

***HERE WE COME
LÄSSAILING***

JUSTIN ROBINSON



A CITY OF DEVILS COMPANION STORY



Candlemark & Gleam

First edition published 2014.

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I wasn't entirely used to Christmas in Los Angeles.

Back where I'm from—that's Omaha, Nebraska—we have indications when the seasons are going to change. The weather gets cold. Leaves fall off trees. We have snow, even. I told that to my boss and he just stared at me in horror. Considering this was the first time he did and it wasn't because I have lots and lots of sharp teeth and a mouth that can unhinge, I really think we've been making progress.

I also wasn't used to it because I didn't celebrate Christmas. Not anymore. Not since I was turned.

That was the summer of '52, right after I came out to LA. Yeah, it was the middle of the Night War, but they were still making pictures then. Not the human movie industry, since that was pretty much over, but the monsters. We even got a couple of them out in Omaha. I watched them at the drive-in. From a neighboring hill, but I still saw them.

Stupid me, I wanted a doppelgänger to turn me, but it's not like you get to choose who catches you alone. Well, okay, I guess you do, if you answer one of those ads. I didn't know about them back then. I thought my chances were good. This was Hollywood! The whole place was doppelgängers.

No, they had sirens too.

That's how I ended up with gills, fins, those teeth I mentioned,

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and some other changes that a lady would rather not discuss in mixed company. It's also how I ended up with the last name Sargasso. We sirens and gill men tend to be a family-oriented bunch.

It was a bit of a shock for me. I had never seen the ocean before and all of a sudden it was like, "There you go! You live there now!" I couldn't even swim. Well, I could, but I didn't know that until Seamus Sargasso threw me off a cliff in San Pedro. After that, it was more instinct than anything else. Now I can swim better than the best of them.

Just about every monster out there has a similar story. The world went crazy, we wanted to be one thing, and nope, we're something else. I don't care who you are, no one wants to be a zombie. Or a crawling eye. Or a nosferatu. Or a blob. I could go on like this, but I won't.

I first became aware that it was around Christmas because one of my roommates was sobbing. This wasn't unusual; Llorona was always sobbing. It was her whole thing. At first, I thought she was miserable living with us, but Mira, my other roommate, assured me that it was just a ghost deal.

Mira's a doppelgänger. Some girls get all the luck.

Anyway, when Llorona moved in, the landlord wouldn't let us tear up the wall and put her remains behind it like you're supposed to, so we just stuck her in one of the bottom drawers in the living room. Llorona insisted that this was because she had to be the closest to the center of the apartment for a proper haunting, but I think she just wanted to be in the way.

Llorona was crying out in the living room, just floating there and sobbing out her bloody tears, and I was ignoring her. It wasn't even like she was crying about a boyfriend or a missed part or anything. She just cried. All the time. I was going to ask her to keep it down, but when I came into the living room, I saw

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that she was actually on the phone, talking through her sobs.

“I *hyuch* can *ough* be home *ahuhuhuh* on Sunday,” she said, and I deciphered it only because I was getting good at speaking Llorona. “Good *hyuch* bye.”

The phone floated back onto the cradle on a tendril of ectoplasm. Mira was going to be mad. She hated it when Llorona didn’t clean up her ’plasm.

“Going home?” I asked her, just to be saying something.

“Yep! *Ahuhuhuh*. Looking *ough* forward to Christmas cheer *ahuhuhuhuh*.”

Home for Llorona was the haunted house she died in. It was down in Westlake on a stretch of Shatto they called Spookstreet. I wouldn’t say that name in polite conversation either, but the ghosts seemed just fine with it. At least amongst themselves. Wasn’t much of a drive from Torrance, but moving a ghost for a vacation of more than a day or so was a *process*. Meant her bones were coming out of the drawer and tracking bone dust over the room.

I had met Llorona’s extended clan once or twice and they were pleasant enough. They didn’t have the same last name like us Sargassos. That was partly due to the way ghosts liked to name themselves. Her father called himself The Bloody Torso, and I also met The Green Lady, Wally Wraith, and Dismembered Mama. This was at a barbecue for the last Mass Grave Day, and though Mira and I weren’t family, we were welcomed as such. We had to spend the time being startled every couple minutes as the ghosts compulsively haunted us, but it was still nice.

Mira came into the room then. She was still dressed from work. She got to be a chorus girl at Visionary, while I was stuck answering phones without anyone discovering me for the pictures. I cut Llorona off, because Mira didn’t have family and

I didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

Well, she probably had a family. A human family, but a nice girl never asks about those. I felt my gills trying to stand at attention just from thinking about it.

"Hi, Mira."

"Hey, girls," Mira said. "You look happy." That was directed at Llorona, whose sobs had taken on a more spritely air.

"You know. *Ahuhuhuhuh*. Christmas always *hyuch* puts me in a good *ough* mood."

"Me too," I said, smiling.

They both frowned. "I thought you didn't celebrate Christmas."

"I don't. I mean we don't."

"You *ough* know how *hyuch* they are," Llorona said to Mira, who nodded sadly.

They. Didn't have to specify there. That meant gill men and sirens, the sea people. Turned out there were lots of *theys* when it came to monsters, but this particular one always came out around Christmas.

"We have our own holiday," I said.

Mira and Llorona exchanged a dubious look. "Well, merry Christmas to you."

"And have a *ahuhuhuhuh* Happy New Year."

It was strange watching my two roommates being so awkward around me. So often we were just Mira and Serendipity and Llorona, the Three Monstketeers. Birds of a feather—or fish of a scale, to use a Sargasso term—and all that. They weren't quite used to the whole "different religion" thing, though.

The irony was, Mira wasn't really religious at all. Ask her and she would say she's Christian, but what she meant was the mainline Protestant version that was sweeping through America. The one that stated Jesus was a monster (a zombie,

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technically, though they liked to forget that part), and this was about His people inheriting the earth. Most monsters would say they were that kind of Christian. But I had never seen Mira go to church. She slept in on Sundays just like the rest of us.

Llorona was Catholic. The weird part was it was the same Catholic Church as before. Oh, sure, the pope was a vampire, but it was the same church. They had human members and even some holdover human priests. She actually *did* go to church, though it was hardly a weekly thing.

But because I was Dagonist, things were weird now.

“Thank you,” I said, flashing them another smile, because that was easier than lecturing.

Church was a weekly thing for me, only I went on Friday nights like we do. I was in the choir, and that particular Friday—after Mr. Moss let me off early, bless him—I sang a nice hymn for the assemblage. The Temple Dagon was a coral structure just off the southern point of San Pedro, thoughtfully built on a raised bit of lava rock. To get out there, you needed a quick, refreshing dip in the ocean. All of the local sea clans showed up on Fridays: the Sargassos, the Kalahs, the Marshes, and so forth and so on. If someone didn’t show, it was a minor scandal.

Truth be told, and I would never admit this to my mother, I didn’t pay attention to the sermons much. I liked the songs mostly for the melodies. I could kind of tune out the parts about the great city rising from the deep and the children of the sea ruling over the land. I didn’t think much of my pantheon awakening from their eons-long slumber and devouring the populace in a fit of unreasoning hunger. I barely even knew what the stars would look like when they were “right.”

I really could hit my notes, though. Like most sirens, I have an impressive four-octave range. That was up three and a half octaves since the change. When I joined the choir, they called

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me an alto, mostly because the term they actually used didn't really have a translation. I don't even really know how to write it. I'm not sure there *is* a written version of our language, since I'm pretty sure some gill man is still in the process of making it up. They like to say that we sea folk are the True Monsters and all that, but I bet if you asked any of the other monsters they'd say the same things about themselves.

The entire choir was composed of sirens, since gill men aren't known for their singing voices. I did feel slightly bad for the girls that got labeled as baritones. Just felt like a slap in the face to me.

After I was done with the singing, I mostly just woolgathered while I stared at the bas-reliefs on the coral walls. They were supposed to be horrifying, and I suppose if you're not used to tentacles they can be unnerving. I found them calming. So while the Deep Father was talking to the congregation about the upcoming holiday (blah blah stars are right blah blah rise of the city blah blah a million years of ruling—I'd heard it a thousand times), I was mostly thinking about the season.

This wasn't a good thing for a siren to mention to anyone, but I missed Christmas. I had loved Christmas back when I was still human, but they turn me, I'm half fish, and now I celebrate the Feast of the Old Gods. I mean, I was never very religious before. Jesus was fine, I suppose, and his birthday was a good thing. Mostly I liked the caroling, the presents, and all of that. The real tragedy was now I could be a world-champion caroler and I wasn't allowed!

And sometimes you just want a Christmas tree, you know?

After church, I rejoined my family. Gill men and sirens, all of us. My mother, Serenity, was with her husband, Seamus. He wasn't really my father, since he had nothing to do with changing me, so he was more of a stepfather. Other than throwing me in

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the water that one time, we had a good relationship. I was close with his sons, as well as with my sister, Sincerity.

Serenity Sargasso looked a lot like I did. Her hair was much greener—apparently our hair goes from black to green as we age, so that was something else for me to be self-conscious about—and her skin a darker blue. Her stripes were wider, too, but there was a bit more of her than me.

Seamus Sargasso was a gill man, so while our skin was slick and smooth, his was covered in bony ridges. Age had made him harder and craggier than most. He looked like a green version of the same lava rock we were standing on.

“Serendipity,” my mother said. “I didn’t think you were coming.”

The judgment had already started. You’d think that me being a choirgirl might head that off. You would be wrong. “I wouldn’t miss it,” I said, as chipper as I could manage.

“I thought what with you living in Torrance...”

“It’s only a few miles inland.”

“You could live out here in San Pedro. Have you met Finn Marsh? He has a house. He’s about your age, you know. Some of the same interests.”

“He likes the pictures too?”

“Fishing.”

“Fishing movies?”

My mother thought about it. The answer was clearly no. “When are you coming home?” she said, changing the subject like mothers do.

“I’ll be back the day of the Feast, and the following week.”

“Good. I can’t have you miss the Dying of the Stars. The Kalahs are already talking, you know. What with you working for a... a... detective.”

“Mr. Moss is a good man.”

“A human!”

“He’s very respectful.”

Mother shook her head. “You can’t trust humans, dear. You didn’t fight in the Night War. You don’t know how... brutal. How savage they can be.”

I tried not to roll my eyes, really I did. But pretty soon the seawater was coming out of my goggles and the whole world went blurry. That was the most annoying part of the change. All of a sudden I couldn’t see without a layer of seawater between me and the world. “Oh Judas priest,” I muttered.

“Serendipity!”

“Listen to your mother,” Seamus said.

I sighed. “I didn’t think I could curse to our Slumbering God in a church.”

“No, blasphemy is fine,” Mother said, still scandalized. “You’re thinking of your old life.”

Both she and Seamus glanced around, horrified at having brought up my former existence as a human.

“Well, okay. I’ll see you guys when I come home.”

“If you lived at home you would see us every day,” Mother said.

Yeah, I figured that out, I did not say.

“Can’t wait to see you.” I hugged my mother and sister and swam back to shore, collecting enough water to see with before I surfaced.

This year, the Feast was a few days after Christmas. It moved around the calendar on some logic that only the Deep Fathers knew about. They were probably making it up. My mother might be horrified to learn I thought that way about my faith, but there you have it. Makes me sound terrible.

The important thing was that while the last two Christmases I had been occupied on our somber tradition of praying for the apocalypse, this year I could enjoy the holiday.

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Well, maybe.

Llorona hadn't invited me to her place. She was family-oriented like me, and probably wanted to spend her time with blood—well, *ectoplasm*—relatives. Mira, though. She liked studio parties with all her friends. Not actor friends—I had checked. Mostly they were chorus girls and grips and so on. Lots of zombies, doppelgängers, and killer vegetables, with nary a crawling eye or robot in sight. No, if I was going to go to a party I wouldn't enjoy, it would be to get discovered.

I really am terrible.

I hoped Mira would be up for some caroling. Maybe trimming a tree or finding a spot to go ice skating. There was an indoor rink in the Valley somewhere, or I could just hope a mad scientist froze one of the reservoirs. It had happened before.

I went home on the redcar. It was after dark by the time I did, and the whole car was stuffed with monsters. I was the only one of the sea people, though. Not many of us got inland as far as Torrance. I went up to my apartment only after I stopped at the automat for dinner. Mira was home, shifting her face to cycle through makeup. I didn't know how she figured out what looked good without a mirror, but I didn't bring that up. That kind of thing would have been in terrible taste.

"Hey, Mira. Do you have any plans for Christmas?"

"Oh, just the usual. Why? You aren't aiming for a conversion."

"No! No, nothing like that." *For all the good it would do, you're a land-dweller.* "The Feast of the... erm... my celebration is actually after Christmas, so I'm free! I was wondering what you're doing and thought maybe I could tag along?"

"Oh, sure! Party at the Ton Ton Club. The Visionary group is going down there after sundown. Then we thought we might like to go hunting, see if any humans are in the Christmas spirit."

"Oh."

“You sound disappointed.”

“Yeah, I was more thinking... tree. Maybe singing. Eggnog.”

“Ser, did you just get off the bus from Kansas?”

“Nebraska. And it was two years ago.”

“No, honey, nothing like that. You might find a church group willing to humor you.”

“No!” My shock was genuine, which, well, shocked me. “I’m sorry, but I can’t be with another... faith. Not so close to the holiday.”

“Sorry, Ser,” she said, her face going blank, then reforming with larger, green-rimmed eyes. “I think you’re out of luck.”

That was how I ended up a depressed and lonely siren around Christmas day. That would have been a terrible way to end things. Fortunately, Serenity Sargasso might have raised a borderline apostate, but she didn’t raise a quitter. I put on a jacket—not that I needed it, since Los Angeles doesn’t get that cold and besides, I put up with the chill of the Pacific—and took a redcar to a part of the city I never went to and only rarely thought about.

The streets were full of monsters hunting humans here. It was enough to put me deeper in a funk if I thought about it too much. I did my best to ignore it, just as they ignored me. A headless horseman rode by on his spectral charger, leaving flaming hoofprints on the blacktop while a phantom played a mad reel on his violin on someone’s front lawn. I walked past a pumpkinhead standing motionless in front of a house and knocked on the door.

“Go away,” said the voice.

“It’s me. Serendipity Sargasso.”

The door opened, revealing my employer, Nick Moss. He was a short, furry man. Brown eyes and hair, dressed in the remnants of a rumpled suit. His gun was still under his left armpit, and his cold iron dagger under his right.

“Miss Sargasso?”

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“Merry Christmas, Mr. Moss,” I said, holding out the present I’d gotten for him at the men’s store. I had no idea if he’d like it or not. Men liked new ties, right? And he was always dragging his through soup and slime.

He didn’t take it.

“Nick? Nick, you aren’t going to let her in, are you?!” wailed the pumpkinhead.

“Get bent, Sam,” my boss said. He turned to me. “Why are you here?”

“Do you celebrate Christmas?”

“Sure. I have a tree and everything. I’m getting ready for a... something happened last year... and you know what? Not important. Come in.”

He opened the door and I went inside. Just as quickly, he locked it behind us. He did have a tree. No presents under it, mostly because any presents would be bigger than the tree itself, but it was there. He was drinking brandy and watching some show about aliens. The house was warm, and despite him being armed, it felt comfortable.

“Brandy?”

“Please.”

He came back with a brandy and handed it to me.

“I got you a gift, Mr. Moss.”

He took it, staring at it like it might start talking. “I, uh... I guess you better call me Nick,” he said.

“And you can call me Serendipity.”

“Well, sit down, Serendipity, and we can watch what passes for Christmas entertainment.”

He took a place on his chair and I took the couch. The show was terrible and the next one was even worse, but I didn’t care one bit.