

Marion Tavares

The Trawler

MARION TAVARES STOMPED OUT OF the Bank of Arkham with an expression so stormy that the uniformed guard at the door scurried out of her way. The trip had been a waste. She'd dolled up in her Sunday best and prepared a neat folder full of financial records and a proposed repayment schedule. But none of it had mattered. The bank manager had barely glanced at her or her papers before he'd turned down her loan application.

Her business partner, Annalise Taylor, waved her over to a shady street-side bench, polishing off the last of an ice cream cone. Anna looked much younger than her twenty-three years, but she was one of the hardest workers Marion had ever met. Someday they'd own a fishing company together, but right now Taylor & Tavares Trawling seemed further away than ever.

"Sorry," she said, brushing crumbs off her lap. "I should have saved you some."

"I'm not hungry," declared Marion.

Anna stood, linking her arm with Marion's and squeezing.

"Went that well, did it?" she asked.

Marion snorted, some of her fury bleeding away. Anna wouldn't hold her failure against her. They'd figure it out. Always had.

"Nope," she said. "Apparently, we're not a stable investment opportunity, whatever that means. We'll have to fund the *Wayfarer's* repairs some other way."

"Plan B it is. Is that the one where we work overtime, or the one where we hold up the bank?"

"Overtime," replied Marion, snickering. "Some of us have standards."

"You're no fun."

Bantering, they headed for the docks without a second look at the bank or the shadowy figure who stood at an upper window, watching them.

THE CHOPPY WAVES OF THE ATLANTIC slapped on the *Wayfarer's* hull, and the orange rays of the setting sun glinted off the water. Marion clapped a hand to one shoulder, trying to massage away the pain

of the long workday. The other crews had packed up an hour ago, returning up the Miskatonic to the docks to process their catch. Now the *Wayfarer* and its crew of two worked the water alone.

Annalise climbed up the ladder from the hold, rubber boots squeaking. Her hair had escaped from beneath the confines of her hand-knit cap, sticking out in clown-like puffs. Marion would have commented except for the fact that she knew she didn't look much better. Her shirt was stuck to her back with spray and sweat, and her curls seemed to have developed a mind of their own.

"I'm thinking we ought to head back," said Annalise, perching on the edge of the hatch. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

"Did we make quota?" replied Marion.

Annalise sighed, and that was answer enough. Marion shook her head.

"If we come in short on the catch today, we'll have to work on Sunday," she said.

Annalise groaned.

"Come on, Mare," she said. "Give a girl a break. The light's fading anyway. We'll be pulling up nothing but seaweed and old boots after dark."

"Not if we rig up the floodlight." Marion stroked her chin in thought. "One or two good runs with that bright light shining on the water and we might even be able to take Saturday off."

Annalise tugged her cap more firmly onto her head.

"I want that in writing," she said, and Marion knew she'd won.

THE ANCIENT WINCH LET OUT A PAINED groan as it strained to haul the heavy net into the boat. Marion's heart leaped. Her little light trick must have worked. She leaned over the side of the boat, trying to catch a glimpse of the trawl. The net must have been full near to bursting to make the winch work that hard.

They needed the win. A two-person crew couldn't begin to compete with the bigger boats; their hauls were too small to attract the attention of buyers willing



Certificate No. 21

Art. 10. Customs Acts 1892

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



Sec. 1319, Rev. Stat.

CERTIFICATE OF ENROLLMENT

ENROLLMENT. In conformity to Title L, "REGULATION OF VESSELS," of the Revised Statutes of the United States, required by

Miss Marion Tavares
having taken and subscribed to the oath together with *Miss Annalise*
Island origin, do solemnly proclaim our vessel as declared before
with all relevant statutes and
Arkham, Massachusetts.

ship or vessel called the *Wayfarer*
United States, and that the said ship or vessel
at the year *1892*
Rhode Island

JEFFRIES WARD, PRESIDENT
MARTIN STILES, VICE-PRES.



FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF ARKHAM

CAPITAL \$1,500,000. SURPLUS & PROFITS \$

Dear Miss Tavares,

With regard to your loan application, we would meet with you in our offices in Arkham. For any further doubt, be assured that First Bank of Arkham has considerable pride in supporting local businesses in a manner of enterprise across within Arkham and the state of Massachusetts.

In order to assess your application appropriately, please bring with you your financial records for the next ten years. With these records, we will be in a position to determine your creditworthiness.

to pay top dollar. If they didn't do something, they'd still be on the *Wayfarer* twenty years from now, barely eking out a living. She wanted something better for her and Annalise. Maybe they weren't blood, but they'd always be family. After her father's heart attack, Marion didn't take that sort of thing for granted.

She'd been saving, but it was slow going. If they upgraded the winch and increased their yields, the bank might look at their loan application a bit more favorably. They could upgrade to a bigger boat, hire more help. If all else failed, she could always take Anna's joking suggestion to rob the bank. Her chuckles at the idea faded out as the winch let out one final moan and then stopped altogether.

An eerie stillness settled over the boat, broken only by the rhythmic clap of the waves.

"That doesn't sound good," said Annalise.

Heart sinking, Marion knelt next to the ancient winch, which was emitting fitful curls of foul-smelling smoke. Anna elbowed her out of the way with an exasperated huff.

"You couldn't find your way around a motor with a road map; we both know that. Scoot," she ordered.

"I'll pull the net in by hand then."

"Good idea. Although I can't see a dang thing even with your floodlight. We might have to leave it till tomorrow morning."

Marion didn't even want to think about that. Early mornings provided the best haul. Missing one would be a step in the wrong direction. Sometimes it felt like all they did was take one step forward and one step back, over and over again.

Grumbling, she leaned over the railing, pulling the net in with the self-assurance of a longtime sailor. Her father and granddad had both been trawlers, and they'd taken her out on the water starting when she was four. Things like that got into the blood, and they never washed out even though both men were long gone.

The netting lifted out of the water with disconcerting ease. She was strong, but not that strong. The weight of the catch usually made her strain, but this...

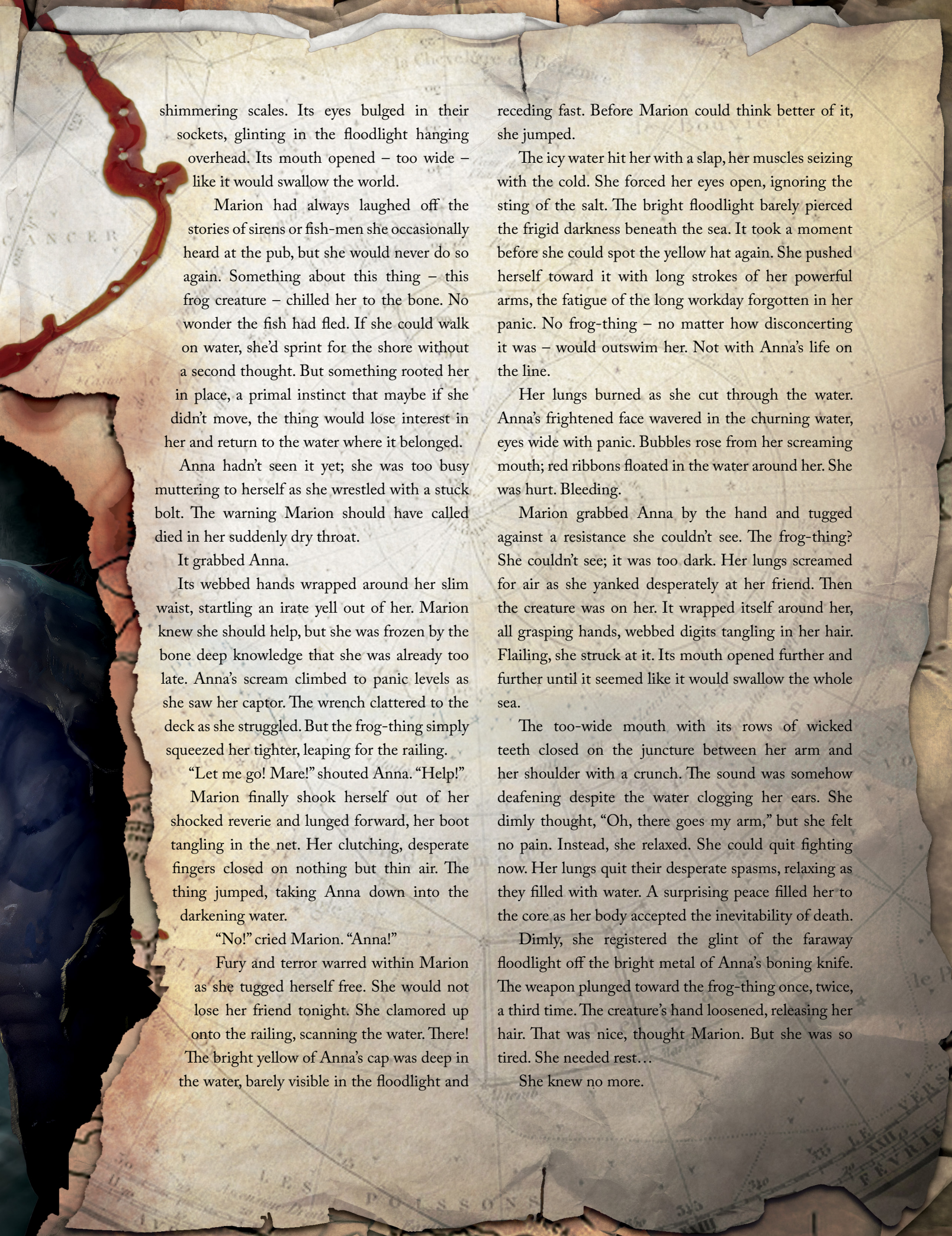
The net was empty.

Stomach plummeting to her toes, she groped at the weave, searching for a rip. Sure, twilight runs didn't usually result in the biggest hauls, but they should have gotten something. But the weave was intact, the rope scratchy beneath her searching fingers. It was like the fish had vanished. Maybe a shark nearby? The theory made sense but did little to quell the eerie skitter up the back of her neck as she looked out over the empty water.

She turned, net in hand, to display its lack of fish.

Something crouched on the railing above Anna. It was shaped like a man, its proportions stretched like taffy. The head was grotesquely oversized, the skin covered in





shimmering scales. Its eyes bulged in their sockets, glinting in the floodlight hanging overhead. Its mouth opened – too wide – like it would swallow the world.

Marion had always laughed off the stories of sirens or fish-men she occasionally heard at the pub, but she would never do so again. Something about this thing – this frog creature – chilled her to the bone. No wonder the fish had fled. If she could walk on water, she'd sprint for the shore without a second thought. But something rooted her in place, a primal instinct that maybe if she didn't move, the thing would lose interest in her and return to the water where it belonged.

Anna hadn't seen it yet; she was too busy muttering to herself as she wrestled with a stuck bolt. The warning Marion should have called died in her suddenly dry throat.

It grabbed Anna.

Its webbed hands wrapped around her slim waist, startling an irate yell out of her. Marion knew she should help, but she was frozen by the bone deep knowledge that she was already too late. Anna's scream climbed to panic levels as she saw her captor. The wrench clattered to the deck as she struggled. But the frog-thing simply squeezed her tighter, leaping for the railing.

"Let me go! Mare!" shouted Anna. "Help!"

Marion finally shook herself out of her shocked reverie and lunged forward, her boot tangling in the net. Her clutching, desperate fingers closed on nothing but thin air. The thing jumped, taking Anna down into the darkening water.

"No!" cried Marion. "Anna!"

Fury and terror warred within Marion as she tugged herself free. She would not lose her friend tonight. She clamored up onto the railing, scanning the water. There! The bright yellow of Anna's cap was deep in the water, barely visible in the floodlight and

receding fast. Before Marion could think better of it, she jumped.

The icy water hit her with a slap, her muscles seizing with the cold. She forced her eyes open, ignoring the sting of the salt. The bright floodlight barely pierced the frigid darkness beneath the sea. It took a moment before she could spot the yellow hat again. She pushed herself toward it with long strokes of her powerful arms, the fatigue of the long workday forgotten in her panic. No frog-thing – no matter how disconcerting it was – would outswim her. Not with Anna's life on the line.

Her lungs burned as she cut through the water. Anna's frightened face wavered in the churning water, eyes wide with panic. Bubbles rose from her screaming mouth; red ribbons floated in the water around her. She was hurt. Bleeding.

Marion grabbed Anna by the hand and tugged against a resistance she couldn't see. The frog-thing? She couldn't see; it was too dark. Her lungs screamed for air as she yanked desperately at her friend. Then the creature was on her. It wrapped itself around her, all grasping hands, webbed digits tangling in her hair. Flailing, she struck at it. Its mouth opened further and further until it seemed like it would swallow the whole sea.

The too-wide mouth with its rows of wicked teeth closed on the juncture between her arm and her shoulder with a crunch. The sound was somehow deafening despite the water clogging her ears. She dimly thought, "Oh, there goes my arm," but she felt no pain. Instead, she relaxed. She could quit fighting now. Her lungs quit their desperate spasms, relaxing as they filled with water. A surprising peace filled her to the core as her body accepted the inevitability of death.

Dimly, she registered the glint of the faraway floodlight off the bright metal of Anna's boning knife. The weapon plunged toward the frog-thing once, twice, a third time. The creature's hand loosened, releasing her hair. That was nice, thought Marion. But she was so tired. She needed rest...

She knew no more.

THREE WEEKS LATER, THE DOCTORS finally released her from the hospital. Marion and Anna still hadn't discussed the frog-thing. They joked about bank robberies and complained about malfunctioning winches, but Marion couldn't scrape up the courage to ask if Anna remembered their attacker. Maybe it had just been an accident like they'd both claimed. Maybe the pain had made her hallucinate. She very much wanted to believe that.

But she couldn't let the fear get the best of her, so on her first day out of the hospital, they went to inspect the *Wayfarer*.

"You know," said Anna as they stood at the end of the dock, "we don't have to do this. If you don't want to go on the water again after... after what happened, I'll understand."

"Where else would I go?" asked Marion softly. "My home is here. If you don't want to crew with me..."

"You sacrificed your arm to save me from that thing," said Anna, her eyes locked on the water. "I think you've earned a little loyalty."

Marion swallowed. So she hadn't dreamed it all. Anna remembered too.

"Do you think it's still out there?" she asked.

Anna whirled on her.

"Don't," she said. "We're not going to tempt fate. I don't know what that creature was, but it's best avoided. I'm not going to bring it up again and neither should you. We'll find a new place to trawl and from now on, we won't stay out after dark, you hear me?"

Marion nodded. She understood Anna's instinct to push away what had happened, but Marion couldn't afford that luxury. She had only one arm now. The frog-thing would come back again, but she would be ready. Life with one arm – and the pain of the phantom limb – would take some getting used to. But she'd done her mourning in the first few difficult nights at the hospital. Now she had nothing left but determination.

It wouldn't get anything else from her without a fight.

