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The Golem and the Djinni

Written by Helene Wecker

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THE GOLEM AND THE DJINNI

HELENE WECKER

blue door

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For Kareem

1.

The Golem's life began in the hold of a steamship. The year was 1899; the ship was the *Baltika*, crossing from Danzig to New York. The Golem's master, a man named Otto Rotfeld, had smuggled her aboard in a crate and hidden her among the luggage.

Rotfeld was a Prussian Jew from Konin, a bustling town to the south of Danzig. The only son of a well-to-do furniture maker, Rotfeld had inherited the family business sooner than expected, on his parents' untimely death from scarlet fever. But Rotfeld was an arrogant, feckless sort of man, with no good sense to speak of; and before five years had elapsed, the business lay before him in tatters.

Rotfeld stood in the ruins and took stock. He was thirty-three years old. He wanted a wife, and he wanted to go to America.

The wife was the larger problem. On top of his arrogant disposition, Rotfeld was gangly and unattractive, and had a tendency to leer. Women were disinclined to be alone with him. A few matchmakers had approached him when he'd inherited, but their clients had been from inferior families, and he'd turned them away. When it became clear to all what kind of businessman he really was, the offers had disappeared completely.

Rotfeld was arrogant, but he was also lonely. He'd had no real love affairs. He passed worthy ladies on the street, and saw the distaste in their eyes.

It wasn't very long before he thought to visit old Yehudah Schaalman.

Stories abounded about Schaalman, all slightly different: that he was a disgraced rabbi who'd been driven out of his congregation; that he'd been possessed by a dybbuk and given supernatural powers; and even that he was over a hundred years old and slept with demon-women. But all the

stories agreed on this: Schaalman liked to dabble in the more dangerous of the Kabbalistic arts, and he was willing to offer his services for a price. Barren women had visited him in the dead of night and conceived soon after. Peasant girls in search of men's affections bought Schaalman's bags of powders, and then stirred them into their beloveds' beer.

But Rotfeld wanted no spells or love-potions. He had something else in mind.

He went to the old man's dilapidated shack, deep in the forest that bordered Konin. The path to the front door was a half-trampled trail. Greasy, yellowish smoke drifted from a chimney-pipe, the only sign of habitation. The walls of the shack slouched toward a nearby ravine, in which a stream trickled.

Rotfeld knocked on the door, and waited. After some minutes, he heard a shuffling step. The door opened a hand's width, revealing a man of perhaps seventy. He was bald, save for a fringe. His cheeks were deeply furrowed above a tangled beard. He stared hard at Rotfeld, as though daring him to speak.

"Are you Schaalman?" Rotfeld asked.

No answer, only the stare.

Rotfeld cleared his throat, nervous. "I want you to make me a golem that can pass for human," he said. "And I want it to be female."

That broke the old man's silence. He laughed, a hard bark. "Boy," he said, "do you know what a golem is?"

"A person made of clay," Rotfeld said, uncertain.

"Wrong. It's a beast of burden. A lumbering, unthinking slave. Golems are built for protection and brute force, not for the pleasures of a bed."

Rotfeld reddened. "Are you saying you can't do it?"

"I'm telling you the idea is ridiculous. To make a golem that can pass for human would be near impossible. For one thing, it would need some amount of self-awareness, if only enough to converse. Not to mention the body itself, with realistic joints, and musculature . . ."

The old man trailed off, staring past his visitor. He seemed to be considering something. Abruptly he turned his back on Rotfeld and disappeared into the gloom of the shack. Through the open door Rotfeld

could see him shuffling carefully through a stack of papers. Then he picked up an old leather-bound book and thumbed through it. His finger ran down a page, and he peered at something written there. He looked up at Rotfeld.

"Come back tomorrow," he said.

Accordingly, Rotfeld knocked again the next day, and this time Schaalman opened the door without pause. "How much can you pay?" he demanded.

"Then it can be done?"

"Answer my question. The one will determine the other."

Rotfeld named a figure. The old man snorted. "Half again, at the very least."

"But I'll have barely anything left!"

"Consider it a bargain," said Schaalman. "For isn't it written that a virtuous woman is more precious than rubies? And her virtue"—he grinned—"will be guaranteed!"

Rotfeld brought the money three days later, in a large valet case. The edge of the nearby ravine was newly disfigured, a piece the length of a man scooped away. An earth-stained spade leaned against a wall.

Schaalman opened the door with a distracted look, as though interrupted at a crucial moment. Streaks of mud crusted his clothing and daubed his beard. He saw the valet case and grabbed it from Rotfeld's hand.

"Good," he said. "Come back in a week."

The door slammed shut again, but not before Rotfeld had caught a glimpse inside the shack, of a dark figure laid out in pieces on a table—a slender trunk, rough limbs, and one curled hand.

"What do you prefer in a woman?" Schaalman asked.

It was the following week, and this time Rotfeld had been allowed inside. The shack was dominated by the table that Rotfeld had glimpsed before, and the young man couldn't help sneaking glances at its burden: a

human-shaped form, draped with a sheet. He said, "What do you mean, what do I *prefer*?"

"I'm creating a woman for you. I assumed you'd want some say in the matter."

Rotfeld frowned. "I like an attractive figure, I suppose—"

"Not her physical aspects, not yet. Her temperament. Her personality."

"You can *do* that?"

"Yes, I believe that I can," the old man said with pride. "At least, I can steer her toward certain proclivities."

Rotfeld thought hard. "I want her to be obedient."

"She'll already be obedient," Schaalman said, impatient. "That's what a golem is—a slave to your will. Whatever you command her, she'll do. She won't even wish otherwise."

"Good," Rotfeld said. But he was perplexed. Having put aside appearance and obedience, he had little idea what else he wanted. He was about to tell Rotfeld to do whatever he thought best—but then, in a burst of memory, he recalled his younger sister, the only girl he'd ever truly known. She'd been full of curiosity, and a burden to their mother, who could not stand her always underfoot and asking questions. In one of the few generous acts of his life, young Otto had taken her under his wing. Together they'd spent whole afternoons wandering through the woods, and he'd answered her questions about anything and everything. When she'd died at age twelve, drowned in a river on a summer afternoon, he'd lost the only person in his life who'd ever really mattered.

"Give her curiosity," he told Schaalman. "And intelligence. I can't stand a silly woman. Oh," he said, inspiration warming him to his task, "and make her proper. Not . . . lascivious. A gentleman's wife."

The old man's eyebrows shot up. He'd expected his client to request motherly kindness, or an eager sexual appetite, or else both; years of manufacturing love spells had taught him what men like Rotfeld thought they wanted in a woman. But curiosity? Intelligence? He wondered if the man knew what he was asking for.

But he only smiled and spread his hands. "I'll try," he said. "The results may not be as precise as you might wish. One can only do so much with clay." Then his face darkened. "But remember this. A creature can

only be altered so far from its basic nature. She'll still be a golem. She'll have the strength of a dozen men. She'll protect you without thinking, and she'll harm others to do it. No golem has ever existed that did not eventually run amok. You must be prepared to destroy her."

The task was finished the night before Rotfeld left for the docks at Danzig. He made his final trip to Schaalman's leading a dray-cart loaded with a large wooden crate, a modest brown dress, and a pair of women's shoes.

Schaalman appeared not to have slept for some time. His eyes were dark smudges, and he was pale, as though drained of some essential energy. He lit a lamp that hung above the worktable, and Rotfeld caught his first true glimpse of his intended.

She was tall, almost as tall as Rotfeld himself, and well proportioned: a long torso, breasts that were small but firm, a sturdy waist. Her hips were perhaps a bit square, but on her it seemed correct, even appealing. In the dim light he spied the dark shadow between her legs; he glanced away from it as though disinterested, aware of Schaalman's mocking eyes, and the pounding of his own blood.

Her face was wide and heart shaped, her eyes set far apart. They were closed; he could not tell their color. The nose was small and curved under at the tip, above full lips. Her hair was brown and had a slight wave, and was cut to brush her shoulders.

Tentative, half-believing, he placed a hand on her cool shoulder. "It looks like skin. It *feels* like skin."

"It's clay," said the old man.

"How did you do this?"

The old man only smiled, and said nothing.

"And the hair, and eyes? The fingernails? Are they clay too?"

"No, those are real enough," Schaalman said, blandly innocent. Rotfeld remembered handing over the case of money, and wondering what sort of supplies the old man needed to buy. He shivered and decided not to think about it again.

They dressed the clay woman and carefully lifted her heavy body into the crate. Her hair tangled about her face as they arranged her, and Rotfeld waited until the old man's back was turned before gently smoothing it into place again.

Schaalman found a small piece of paper and wrote on it the two necessary commands—one to bring her to life, and one to destroy her. He folded the paper twice, and placed it in an oilskin envelope. On the envelope he wrote *COMMANDS FOR THE GOLEM*, and then handed it to Rotfeld. His client was eager to wake her, but the old man was against it. "She might be disoriented for a time," he said. "And the ship will be too crowded. If someone realized what she was, they'd throw you both overboard." Reluctantly, Rotfeld agreed to wait until they reached America; and they nailed the lid on the crate, sealing her away.

The old man poured them each a finger of schnapps from a dusty bottle. "To your golem," he said, raising his glass.

"To my golem," Rotfeld echoed, and downed the schnapps. It was a triumphant moment, marred only by his persistent stomachache. He'd always had a delicate constitution, and the stress of the last few weeks had ruined his digestion. Ignoring his stomach, he helped the old man lift the crate into the dray-cart, and then led the horse away. The old man waved after the departing Rotfeld, as though seeing off a pair of newlyweds. "I wish you joy of her!" he called, and his cackle echoed through the trees.

The ship set sail from Danzig, and made its stop in Hamburg without incident. Two nights later Rotfeld lay in his narrow bunk, the oilskin envelope labeled *COMMANDS FOR THE GOLEM* tucked away in a pocket. He felt like a child who'd been given a present and then instructed not to open it. It would have been easier if he could've slept, but the pain in his stomach had grown into a lump of misery on the right side of his abdomen. He felt slightly feverish. The cacophony of steerage surrounded him: a hundred diverse snores, the hiccupping sobs of babies, an occasional retch as the ship rode from swell to trough.

He turned over, squirming against the pain, and reflected: surely the old man's advice was overcautious. If she was as obedient as promised, there'd be no harm in waking her, just to see. Then he could command her to lie in the crate until they reached America.

But what if she didn't work properly? What if she didn't wake at all, but only lay there, a lump of clay in the shape of a woman? It struck him for the first time that he'd seen no proof that Schaalman could do what he'd promised. Panicked, he fished the envelope from his pocket, withdrew from it the scrap of paper. Gibberish, meaningless words, a jumble of Hebrew letters! What a fool he'd been!

He swung his legs over the side of his bunk, and fetched a kerosene lamp off its nail. Pressing a hand to his side, he hurried through the maze of bunks to the stairwell and down to the hold.

It took him nearly two hours to find the crate, two hours of picking his way through stacks of suitcases and boxes bound with twine. His stomach burned, and cold sweat dripped into his eyes. Finally he moved aside a rolled-up carpet, and there it was: his crate, and in it his bride.

He found a crowbar, pried the nails from the crate, and yanked off the lid. Heart pounding, he pulled the paper from his pocket, and carefully sounded out the command labeled *To Wake the Golem*.

He held his breath, and waited.

Slowly the Golem came to life.

First to wake were her senses. She felt the roughness of wood under her fingertips, the cold, damp air on her skin. She sensed the movement of the boat. She smelled mildew, and the tang of seawater.

She woke a little more, and knew she had a body. The fingertips that felt the wood were her own. The skin that the air chilled was her skin. She moved a finger, to see if she could.

She heard a man nearby, breathing. She knew his name and who he was. He was her master, her entire purpose; she was his golem, bound to his will. And right now he wanted her to open her eyes.

The Golem opened her eyes.

Her master was kneeling above her in the dim light. His face and hair were drenched with sweat. With one hand he braced himself on the edge of the crate; the other was pressed at his stomach.

"Hello," Rotfeld whispered. An absurd shyness had tightened his voice. "Do you know who I am?"

"You're my master. Your name is Otto Rotfeld." Her voice was clear and natural, if a bit deep.

"That's right," he said, as though to a child. "And do you know who *you* are?"

"A golem." She paused, considering. "I don't have a name."

"Not yet," Rotfeld said, smiling. "I'll have to think of one for you."

Suddenly he winced. The Golem didn't need to ask why, for she could feel it as well, a dull ache that echoed his. "You're in pain," she said, concerned.

"It's nothing," Rotfeld said. "Sit up."

She sat up in the crate, and looked about. The kerosene lamp cast a feeble light that roamed with the ship's rocking. Long shadows loomed and retreated across stacks of luggage and boxes. "Where are we?" she asked.

"On a ship, crossing the ocean," Rotfeld said. "We're on our way to America. But you must be very careful. There are many people on this ship, and they'd be frightened if they knew what you were. They might even try to harm you. You'll need to lie here very still until we reach land."

The ship leaned sharply, and the Golem clutched at the edges of the crate.

"It's all right," Rotfeld whispered. He lifted a shaking hand to stroke her hair. "You're safe here, with me," he said. "My golem."

Suddenly he gasped, bent his head to the deck, and began to retch. The Golem watched with chagrin. "Your pain is growing worse," she said.

Rotfeld coughed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I told you," he said, "it's nothing." He tried to stand, but staggered, and fell to his knees. A wave of panic hit him as he began to realize that something was truly wrong.

"Help me," he whispered.

The command struck the Golem like an arrow. Swiftly she rose from her crate, bent over Rotfeld, and lifted him as though he weighed no more than a boy. With her master in her arms, she wove her way around the boxes, up the narrow staircase, and out of the hold.

A commotion broke out at the aft end of steerage. It spread down the deck, waking the sleepers, who grumbled and turned over in their bunks. A crowd began to grow around a cot near the hatch, where a man had collapsed, his face gray in the lantern-light. A call threaded its way from row to row: was there a doctor nearby?

One soon appeared, in pajamas and an overcoat. The crowd parted for him as he made his way to the cot. Hovering next to the sick man was a tall woman in a brown dress who watched, wide eyed, as the doctor undid the young man's shirt and pulled it back. Carefully the doctor prodded Rotfeld's abdomen, and was rewarded with a short scream.

The Golem lunged forward and snatched the man's hand away. The doctor pulled back, shocked.

"It's all right," the man on the cot whispered. "He's a doctor. He's here to help." He reached up, and clasped her hand.

Warily the doctor felt Rotfeld's abdomen again, one eye on the woman. "It's his appendix," he announced. "We must get him to the ship's surgeon, quickly."

The doctor grabbed one of Rotfeld's arms and pulled him to standing. Others rushed to help, and together the knot of men moved through the hatch, Rotfeld hanging half-delirious at its center. The woman followed close behind.

The ship's surgeon was the sort of man who did not appreciate being roused in the middle of the night, especially to cut open some nameless

peasant from steerage. One look at the man writhing weakly on his operating table, and he wondered if it was worth the trouble. Judging by the advanced state of the appendicitis and the high fever, the appendix had likely already burst, flooding the man's belly with poisons. The surgery alone might finish him off. After delivering their burden, the foreigners who'd brought the man had hovered by the hatchway, unsure of themselves, and then left without a word of English.

Well, there was nothing for it. He'd have to operate. He called down for his assistant to be roused and began laying out his instruments. He was searching for the ether jar when suddenly the hatch was wrenched open behind him. It was a woman, tall and dark-haired, wearing only a thin brown shift against the cold Atlantic air. She rushed to the side of the man on the table, looking near panicked. His wife or sweetheart, he supposed.

"I suppose it's too much to ask that you speak English," he said; and of course she only stared, uncomprehending. "I'm sorry, but you can't stay here. No women permitted in the surgery. You'll have to leave." He pointed at the door.

That, at least, got through: she shook her head vehemently and began to expostulate in Yiddish. "Look here," the surgeon began, and took her elbow to steer her out. But it was as though he'd grabbed hold of a lamppost. The woman would not move, only loomed over him, solid and suddenly gigantic, a Valkyrie come to life.

He dropped her arm as though it had scalded him. "Have it your way," he muttered, disconcerted. He busied himself with the ether jar, and tried to ignore the bizarre presence behind his shoulder.

The hatch opened again, and a young man fell in, looking roughly wakened. "Doctor, I'm—good lord!"

"Never mind her," the surgeon said. "She refuses to leave. If she faints, so much the better. Quick now, or he'll die before we can open him up." And with that, they etherized their patient and set to work.

If the two men had known the powerful struggle taking place inside the woman behind them, they would've deserted the surgery and run for their lives. Any lesser creation would have throttled them both the moment their knives touched Rotfeld's skin. But the Golem recalled the doctor in the hold,

and her master's assurance that he was there to help; and it had been that doctor who'd brought him here. Still, as they peeled back Rotfeld's skin and hunted through his innards, her hands twisted and clenched uncontrollably at her sides. She reached for her master in her mind, and found no awareness, no needs or desires. She was losing him, bit by bit.

The surgeon removed something from Rotfeld's body and dropped it in a tray. "Well, the damned thing's out," he said. He glanced over his shoulder. "Still on your feet? Good girl."

"Maybe she's simple," muttered the assistant.

"Not necessarily. These peasants have iron stomachs. Simon, keep that clamped!"

"Sorry, sir."

But the figure on the table was struggling for life. He inhaled once, and again; and then, with a long, rattling sigh, Otto Rotfeld's final breath left his body.

The Golem staggered as the last remnants of their connection snapped and faded away.

The surgeon bent his head to Rotfeld's chest. He took up the man's wrist for a moment, then gently placed it back. "Time of death, please," he said.

The assistant swallowed, and glanced at the chronometer. "Oh two hundred hours, forty-eight minutes."

The surgeon made a note, true regret on his face. "Couldn't be helped," he said, his voice bitter. "He waited too long. He must have been in agony for days."

The Golem could not look away from the unmoving shape on the table. A moment ago he'd been her master, her reason for being; now he seemed nothing at all. She felt dizzy, unmoored. She stepped forward and touched a hand to his face, his slack jaw, his drooping eyelids. Already the heat was fading from his skin.

Please stop that.

The Golem withdrew her hand and looked at the two men, who were watching in horrified distaste. Neither of them had spoken.

"I'm sorry," said the surgeon finally, hoping she would understand his tone. "We tried our best."

"I know," said the Golem—and only then did she realize that she'd understood the man's words, and replied in the same language.

The surgeon frowned, and shared a glance with his assistant. "Mrs. . . . I'm sorry, what was his name?"

"Rotfeld," said the Golem. "Otto Rotfeld."

"Mrs. Rotfeld, our condolences. Perhaps—"

"You want me to leave," she said. It wasn't a guess, nor was it a sudden understanding of the indelicacy of her presence. She simply *knew* it, as surely as she could see her master's body on the table, and smell the ether's sickly fumes. The surgeon's desire, his wish for her to be elsewhere, had spoken inside her mind.

"Well, yes, perhaps it would be better," he said. "Simon, please escort Mrs. Rotfeld back to steerage."

She let the young man put his arm about her and guide her out of the surgery. She was shaking. Some part of her was still casting about, searching for Rotfeld. And meanwhile the young assistant's embarrassed discomfort, his desire to be rid of his charge, was clouding her thoughts. What was happening to her?

At the door to the steerage deck, the young man squeezed her hand guiltily, and then was gone. What should she do? Go in there, and face all those people? She put her hand on the door latch, hesitated, opened it.

The wishes and fears of five hundred passengers hit her like a maelstrom.

I wish I could fall asleep. If only she would stop throwing up. Will that man ever quit snoring? I need a glass of water. How long until we reach New York? What if the ship goes down? If we were alone, we could make love. Oh God, I want to go back home.

The Golem let go of the latch, turned, and ran.

Up on the deserted main deck, she found a bench and sat there until morning. A chill rain began to fall, soaking her dress, but she ignored it, unable to focus on anything except the clamor in her head. It was as though, without Rotfeld's commands to guide her, her mind was reaching out for a substitute and encountering the ship's worth of passengers that lay below. Without the benefit of the bond between master and golem, their wishes and fears did not have the driving force

of commands—but nonetheless she heard them, and felt their varying urgencies, and her limbs twitched with the compulsion to respond. Each one was like a small hand plucking at her sleeve: *please, do something.*

The next morning, she stood at the railing as Rotfeld's body was lowered into the sea. It was a blustery day, the waves white-tipped and choppy. Rotfeld's body hit the water with barely a splash; in an instant the ship had left it behind. Perhaps, the Golem thought, it might be best to hurl herself overboard and follow Rotfeld into the water. She leaned forward and peered over the edge, trying to gauge the water's depth; but two men hurriedly stepped forward, and she allowed herself to be drawn back.

The small crowd of onlookers began to disperse. A man in ship's livery handed her a small leather pouch, explaining that it held everything that had been on Rotfeld's person when he died. At some point a compassionate deckhand had placed a wool coat about her shoulders, and she tucked the pouch into a pocket.

A small knot of passengers from steerage hovered nearby, wondering what to do about her. Should they escort her below decks, or simply leave her be? Rumors had circled the bunks all night. One man insisted that she'd carried the dead man into steerage in her own two arms. Then there was the woman who muttered that she'd seen Rotfeld at Danzig—he'd made himself conspicuous by berating the deckhands for not taking care with a heavy crate—and that he'd boarded the ship alone. They remembered how she'd grabbed at the doctor's hands, like a wild animal. And she was simply *odd*, in a way they couldn't explain even to themselves. She stood far too still, as if rooted to the deck, while those around her shivered in the cold and leaned with the ship. She hardly blinked, even when the ocean mist struck her face. And as far as they could tell, she hadn't yet shed a single tear.

They decided to approach her. But the Golem had felt their fears and suspicions and she turned from the rail and walked past them, her stiff back a clear request for solitude. They felt her passing as a

slap of cold, grave-smelling air. Their resolve faltered; they left her alone.

The Golem made her way to the aft staircase. She passed steerage and continued down to the depths of the hold: the one place in her short existence where she hadn't felt herself in peril. She found the open crate and climbed into it, then drew the lid into place above her. Muffled in darkness, she lay there, reviewing the few facts of which she was certain. She was a golem, and her master was dead. She was on a ship in the middle of the ocean. If the others knew what she was, they would be afraid of her. And she had to stay hidden.

As she lay there, the strongest of the desires drifted down to her from the decks above. A little girl in steerage had misplaced her toy horse, and now wailed for it, inconsolable. A man traveling second class had been three days without a drink, trying to make a fresh start; he paced his tiny cabin, shaking, fingers knotted in his hair, unable to think about anything except a glass of brandy. Each of these, and many others, pulled at her in turn, rising and falling. They urged her to climb out of the hold, to help in some way. But she remembered the suspicions of the passengers on the foredeck, and stayed in the crate.

She lay there the rest of the day and into the night, listening to the boxes around her shift and groan. She felt useless, purposeless. She had no idea what to do. And her only clue to where they were going was a word that Rotfeld had spoken. *America*. It might mean anything.

The next morning, the ship awoke to warmer weather and a welcome sight: a thin line of gray between ocean and sky. Passengers drifted to the deck, watching westward as the line thickened and stretched. It meant all their wishes granted, their fears forgotten, if only for the moment; and down in the hold the Golem felt an unexpected and blissful relief.

The constant thrum of the ship's propellers quieted to a purr. The ship slowed. And then came the distant sound of voices, yelling and

cheering. Curiosity made the Golem rise at last from her crate, and she emerged onto the foredeck, into the noonday sun.

The deck was crowded with people, and at first the Golem didn't see what they were waving at. But then, there she was: a gray-green woman standing in the middle of the water, holding a tablet and bearing aloft a torch. Her gaze was unblinking, and she stood so still: was it another golem? Then the distance became clear, and she realized how far away the woman was, and how gigantic. Not alive, then; but the blank, smooth eyes nevertheless held a hint of understanding. And those on deck were waving and shouting at her with jubilation, crying even as they smiled. This, too, the Golem thought, was a constructed woman. Whatever she meant to the others, she was loved and respected for it. For the first time since Rotfeld's death, the Golem felt something like hope.

The ship's horn sounded, making the air vibrate. The Golem turned to go back down to the hold, and only then did she glimpse the city. It rose, enormous, at the edge of an island. The tall, square buildings seemed to move between each other, dancing in rows as the ship drew closer. She glimpsed trees, piers, a harbor alive with smaller craft, tugs and sailboats that skimmed the water like insects. There was a long gray bridge that hung in a net of lines, stretching east to another shore. She wondered if they would go under it; but instead the great ship turned westward and pulled in closer to the docks. The sea became a narrow river.

Men in uniform walked up and down the foredeck, shouting. *Go collect your belongings*, they said. *We'll dock soon at New York, and you'll be taken to Ellis Island by ferry. Your luggage in the hold will be delivered to you there.* Not until she'd heard these messages repeated half a dozen times did the Golem realize that the men were speaking in different languages, and that she understood every single one of them.

Within minutes the deck had been cleared of passengers. She moved into the shadow of the wheelhouse, and tried to think. She had no possessions save the coat she'd been given; its dark wool was growing warm in the sunlight. She felt inside the pocket and found the little leather satchel. There was that, at least.

A trickle of passengers reemerged from the stairway, and then a

general flood, all dressed for travel and carrying their bags and suitcases. The uniformed men began to shout again: *Form an orderly line. Be ready to give us your name and nationality. No pushing. No crowding. Mind your children.* The Golem stood apart, unsure. Should she join them? Find somewhere to hide? Their minds clamored at her, all wanting only a speedy trip through Ellis Island and a clean bill of health from the inspectors.

One of the uniformed men saw the Golem standing alone and hesitant, and walked toward her. A passenger intercepted him, put a hand to his shoulder, and began to talk in his ear. It was the doctor from steerage. The ship's man was carrying a sheaf of papers, and he flipped through them, searching. He frowned and stepped away from the doctor, who melted back into line.

"Ma'am," the officer called, looking straight at the Golem. "Come here, please." All around them went quiet as the Golem approached. "You're the one whose husband died, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"My condolences, ma'am. It's probably just an oversight, but you don't seem to be on the manifest. May I see your ticket?"

Her ticket? She had none, of course. She could lie, and say she'd lost it, but she'd never lied before and didn't trust herself to do it well. She realized that her only options were to remain silent, or to tell the truth.

"I don't have a ticket," she said, and smiled, hoping that would help.

The officer sighed wearily and placed a hand around the Golem's arm, as though to prevent her from running away. "You'll have to come with me, ma'am."

"Where are we going?"

"You're going to sit in the brig until we get the passengers sorted, and then we'll ask you a few questions."

What should she do? There was no way to answer their questions without exposing herself. Already everyone was staring. Alarmed, she turned in the man's insistent grip, looking for some sort of escape. They were still under way, fording the middle of the river, smaller ships gliding to either side. Beyond the busy piers, the city gleamed invitingly.

The officer gripped her arm harder. "Ma'am. Don't make me force you."

But he didn't want to force her, she saw. He didn't want to deal with her at all. More than anything, the officer wished she would just disappear.

The edge of a smile lifted the Golem's mouth. Here, finally, was a desire she could gratify.

With a flick of her elbow, she broke from the startled officer and ran to the railing. Before anyone could even shout out, she vaulted the edge, arced out into the shimmering Hudson, and sank like a stone.

A few hours later, a stevedore smoking a cigarette on the corner of West and Gansevoort saw a woman walk past from the direction of the river. She was soaking wet. She wore a man's woolen jacket and a brown dress that clung immodestly to her body. Her hair was plastered to her neck. Most astonishing was the thick, brackish mud that covered her skirt and shoes.

"Hey, miss," he called out to her, "you go for a swim?"

The woman gave him a strange smile as she went by. "No," she said. "I walked."