made Rose worry. Before, Atom was just another genius to compete with. Now he was a piece of work. Gabriella was going to have some competition if she wasn't careful.

"My husband's commanding officer had a clockwork leg," Magpie said.

Jayne shot Magpie a nasty look over her shoulder.

"He did," Magpie insisted. "Except it weren't nothing like that. No sir. It wasn't that fancy for starts. It had a terrible creak when he walked about too. The boys used to get away with all sorts of things because of that creak. He couldn't sneak up on 'em, you see? You could hear the man a mile away for all the creaking and ticking."

"What makes it a weapon?" Rose asked.

Jayne gave a sharp huff. "Captain, his strength in this arm alone must be at least that of ten men."

"Yes, but what good is that against an entire island of enemies?" Rose asked.

"Could put the fear of God into 'em," Magpie suggested.

"Yah," Jax said with a snort. "Maybe he waves it and they all go running."

"It kind of scares me," Click said.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Atom said, a little louder than the chattering crew. They went silent. “It’s a weapon because it can do this.”

The man pulled his metal thumb backward until it lay parallel to his arm at a bone achingly uncomfortable angle. A loud click sounded when his thumb disappeared into his forearm. Atom twisted his remaining fingers together until they merged into one metal mass. Like the pieces of a Chinese puzzle box, he flipped, slid, and slipped his forearm and hand against one another. Soon all he had from the elbow down was a hollow metal tube.

“What is it?” Magpie asked.

“A cannon,” Jax offered.

Atom nodded. “Of sorts.”

“Simply amazing,” Jayne said. Her eyes lit with an affection that Rose had never seen on the tinker before. Jayne began once again to pat and paw at Atom’s arm, sidling ever closer to him.

The young man looked away, letting the cogsmith have her fill of the new toy.

Rose worried that if they did manage to escape this certain doom, there would be a triangle of trouble aboard her vessel. Yet Atom’s face told her otherwise. He gazed at Gabriella with mix of affection, desperation, and anxiety. Most of all he looked troubled. As if revealing his strange abilities to her had rent him to his very soul. Gabriella eyed his arm with a curious interest. When she looked up to see Atom’s terror stricken face, her bemused grin slipped into a warm smile.

“I think it’s absolutely wonderful,” the young girl gushed.

Atom’s demeanor changed. He relaxed, clearly relived that she’d approved, then stood a little taller, as if proud of her acceptance.

“What kind of ammunition does it use?” Jax asked.

“Good question,” Jayne said in that condescending tone she reserved for her own lengthy explanations.

Jax grunted.

“It doesn’t,” Atom said. “It operates using Faraday’s electromagnetism work. It’s basically a reverse of his homopolar motor.”

Jayne snorted. “Reversing a homopolar motor would just push the components themselves apart.”

Atom smiled. He held out his arm, pointing to various sections to illustrate his explanation. “Not with a welded set of voltaic piles on each end. They allocate the magnetic fields into these sections and direct the diamagnetism across a controllable level here.”

“That’s impossible,” Jayne said. She stared at his arm. “Even Faraday couldn’t control the effects on such a direct scale.”

“He didn’t have Doctor Loquacious either,” Atom corrected her.

Jayne looked back up at Atom before she grinned again.

“Excuse me?” Rose asked.

The pair looked at her.

“Can you translate that for the rest of us?” Rose asked.

“My apologies,” Atom said.

“It’s a magnetic cannon,” Jayne said.

“It sends out a controlled burst of vibrations,” Atom said, “that act to undermine the magnetic structures of the intended target.”

Rose shook her head while the words flew past her mind. She was never much for higher learning, always satisfied to have the technical minded Jayne run the ship as she saw fit. The mathematical genius of Gabriella was enough to make her feel dimmer than normal. Now with the addition of the brainy Atom, she supposed she would have to learn a few things just to keep up.

Atom seemed to sense her confusion. “Essentially, it emits low frequency magnetic pulses that can shake things apart.”

“You say controlled,” Jayne said. “How controlled?”

Atom chewed his lower lip while he looked around the cage. Thankfully, the natives were so cocksure of the fact that Rose and her crew were going nowhere that they had left the cage unguarded. Atom tipped his head toward the bars that held them. His eyes narrowed. Rose gazed at him, if she didn’t know better, she’d swear he could see something just outside the cage. No sooner did she have the thought than he spoke.

“That rock there,” he said. “The one just a few feet away.”

Rose looked out at the small rock the young man pointed out.

“Keep an eye on it.” He poked the thin cannon between the wooden bars. A soft, low hum sounded from the barrel. Within moments, the rock beyond disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“Yebat!” Jax shouted.

“Holy cow!” Magpie yelled.

Jayne and Click cheered. Gabriella came to Atom’s side. He grinned when she laid her hand on his mechanical arm.

Rose smiled. She was impressed. “Do you have a plan?” she asked.

“I thought perhaps,” Atom said, “I could discreetly disassemble the cage and we could slip off, unnoticed.”

Rose considered this option for a moment. She leaned to one side, looking beyond Atom before she asked, “Do you think there is a chance we could?”

“Oh, yes,” Atom said.

Rose cocked her head at Atom. “I wasn’t asking you.”

“Ah,” Atom said, turning toward Jax who was behind him. “Sorry.”

“Perhaps,” Jax answered. “They seem busy with victory party. We might get away clean if we are careful and quiet.”

“If it helps,” Atom said, “I believe they are waiting for the moon to reach the other horizon before they begin. So we have about an hour or so.”

“Begin what?” Gabriella asked.

Atom turned back to the young girl. He sighed. "I'd rather not say."

Gabriella's nostrils flared. She put her hands on her hips, narrowing her eyes at the man. "You'd rather not? Well, I'd rather you did."

Atom's head rocked back at her words. He looked horrified. "It's much too terrible for such delicate ears."

"Delicate ears?" Gabriella squealed. She poked Atom in his naked chest. "I'll have you know these delicate ears have heard more than you can imagine." She gave him a curt nod.

Rose chuckled.

"If you insist," Atom said. "They intend to have most of us for some kind of ceremonial dinner."

Gabriella clutched her throat and winced.

"Most of us," Jayne repeated.

"Yes," Atom said. "Him..." He paused, lifting a finger to Click. "They intend to hang up by his...unmentionables. And leave for the animals to fight over."

Click's eyes went wide. He placed a protective hand over his precious groin. "Oi! What did I do?"

"Something about being a traitor, I believe," Atom explained. "You..." He stopped again, shifting his hand to Rose. "Have a fate worse than all of us, I'm afraid."

"The hair again?" Rose asked. Atom nodded. He opened his mouth to explain, but Rose held her hand up to stop him. "I'd rather not know," she said.

"So you break cage apart?" Jax asked. "I can do that without sound." She shoved a finger at Atom's arm. "Why should that matter?"

Rose doubted that even Jax could get them out of this cage without raising the attention of their captors. "Because it puts us on even footing. If we can't slip away unnoticed then at least we can go down with a fair fight. Isn't that right, Mr. Loquacious?"

Atom looked unsure. "Captain, might I have a word?"

"Go ahead," Rose said.

Atom glanced around at the crew before he added, "Alone?"

Rose sighed. She took Atom by the arm, his real one, and walked him to the far corner of the cage, waving the others away. They huddled across the cage with dejected looks.

"What's the trouble, son?" she asked.

He traced the edge of his arm-cannon with a shaking finger. "I...I've never actually used this before." He looked back at Gabriella and sighed.

"You seem to have the hang of it," Rose encouraged him.

"No," Atom snapped. He turned back to her. "I mean...I mean as a weapon."

Rose grasped the underlying current. "Ahh." She clapped Atom on his shoulder. Pulling him in close, she whispered, "You've never had to protect yourself?"

Atom shook his head. His eyes asked the question she was sure his throat couldn't.

"No, I've never killed a man before," she said. Her mind added, not officially at least.

"I don't know what to do. I want to help." He paused and eyed Gabriella again before he continued, "I want to help everyone, but I can't bring myself to hurt anybody. The very idea of it makes me nauseated."

Rose didn't expect the young lab assistant to act any other way. "Jax might be the best person to talk to about this."

"You mean she's..." Atom asked in a half question.

"She's had to. Jax has lived a hard life. The village she grew up in was a regular spot for raiders. She was raised with a sword in one hand and the head of her enemy in the other. Killing is in her blood."

Atom turned green at the idea.

"You don't have to hurt anyone," Rose said.

"Do you think?" he asked.

"I would never ask someone to do anything that I wouldn't do."

This explanation seemed to please the young man. "That's very wise of you, Captain."

"Just get us out of here, and if need be, cause enough of a distraction to let us get away."

"That I can do." Atom turned back to the crowd. Rose caught him by the arm again and tugged him back.

"Atom," she said. "Please take your time with Gabriella."

"Take my time?"

"She's kind of...sheltered. I know the impression that most men have of my crew, because of our unconventional lifestyle, and perhaps part of it is our own fault. After all we aren't the simple mothers and homemakers women are expected to be. In this case... Guppy...she's young. Inexperienced. Just take your time with whatever it is you're thinking about."

Atom paused for a moment, his brow furrowed as if he was confused by Rose's words. Slowly, his face twisted into a mask of revulsion. He glanced at Gabriella, then back at Rose. "Captain!" He motioned to the young lady in question. "I would never...take such liberties with...do such a thing...never!"

"Calm down."

"I admit, I'm quite fond of the young lady."

"And she's taken with you."

Atom seemed not to hear her. "But there is a certain propriety to these things. One doesn't just assume that a lady acts in a certain manner based upon the company she keeps."

Rose wondered at the veiled insult.

"It just isn't done," he continued. "I mean there is a well worn route that one must take when courting a young..." He stopped mid-lecture to stare open mouthed at Rose. "Wait a moment? What did you just say?"

Rose smiled wide. She wondered how long it would take for the assurance that Gabriella was interested in him to work its way past his brain and into his heart. "She likes you too, Atom. I do believe she does."

In an instant, the look of disgust slipped away under wave of tenderness, which included a goofy, but adorable grin. "Do you think so?"

Rose nodded and clapped him on the back again. "Just do right by her. That's all I'm asking."

"Of course," Atom said. "Absolutely. This kind of thing takes planning. And effort. And preparation. And research." He degenerated into a series of mumbles about the hours of the day and the days of the week.

Rose hoped she hadn't gummed up the works too much.

"For crying out loud, you nitwit!" Jayne shouted.

"Sounds like the troops are back to the arguing," Rose said. She looked back at Atom, wondering if it was a mistake to put everyone's lives in the hands of a man who seemed so unsure of himself. In the end, she supposed she had to go with her gut, and her gut trusted the kid. She only hoped her little talk had given him enough courage to trust himself. "Shall we get to it then?"

"Get to what?" Atom asked, his mind elsewhere, most likely somewhere about Gabriella's skirts.

"The part where we all get the hell out of here." Rose gave him a wide smile.

Atom smiled in return. "Of course, Captain."

\* \* \* \*

"Atom can break cage, then I can break heads," Jax said. She cupped one fist in the other open palm.

Gabriella looked over her shoulder at Atom. He was arm in arm with the captain, whispering furiously about heaven knew what.

"That's your plan?" Jayne asked.

"Better than staying around here," Click said. He still hung on to himself in the most inappropriate manner.

Gabriella couldn't blame him. Besides, she was growing immune to such scenes of vulgarity. Her prim etiquette slipped away little by little with each boorish display she witnessed. Would Atom think poorly of her because of it? The thought depressed her. How could he not? She was covered in filth, hadn't had a proper bath in ages, and was sure she smelled as bad as she looked. Atom had been polite from the moment they'd met, yet Gabriella was sure that was just his way. She eyed the whispering pair again just in time to see Atom look at her, then away, but it was too late, she had seen the look of disgust on his face and the way he motioned at her.

Somehow, she knew they were talking about her. Atom must hate her. After thinking about this for a moment, Gabriella decided not to care. He was the weirdo with the fake arm. Not her. Then there was the fact that he had lied to her twice already. Granted, he did lie for a good reason. He just didn't want Gabriella to think ill of him. It was kind of sweet. Why did he have to be so sweet?



“You thinking about him?” Magpie whispered.

Gabriella, shaken from her thoughts, realized that Magpie was talking to her.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Gabriella said under the ongoing argument of the rest of the crew.

“Sure you are,” Magpie said. “You got that look in your eye.”

“No, I don’t,” Gabriella whispered. She folded her arms across her chest and tried hard not to look like she was pouting. Even though she was.

“That boy is sweet on you,” Magpie said.

Gabriella lost the pout. She looked up at Magpie. “You think so?”

“Sure,” Magpie said.

“I don’t know—” Gabriella started.

“Oh, for crying out loud, you nitwit!” Jayne shouted.

Everyone jumped at the sound of her voice.

“He’s obviously infatuated with you,” Jayne said.

Gabriella blushed and ducked her head in shame. She hadn’t realized the others were listening.

“Yah,” Jax said. “He seems to like you very much.”

Gabriella’s face was hot enough, yet Jax’s words pushed the heat higher.

“I think he’s in love with you,” Click said.

Gabriella bordered on a whole new, previously undiscovered, shade of red.

“There,” Magpie said. “For once we all agree on something.”

Everyone was laughing when the captain and Atom rejoined them. Even Jayne.

“What’s so funny?” the captain asked.

“Guppy here—” Jayne said.

“Nothing,” Jax snapped, shutting Jayne up. “Nothing needs explaining.”

The captain raised an eyebrow at the women, then smiled when her gaze settled on Gabriella and her scarlet cheeks. The captain looked to her cabin boy for a possible answer, which came in the form of a knowing wink. Gabriella suspected she and Atom would be the topic of the pair’s pillow talk later that night. That was, if they made it out of here alive.

“Mr. Loquacious,” the captain said. “In your own time, please.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said.

Gabriella watched while Atom and his strange arm began to take the cage apart.

## Chapter 10

*No Freedom without Sacrifice*

*In which we make a break for it, but at what cost?*

They were almost home free.

Gabriella could smell the salt of the ocean, could nearly feel the sand crunch under her boots. The canopy of jungle had thinned out, blessing them with a few slivers of precious light by which they ran. The natives had discovered the crew's disappearing act and were in hot pursuit. Wild screams filled the air while the crew pushed themselves harder to escape unscathed. The beach was close, with the ship not much further...

Something clipped her blouse at the shoulder before it zipped past her into the darkness beyond.

"Everyone down!" Jax shouted.

The crew obeyed the barked command by dropping to the ground. Gabriella landed flat on her belly with a face full of leaves, mold, dirt, and something else she'd rather not think about. Spears whizzed overhead like great black bees.

"Jax!" the captain yelled over the pounding of the drums and the screams of the wild men. "You and Atom help me hold them off! The rest of you keep low until you reach the shore, and then run for it!"

"I'm not leaving you, my captain!" Click yelled.

"If you don't go," the captain shouted, "I'll hang you up by your unmentionables myself! Help Jayne and Guppy back aboard. If we don't follow on your heels, you are to push off. That's an order!"

Gabriella didn't want to do as ordered. She wanted to stay here with Atom. It was then that she realized she was willing to follow him anywhere, despite the short time she had known him.

"Come on, girly!" Jayne yelled over Gabriella's inner monologue. She pushed Gabriella from behind, encouraging her to crawl away from the battle, from the danger, from Atom.

"I don't want to go!" she screamed.

Jayne slipped past her and crawled after Click toward freedom.

"Gabriella!" Atom yelled. "Get out while you can! Now!"

She had to leave. Through the haze of burning tears, Gabriella shot one last desperate look at Atom. In the thin moonlight he smiled at her for the briefest of moments, and she pressed that smile to her heart where she knew it would remain always. Crawling to safety, she silently prayed that her friends would escape.

Gabriella crawled on for what seemed like eons. Hand over hand, knee over knee, she scooted and scurried through the underbrush like some kind of wild animal. All the while she thought of poor Atom and how brave he was for risking his life. She also thought about how handsome he was. How clever he was. How wonderful his smile was. How she could see eternity in his beautiful copper eyes. With her mind on Atom, she was knee deep in sand long before she knew it.

“Come on, Guppy,” Jayne snapped. She dragged Gabriella to her feet. “Get your mind on the moment or you’ll end up with a back full of spear.”

Gabriella stood to face the second most beautiful thing she had seen that day—the vision of the Merry Widow awaiting their return. She never thought she would be so happy to see the old ship.

“No one seems to be following,” Click said. “Let’s go!” He took each of their hands and the three ran full tilt for the ship. It didn’t take long for them to reach her. Click pushed Gabriella toward the rope ladder first.

Gabriella scaled the ladder quicker than she’d thought possible, even with the addition of two more bodies rocking the ladder beneath her while she climbed. The moment she crested the side of the railing, Dot greeted her.

“What on earth kept you guys?” Dot asked.

“Not now, Dot!” Jayne snapped when she scrambled onto the deck behind Gabriella.

“Don’t you ‘not now’ me,” Dot said. “Where are you going?”

The young tinker didn’t stop. She kept on running until she disappeared into the bowels of the ship. Click pulled himself onto the deck with a loud grunt.

“Well, how do you like that?” Dot asked. She helped Gabriella to her feet before she wrinkled her nose. “You guys look horrible. What happened?”

Gabriella was too out of breath to answer. She didn’t know where Jayne got her stamina, because even Click was winded despite being in excellent shape.

Dot eyed the ladder expectantly, then looked back to Click. “Where’s the captain? And Jax?”

Click bent double, clutching his knees while he tried to catch his breath. He spoke in short bursts between gasps. “Behind...natives...danger.”

Dot’s eyes widened. “No!”

“Fraid...so,” Click panted, his eyes watering as he raised a hand to his chest.

“So that’s what all the drumming was about?” Dot asked.

“What...did... you...think it...was?”

“I don’t know. I just supposed you made friends on the island and didn’t want an old woman like me to interrupt your party.” Dot stamped one foot on the deck. “I told the captain Ruby couldn’t be trusted. That woman is trouble with capital whore.”

Gabriella, still too out of breath to comment, turned around and grabbed the railing. She narrowed her eyes, scanning the sand below, watching the beach for any sign of the other three. All she saw was the trail of her own, hasty retreat.

“We have to go after them,” Jayne said.

Gabriella turned back to see the tinker had reappeared with an armful of homespun weaponry. She dumped the objects on the deck and rooted through them. “All of these are simple to use. Just point and click.”

From exotic guns to bizarre blades to guns that even launched blades, the bevy of weaponry Jayne possessed was strangely seductive. Gabriella hovered over the pile of iron, copper, and wood, overwhelmed by the variety of choices. Not that she could ever wield one of the things herself. She wouldn’t know what to do if she did.

“Go on, Guppy,” Jayne said. “Help yourself.”

“The captain ordered us to stay here,” Click reminded them.

Jayne cocked the handle of something that resembled a gun, yet the barrel of which was twice that of any Gabriella had ever seen before. She leveled it at an imaginary target somewhere off the ship. “Tell me you plan on doing that.”

Click cocked his head at Jayne, his eyes dark and brooding. He bent low to snatch one of the weapons from the deck, a complicated affair with three barrels with just as many triggers. Bringing the weapons to his face for inspection, Gabriella saw that his classic wide smile had returned. “No. But I just wanted to have witnesses that I tried to. Now let’s go and get the rest of our crew back.”

The hollow, triple click of his weapon punctuated his point.

\* \* \* \*

While she lay face down in the muck, Rose mulled over her situation, taking stock of her options and decisions.

She was pinned down by wild savages.

She had just, effectively, told her crew to sail away without her.

She had one weapon, and it was attached to a pacifist.

She was insane.

“Captain!” Jax yelled. She scurried to Rose’s side, pushing something into Rose’s palm. “I’ve collected some of their weapons.”

Rose rolled over and looked at the stout spear Jax had placed in her hand. In the weak moon glow, she could just make out the deadly stingray tails bound to the tip. “Good work, Jax.”

“They shouldn’t give them to us if they don’t want us to use them,” Jax said. She offered Rose a few more of the white tipped weapons.

“Atom?” Rose called out. When she rose to a crouch, she felt someone tug her pants leg. Looking back, Rose saw the poor boy cringing behind her in the underbrush. He smiled weakly and waved his cannon-arm, as if reminding her he had it.

“Are you prepared to use that thing?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Even over the snap and whiz of the spears, she heard the hesitation in his voice. She tried to grin at him. “Maybe you won’t have to.”

Rose was amazed when the big woman offered him a spear. Jax seemed to understand his anxiety. Atom nodded in thanks while clutching the weapon to him.

"Now," Jax said, "on count of three we scream, stand, and give all we have. They won't expect us to fight back so while they are stunned by this, we run. Clear?"

Rose agreed, while Atom just stared at the blonde.

"You have problem with plan?" Jax asked.

"Oh no," Atom said. "I'm just honored to be included."

"Be honored back at ship," Jax said. "One, two, three!"

Leaping to her feet, Rose hollered. She ignored the projectiles zipping past her, focusing instead on throwing spears in return. Exactly as Jax had predicted the assault on them came to a sudden halt.

"Go! Go! Go!" Jax yelled.

Before Rose could flee, she heard Atom screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Captain! Look out!" he yelled.

Time slowed to a crawl. Her gaze swept around to land on a single, well-placed spear hurtling toward her. The thing was dead centered, no matter which way she twisted, it would strike her. She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and waited for the worst.

Instead of a gut full of spear, she heard a low boom, a soft grunt, then nothing at all. Not even the drums or screams of the natives. All was quiet. Eternal silence. Death hurt a lot less than she thought it would.

"Captain?" Jax asked.

Rose opened her eyes. She patted down her blouse, but the spear wasn't there. She turned a questioning eye to Jax. "What just happened?"

Jax pointed to the ground between them

Atom lay at Rose's feet with a spear embedded in his lower part of his left shoulder.

Rose lowered to his side. "What have you done?"

"He took spear for you," Jax announced.

"I can see that," Rose snapped. She lifted the young man as gently as she could.

He moaned in response. A dark stain bloomed around the wound.

"He didn't even know you," Jax said.

"Get his feet, Jax. We need to get him back to the ship."

"He didn't even know you," Jax repeated. "But he took spear anyway."

"Jax!" Rose yelled.

Jax started. Back in the moment, she bent over Atom's still form and grabbed the spear. "Hold him still." In one clean movement, Jax snapped the body of the spear away, leaving the head with its handful of bone-white splinters lodged in his chest. "Is best not to remove now."

Carting Atom between them, they ran through the remainder of the jungle. Rose cast a few looks over her shoulder, but the natives didn't give chase.

“What happened to the natives?” she asked.

“He happened to them,” Jax said. She nodded to the body between them. “He fired that thing just before he went down. And all went quiet.”

When they exploded onto the beach, Rose nearly cried aloud when she saw her ship still waiting. Somehow she wasn’t surprised to see the remainder of her crew making their way across the beach toward her, brandishing weapons.

“Atom!” Gabriella called out. She ran up and fluttered around Atom like a nervous butterfly. She was the only one unarmed. “Atom. Oh, Captain, what happened?”

“He took a hit for me,” Rose said. “Now get back to the ship so we can get the hell off of this God forsaken island!”

Click relieved Rose of her end of the load and everyone ran for the ship. Within moments, the crew was aboard. Rose clambered up the ladder behind them.

“Click, take him to my room and make him comfortable,” Rose commanded when she reached the deck. “Everyone else, get the Widow in the air!”

Dot followed Click, helping him carry the wounded young man to Rose’s quarters. Jayne disappeared into the engine room while the others hoisted sandbags and tethers from the beach. The pistons creaked into movement when the engines fired. The props began their familiar vibrating hum. In record time, the Widow rose into the night air. Rose breathed a little easier. The moment she was sure they were clear of the island, she returned to her quarters and the guilt that waited there. The door was closed with Click waiting before it as if standing guard.

“My captain,” Click said. He caught her up in his arms to hold her close. She wanted to collapse then. To cry, to bawl, to lean on his strength, to beg his forgiveness for putting the crew in such danger. Regret could wait until later. Now she had to remain strong and take responsibility for what happened.

Click tightened his grip on her before he said in a low voice, “You couldn’t have known. She didn’t tell you. None of us knew the island was inhabited.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. She lifted away from him, taking his strength with her. “I see Dot’s kicked you out.”

“She didn’t want my help.” Click shrugged.

“Captain!” Gabriella yelled while she ran up the deck. “How is he? Let me see him.” She pushed past Rose, toward the closed door.

“Hold up, Guppy.” Rose caught the young girl by the arm to hold her back.

Gabriella jerked her arm away. “I want to see him!”

“Please,” Rose begged. “Let Dot do her job.”

Gabriella’s eyes welled up.

“Is he okay?” Jax asked. The blonde joined them with a look of concern.

Gabriella turned to Jax and buried her head in the big woman's chest. Jax was surprised, but didn't push the girl away. With a perplexed look, she patted Gabriella on the back gently. Sobbing rose from the girl in Jax's arms.

Rose didn't begrudge the young girl one tear.

"Is he okay, Captain?" Jax asked again.

"Stay here," Rose said. "I'm going to go find out." She left Gabriella in the care of Jax, and then slipped away into her room where she found Dot standing over Atom. He was motionless on her bed with the many pointed head of the spear still imbedded in his shoulder. A dark pool gathered beneath him, staining her sheets with his very life.

A worried look dressed the elder matron's face.

"Dot?" Rose asked.

Dot drew a sharp breath before she said, "His heart isn't beating."

"Damn it!" Rose yelled. She balled her fist and punched the door behind her. The pain of the blow didn't take away the ache of Dot's words. "Why did he do it?"

"Captain," Dot said.

"Why?" Rose asked again as she stormed across the room to plead with the unconscious man. "Jax was right. You didn't even know me! Why would you be so stupid?"

"Captain," Dot tried again.

Rose ignored Dot, instead raging on. She had never been so infuriated by something so selfless. "Atom Loquacious, you are the stupidest, most foolish, dim-witted, thick-headed..." She paused as she sank to her knees over the still form before she added, "Bravest man I ever knew." Tears pricked her eyes and stung her nose.

"Captain, please," Dot said a third time.

Rose looked up at her. "What?"

Dot held out her stethoscope. She nodded to Atom. "His heart isn't beating."

Rose furrowed her brow. The woman shook the listening instrument at her again. Growling, she snapped the stethoscope from Dot and put it on. With a trembling hand she placed the cup over Atom's chest. Her eyes widened as she listened. And as she listened, she understood. She understood everything. Rose got to her feet in a daze, unsure of how to handle this new situation. She touched the stain on her sheets, then rolled the slick substance between her fingertips.

"Send for Jayne," Rose said in a calm voice.

"Aye-aye, Captain," Dot said, and hurried from the room.

Alone for a moment, Rose lowered the stethoscope to Atom's chest again, and listened to the curious sound within. The hollow sound of steady, rhythmic ticks.

The sound of clockworks.

# Chapter 11

## *Origin of the Species*

*In which we pray for Atom's recovery, and our captain realizes our mistake.*

Click watched the captain's door with longing. Jax paced the deck like a nervous tiger. Magpie withdrew to her loft for a rest. Gabriella sat on the deck with her back against the captain's quarters, wondering what she did wrong.

The captain had sent for Jayne. Out of the whole crew, she'd sent for Jayne.

At first, when Dot came rushing from the room, Gabriella thought it was a joke.

"We need Jayne," Dot said. Jax ran to fetch the girl.

"Jayne?" Gabriella asked. She tried to get past the doctor. "Surely she wants to talk to—"

Dot pushed her away from the room and shook her head. "Let us take care of him, honey. He needs Jayne right now."

The words cut Gabriella like the dulllest blade, slow and ragged, tearing a gaping hole in her aching heart.

Jax rushed back with the surprised tinker. Dot disappeared with her into the forbidden room. That had been almost an hour ago. Gabriella was left to wonder why.

"Penny for your thoughts," Click said. He sank to the deck beside her.

"Nothing," Gabriella sulked. "I'm not thinking about anything."

Click ran an arm around her shoulder before he whispered, "I'm worried about him too."

She rested her head against him and sighed. She was all out of tears. Besides, she wasn't sure she wanted to cry for him anymore. Not if he needed Jayne so badly.

"Why would he need Jayne?" she asked.

Click shrugged. "Who knows? He's a mystery to all of us."

She knew this was the truth, Atom was a stranger to them all, yet part of her felt like she had known him for years. "Yes, but why her? Jayne. Why would he ask for Jayne instead of... I mean out of all of us?"

Click pulled her closer to him while he chuckled. "Do you want to hear a story? To take your mind off of things?"

"I suppose so."

"When I was a baby," Click began, "the village shaman took an interest in me because I was born with a cowl."

"A what?"

"A veil of mucus, over my face."

"Oh." Gabriella resisted the urge to wince at the horrible image such a description brought with it.



“Do you have any guesses what the shaman said it meant?”

“No.”

“He said I was cursed. That I was doomed to wander the earth for my entire life, seeking a happiness that I would never find in any one place.”

“That’s horrible.”

“I agree. When I grew up, my mother passed the prediction on to me, and I believed it. I really thought I would never be happy, that I would always be forced to wander. I left my home, my family behind because I thought I would be unhappy if I stayed with them.”

“Not because you wanted to?”

Click smiled. “Perhaps it was a bit of both, because truth be told I wasn’t happy there. So, I wandered a long time, and it was true. I’ve ventured to England. To Spain. I spent several months in China and a few memorable weeks in Japan. I have been to a lot of different places, but everywhere I went, I was always very unhappy.”

“You’re happy now.”

“Am I? How can you tell?”

“You’re always smiling.”

“So I am.” The native man gave a sharp laugh. “So I am.”

“I thought the shaman said you couldn’t be happy?” Gabriella asked. This story was confusing her.

“He said I wouldn’t be happy in one place,” Click reminded her.

Gabriella understood. “The Widow. You’re happy here because the ship moves around.”

Click smiled wider.

“I don’t want to seem ungrateful, really,” Gabriella said. “But what does this have to do with anything?”

“Don’t you wonder what a man is doing aboard an all female ship?” Click asked.

Gabriella blushed and dropped her head.

“Come on now, be honest,” Click said. “I’m sure my presence has crossed your mind more than once.”

“Yes, I admit I have wondered.”

“The captain didn’t make joining this crew easy.” He lost a bit of his shining smile.

Gabriella found that hard to believe. “She seems to...umm...like you well enough.”

“It’s true though. She was dead set on an all female crew. No men allowed, please.”

“How did you join the crew then?”

Click’s smile returned. “I refused to leave. From the moment I saw her, I knew I would find my peace with her.”

Gabriella got the impression they weren’t talking about the Widow any more.

"I suppose what I am saying," Click said, "is that happiness is where you find it. Sometimes you have to take it to make it your own." He stood and flexed his back. He looked like a panther lazily stretching in the early morning hour, muscles taut and toned. Gabriella shuddered at the handsome sight.

"You love her, don't you?" she asked.

Click lifted his hands as if in surrender, but didn't answer. He stepped back to the door and leaned against it, waiting patiently for his captain's next order.

Gabriella swore that if Atom Loquacious lived through this then she was going to have him for herself. She smiled a Clickish smile as she made her plans.

\* \* \* \*

"So this is what Ruby was after?" Dot asked.

Rose nodded. "I think so. It makes sense in a twisted kind of way."

The three women stood around the bed, staring at the sleeping form of Atom. After all that time they spent believing they would leave the island empty handed, their prize had been with them all along.

"What would the madam of a bordello want with him?" Dot asked.

"I'm not thinking of her," Rose said. "I'm thinking of her cliental."

"Ah," Dot said. "Of course. Anyone of them would pay a fortune to take advantage of this poor young thing. We aren't going to give her the opportunity. Are we, Captain?"

Rose shook her head. She was too angry to talk about this right now.

"He is absolutely magnificent," Jayne said. She added, just under her breath, "Just like the masters said he would be."

Rose eyed the tinker with worry. "Jayne? Are you okay?"

Jayne snapped out of her memory and nodded. "I'm fine. Just fine."

"Are you sure?" Rose asked.

Jayne closed her eyes. She drew a few deep breaths before she said, "Yes, sir."

Rose was just going to have to trust her. With everything. "Once again. I'm going to ask you both to keep this between us. It's up to him who knows what happened here. So keep your mouths shut. Understood?"

"Aye-aye, Captain!" the women answered.

At the sound of their shout, Atom's eyelids flickered for a moment before he opened his eyes wide. His strange copper eyes darted around the room in surprise.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Mr. Loquacious," Rose said.

Atom looked at her, then at Jayne, then at Dot.

"Would you look at those eyes," Dot whispered.

"Atom Loquacious," Rose said, "This is Dorothy Johnson. She's our resident doctor."

"Oh, now," Dot said, oddly shy in front of the young man. "I'm a nurse by training. I worked with my husband for so long...well, one picks up things, don't they?"

“What happened?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

“You stepped in front of a stingray spear,” Rose said. She tossed a handkerchief full of the spearheads onto the bed beside of him. “It took us almost an hour to extract those from your shoulder.”

He pulled the cloth open and cringed at the serrated stingers within. He ran his mechanical hand across his bandaged shoulder.

“You shouldn’t even be alive,” Dot said.

Jayne snorted. Rose gave her a look that silenced the tinker.

“Then I owe you my life,” Atom said to Dot.

Jayne opened her mouth, most likely to protest. Rose’s was quicker.

“No, Atom,” she said. “I owe you my life. That was quite brave of you.”

Atom grinned before he dipped his head in obvious embarrassment.

“It was also stupid,” she added.

He opened and closed his mouth several times in succession as if unsure how to address the backhanded compliment.

“But brave nonetheless,” Rose finished.

Atom settled on a smile. “It was my honor. Really.”

“Just don’t do it again,” Rose said. “I can’t have people thinking that it’s deadly to travel with me. Can I?”

With care, Atom tried to sit upright. Dot rushed forward and helped him lean against the headboard. “Doctor, I cannot thank you enough—”

“Hey!” Jayne shouted.

“Dot, Jayne,” Rose said. “Will you please wait outside?”

“He just—” Jayne tried to say.

“Come on,” Dot said over Jayne. She gathered the young girl by the shoulders and escorted her to the door. “She needs a moment alone with him. You can tell me all about what happened out there.”

“Jayne?” Atom asked.

The tinker turned back with a hateful look.

“Thank you too.” He motioned to his wound before he added, “I know you had a hand in this.”

Jayne seemed ready to deliver another speech. Before she could, Dot pushed her through the door. The room fell quiet. Rose stood with her back to her desk, staring at the stranger on her bed. Atom’s gaze darted around the room, looking everywhere but her.

“I’m sorry to be such an inconvenience,” he said. “I really had hoped this would be—”

“Who are you?” Rose asked.

Atom stopped. He looked down at his mechanical hand, flexing it over and over while he considered the question. A light creak filled the air with every curl of the metal fingers.

Rose sighed. This was going to be more difficult than she would have liked. She pulled her chair across the room to the side of the bed, where she sat and propped her feet beside of him. She eyed Atom before she asked again, "Who are you?"

"All I know is that I'm Atom Loquacious," he answered. He still wouldn't meet her gaze.

Rose leaned in closer to him. "Then let's try a different question, shall we?"

Atom continued to look at his hand.

*Flex, creak.*

*Flex, creak.*

*Flex, creak.*

"What are you, Atom Loquacious?" Rose asked.

The creaking stopped. The silence that followed seemed as accusatory as Rose's tone.

Atom turned up to her with a pain-filled expression. "I don't know. All I know is that I am Atom Loquacious."

Rose hated to do this, hated to make him dig so deep when it obviously caused him distress. Damn it! She needed to know what the hell was going on with her ship! She pressed on. "You aren't Doctor Loquacious's real son, are you?"

Atom shook his head. "I never said I was."

"You said he was your father."

"Yes, because he..." Atom paused, looking away before he finished with, "He made me."

That was the answer Rose had been looking for. "I see."

Atom hung his head, as if in shame.

"How long were you with the doctor?" Rose asked. "Before he left you, I mean."

"Ten years."

"When did he leave?"

"He abandoned me five years ago."

"So you've been on that island for fifteen years?"

Atom nodded. "I really am lucky that you came along."

"Maybe," Rose said. She sucked a quick breath through her teeth before she added, "Maybe not."

Atom didn't seem to hear her last remark. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"For all the trouble I must have caused. For deceiving you."

"You just said yourself that you never lied. You never said you were his real son. We just assumed—"

"Yes, but I didn't clarify," he said over her. "That's as good as a lie."

"Didn't your father ever teach you that it's human nature to lie?"

Atom narrowed his eyes at her. "Don't you understand? I'm not..." His words faded, as if he couldn't bring himself to say them.

“Don’t fool yourself,” Rose said. “You’re more human than most men I know.”

Atom dipped his head again.

Smiling, Rose placed her hand on Atom’s. “See, you’re embarrassed. What could be more human than that?”

“I was made,” he said, pulling his hand away. “Not born. I have no father, no mother.”

Rose lowered her feet to lean forward. Propping her elbows on her knees, she pressed her fingers together and leveled them at Atom while she spoke. “You were put together by a man—”

“Which makes me a construct,” Atom interrupted her.

Rose just barreled on with her words. “A man who cared enough about your safety to conceal you in the deepest, darkest jungle he could find so no one else could get their hands on you. Sounds like a father to me.”

“You don’t think he abandoned me?”

“No. I think he was hiding you.”

“Hiding me,” Atom echoed.

“Yes.”

“From who? Who would want me?”

Rose couldn’t help her laughter. She knew at least one girl who wanted the young man. Still, that wasn’t what she, or he, was talking about. “Some really bad people, Atom. You’ve been on that island your whole life. You have no idea how cruel some people can be.”

“Why me?”

“Because of that maybe?” Rose pointed to his mechanical hand.

Atom looked down at the hand in question and flexed it again. The loud creak echoed through the small chamber.

“Jayne should be back with some fluid for you later,” Rose said. “To replace what you lost.”

Atom eyed the dark stains that streaked his fleshy fingers. “I’m sorry about your sheets. I don’t suppose this will ever come out.”

“Don’t worry. It won’t be the first time we’ve had oil in the bed.” The shocked expression that came over his face made Rose laugh again. “You really are quite sheltered.”

Atom looked away, as if embarrassed again.

“Listen,” Rose said. “I’m going to leave you in Jayne’s capable hands for your repairs.”

“I’m sure she knows what to do,” Atom said.

“There are a few things you need to know about her first. Did your father ever tell you about the Mechanics?”

“No.”

“They are a nasty group. A bunch of crackpot zealots who swear fealty to all things mechanical. No offense meant.”

“None taken.”

“They believe that technology is the only road to salvation for the souls of mankind. They preach the way of the clockwork and the might of the engineers to smite the Luddites of the world.”

“Is Jayne one of these Mechanics?”

“She used to be. Her parents sold her to the group when she was just a baby. That’s how they recruit members. She has no idea who her real family is.”

“How horrible.”

“Indeed. A few years ago she came to me, looking for a place to hide.”

“On the run from them?”

“Yes. I’m afraid she failed to meet their requirements to become a priestess.”

“I don’t see how. She’s very clever. She’s such a bright girl.”

Rose smiled at the kindness. Atom was a true gentleman. No wonder Gabriella was falling so hard. “True, but Jayne has a wild streak for unusual inventions. It gets her into a lot of trouble. Even with me. The Mechanic’s penalty for such behavior was death.”

“So she sought shelter aboard your vessel.”

“Yes.”

“Which you gave her despite the obvious consequences.”

Rose cocked her head at him. What was he driving at?

“That was very...humane of you,” Atom said with a smile.

“This is serious,” she said, despite her own smile. “The Mechanics beat the beliefs of their laws into their members. Jayne swears that she is through with them, and I trust her, but I’m going to have to ask the same of you. Will you trust her?”

“Yes,” Atom said without hesitation.

“Excellent,” Rose said. She stood. “Now if you’ll excuse me I have to—”

“What does she think of me?” Atom asked in a low voice.

“Who?” Rose asked as if she had no idea.

Atom hung his head even lower, waiting for an answer.

Rose sat on the bed and leaned in close to him. “She doesn’t know.”

Atom turned toward her, his strange eyes imploring her for the truth.

“She doesn’t know,” Rose repeated. “Dot and Jayne will keep it quiet for as long as you wish. It’s your business, Atom, not ours. I suggest being honest with her. I know I would appreciate the truth.”

“I see,” Atom said. “Thank you, Captain.”

“You’re welcome. Would you like to see her?”

Atom smiled. “Yes, please.”

“Let’s get you to your own quarters then. I realize you just saved my life, but I’ll be damned if I’m sleeping in any bed other than my own.”

## Chapter 12

### *Ship for Hire*

*In which our Gabriella falls in love, and our captain makes her final decision.*

Gabriella stood outside Atom's room, gathering her courage.

When he was fighting for his life behind closed doors, she found she had so much to tell him. So many things to say. The threat of losing him brought out so many emotions in her. Now that he was safe, and the threat had passed, she didn't know what she felt anymore.

Click opened the door. He smiled down at her. "He's all settled in. You can see him now."

"Thank you." She slipped past Click into the small berth.

Atom was in the bed, propped on a mountain of pillows, with his shirt removed, showing his bandage. Morning sunlight strayed in from the poorly shaded windows, highlighting his alabaster complexion. Gabriella should have been scandalized to visit a man in his bedchambers, especially a half dressed one. But after the incidents of the previous night, she supposed any sense of real normality in their relationship was long gone.

"Hello." She took a seat beside his bed.

"Hello." Atom pulled the blankets a little tighter around him.

"Well. I'll just leave you two alone, shall I?" Click ducked out before anyone could argue.

The room went quiet and they stared at one another.

Gabriella cleared her throat before she motioned to the bandage at his shoulder. "Does it hurt?"

Atom looked down to it. "Not much. All things considered."

"That was a very brave thing you did."

"It was nothing."

The room was quiet again for a little while.

"Gabriella," Atom said, absentmindedly picking the lint from his blanket.

"Yes?"

"I have something I feel I need to tell you." He looked down at his mechanical hand, his eyes narrowed with a look of worry, as if he had bad news for her.

"Is it about your arm?"

"Sort of."

Gabriella laid her hand over his metal hand. "I don't care about that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's not important. I don't think any less of you because of it."

"Well, that's good because—" he started.

"In fact, I'm rather fond of it," she said over him.

He lifted his confused face to hers. "You are?"

She raised his mechanical hand to her face and cradled it next to her cheek.

Atom swallowed hard.

The metal hand twitched against her flesh. The cold feel of it brought out an unusual desire in her. She longed to feel Atom's mechanical hand run through her hair, brush over her lips, trace across her bare skin, and sink deep between her legs. This last thought set her soul ablaze, not to mention her face. The heat rose to her cheeks, signaling the threat of panic. Gabriella forced herself to calm down. The last thing she wanted was for Atom to think she was just another flighty girl, especially with the ever composed Jayne aboard. Somehow, Gabriella managed to regain control of her emotions before her entire body went crimson with shame, embarrassment, lust, and want.

"See, I'm fine with it," she said. She placed his hand back onto the bed. "I don't think you're any less of a man just because you have a mechanical hand."

Atom looked down at the extremity in question. "Any less of a man."

"It doesn't change the way I feel about you one bit."

"Any less of a man," he said again.

"Atom?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

He looked up at her. "Exactly how do you feel about me?"

Gabriella panicked. Even though she had practiced this moment for the last few hours, she was now at a loss.

She wanted to say, 'I can't stop thinking about you.'

Or perhaps, 'you drive me mad with desire, Atom Loquacious.'

Or even, 'I think I'm falling in love with you.'

Instead, she said, "I think you're a wonderful man."

He closed his eyes before he asked, "Do you?"

What was she saying? Here was the bravest, not to mention most handsome man she had ever met, and all she could say was how wonderful she thought he was. It was a sorrowful pittance for all he had done. Inviting them so kindly into his home. Exposing his handicap in order to free them all. Taking a spear for her captain. He had risked his very life. Didn't he deserve more? That odd feeling came over Gabriella again. This time she couldn't control it. Before she knew what she was doing, she leaned forward and laid her lips on his.

At first, Atom froze under her mouth, his lips cold, stiff.

Gabriella was by no means a book of experience, but even she knew this was not a good sign. She was just about to back off when the young man eased his hands up her shoulders, pulling her closer to him. He parted his lips, drinking her full, open-mouthed and sweet. After a few moments of this gentle union, Atom wrapped his mechanical arm around her waist, pressed his mouth to hers with even more force than before, and kissed her with such a fiery passion that Gabriella wondered if he intended to consume her whole.



Gabriella fell into that kiss, tumbling head over heels deeper in love than she ever thought possible. For that's what it was. There was no denying it now. She loved this strange man, mechanical hand and all. There was no going back. She was in love. She felt things she had never felt before—so raw, so wild, so unexplainably hot.

"Oops," Jax said from the doorway. "Sorry."

Gabriella pulled away from Atom, her cheeks burning with desire and embarrassment. She didn't mind one bit.

"Don't stop on my account," Jax said with a grin. "I'll come back later." She pulled the door closed behind her.

The room was quiet once again, yet this time the sensation of unease was gone, replaced by a splendid, warm glow. Gabriella felt Atom's metal hand on hers. She looked at him and was pleased to see a wide grin spread across his handsome face.

"Did you have something you wanted to tell me?" she asked.

Atom shook his head. "It can wait. There are more important things to talk about."

"Like what?" Gabriella asked. She was hoping they could do more than just talk. Not much more, mind you, but enough.

"You can tell me how wonderful I am again. If you want."

Gabriella certainly wanted to.

She felt like she wanted to do just that very thing for the rest of her life.

\* \* \* \*

Rose sat at the head of the table, eying her weary crew. "I know you're all ready for a good night's rest, so I'll be brief."

Jax rushed into the mess hall. She took her seat near Rose. "I don't think Guppy will join us. She has her hands full."

The crew chuckled for a few moments, then wound down to a silent reverence. They all looked at Rose, for answers.

Rose sighed while she rubbed her temples with her fingertips. "First of all, I feel I need to apologize—"

"No," Magpie said.

Rose looked at the interruption with a frown.

"We all went with you willingly," Magpie continued. "We won't have you saying you're sorry for something we all walked right into."

"Hear, hear!" Jax concurred.

The others nodded, murmuring their agreement.

"It certainly weren't your fault," Magpie continued, "that the lab was empty."

Again nods and grunts rounded the room as the crew agreed.

"In fact," Jax said, "it would serve Ruby right if we go back and demand our wages. We did work. We deserve our pay."

Shouts of “aye” and “hear, hear” flooded the room. Rose held up a hand, signaling for the crew to simmer down.

“The laboratory wasn’t empty,” she said.

Several pairs of inquisitive eyes begged her for details.

“The cargo Ruby wanted is aboard the ship,” Rose said.

“What cargo?” Jax asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Jayne asked. “Ruby wants Atom’s arm.”

“Or Atom,” Rose added.

All eyes went wide.

“Captain!” Magpie shouted. “You can’t be serious!”

“I don’t believe it,” Jax said.

“My captain,” Click said, “I cannot, in good faith, allow such a—”

“Quiet!” Rose shouted.

The room went silent. Rose rubbed her temples again. This was becoming too much. She was getting too old for this kind of thing. The crew stared at her in silence for a few moments, before Rose rolled out another exasperated sigh. “Magpie.”

Magpie stared at Rose, arms crossed with her lip jutted out in an angry southern pout. She didn’t answer.

“Please send Ruby a bird as soon as we are within range,” Rose said.

“What should I say?” Magpie asked.

Everyone held their breath, awaiting Rose’s answer.

“Tell her.” Rose paused to grin at her loyal crew. “Tell her that the lab was empty, and we have nothing to show for our efforts.”

Everyone exhaled together, clearly relieved by her decision. Rose looked at Click, who smiled and gave her an impish wink.

“What will we do with him?” Jax asked.

It was just like Jax to plan ahead. They couldn’t have five minutes to just congratulate themselves for their magnanimous decision. No. With Jax, they always had to leap into the next phase of things.

What would they do with him? Again, all eyes turned to Rose.

“I don’t think that’s up to us,” Dot said. Like an ocean wave, faces turned to the doctor at the opposite end of the table. Dot ignored them, instead staring straight ahead, at Rose. “He’s not an object. We can’t make his choices for him.”

Rose smiled at the doctor’s words, thankful for not only the discretion, but also the gentle reminder. “She is right of course. It’s not our decision to make.”

“He has no home,” Magpie said. “No one to take him in. Nowhere to go. What will he do? What can he do?”

“Perhaps we should ask him,” Rose said. She stood and went to the speaking tubes in the corner of the room. Lifting the cap marked *guest quarters*, she shouted into the copper pipe. “Mr. Loquacious! Are you there?”

A few seconds passed and the trembling voice of Gabriella echoed up the tube. “Is there a problem, sir?”

“No problem, Guppy,” Rose said. “Is Atom listening?”

“I’m here,” Atom said in a distant voice.

“I have the crew gathered here,” Rose said. “We have decided to take your employment. Will you still have us?”

A quiet moment passed before Atom’s reply slipped up the tube, very faint and unsure. “You’ll help me find my father?”

“Yes,” Rose answered. “Will you hire us?”

Whispers whisked across the metal tube—the sound of Atom imploring Gabriella for some assurance to the validity of Rose’s offer.

“I assure you, Atom,” Rose said with a laugh, “I’m serious. Now will you hire us, young man?”

Again a small pause.

“Yes?” he half said, half asked.

A great whoop went up over the room as the rest of the crew rejoiced in his decision. Whether they were glad of the employment, or the promise of adventure, Rose would never be sure.

“Good,” she shouted back down the tubes. “Then we start first thing in the morning. I suggest you get a good night’s rest.”

The tubes shuddered with the laughter of the young couple. Rose snapped the lid closed, leaving them to their moment. In fact, she was ready for some moments of her own.

“That goes for the rest of you too,” she said. “Get plenty of sleep, for tomorrow we begin the search for an un-locatable man.”

“I would say the same to you, Cap,” Magpie said. “But with Click in your bed, I think we all know there’s a fat chance of that happening!”

Rose smirked while her crew laughed at her expense.

“Come on, Click.” Grabbing her cabin boy by the hand, she tossed her head back overdramatically. “Let’s give them something to talk about!”

Whistles and catcalls followed them from the room.

Once again, all was as it should be.

## About Regina Riley

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Regina doesn't live on a fantastic airship, nor does she have a mechanical lover. She does, however, have steam driven dreams of such things, and scrambles on awakening to translate them into cohesive tales so you can enjoy them with her. As an anglophile she's enchanted by the idea of Victorian England, but as a down home Southern girl she finds it easier to write Steampunk with an American slant. When she isn't fantasizing about handsome men made of clockworks, she enjoys writing paranormal erotica, as well as the occasional good old fashioned romance.

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