



The Unicorn Curse

Book 13

S. E. Grosskopf

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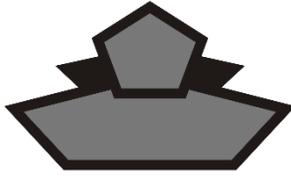
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Chapter I

Wednesday, May 6, 1931

Close to midnight, Captain Bob Carniegh slunk through the shadows. He wore a ragged navy coat and a captain's hat, though it didn't mean much now. The thick smell of fish and salt blew off the Atlantic. Dim streetlamps cast an eerie glow.

This was one of the oldest sections of town, still featuring narrow, cobblestone streets lined with rickety buildings huddled together as if they were leaning on each other for support. One misplaced sneeze might bring the whole neighborhood down. Light flickered from a few grimy windows. Somewhere nearby, an accordion wheezed a tired sea shanty. A dog barked.

Carniegh paused long enough to rub his grizzled beard, glanced around until he regained his bearings, and continued through the maze of streets. Some were no more than narrow and twisting alleys, barely wide enough to accommodate modern cars. He turned a few more corners, crept down a flight of steps old enough for the stones to show wear, and knocked a specific pattern on the heavy wooden door at the bottom.

A little window opened. Cold eyes peered out through the grille. "What's the password?"

"Trident." Carniegh tried not to fidget. The window slammed shut. A lock scraped, and then the door creaked open. He slipped inside.

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The atmosphere would have choked anyone unaccustomed to it. Cheap alcohol fumes mingled with a cloud of tobacco smoke almost too dense to see through. Mismatched oil lamps, some glass, others improvised from empty paint cans, provided a few flickering, sooty lights. No one could guess what color the walls had originally been. A thick layer of yellowed grime slathered every surface. The brick back wall never had been properly repaired after O'Malley the Giant threw a man through it a year and a half ago.

Flannigan's speakeasy was the kind of place where you couldn't turn your back on anyone if you didn't want to lose your wallet. The watered-down drinks were limited to whatever made it past the Coast Guard, and the glasses were washed once a week in stale beer. Carniegh glanced around, noting a dozen or so patrons. Conversations hushed. His shoes stuck to the dried alcohol on the floor, causing embarrassing squelching noises as he crossed the room.

The bar was a platform made of scrap plywood haphazardly reinforced until it was sturdy enough to support staggering drunks. He found a vacant spot. Three other patrons glared at him and moved away, muttering uncomplimentary phrases. He should have expected the reaction. No matter where he went, they'd all treated him like a pariah for the last month, and he couldn't blame them. He made an effort to square his shoulders and signaled for the bartender.

"Got any money?" The bartender stood back, as if Carniegh was contagious. He scowled and wiped a glass with a dirty rag.

"I was wondering if you heard anything about a job."

"Shove off, or I'll bounce you myself."

Carniegh let his breath out. He'd never get another command, and with no other options, he'd spent weeks begging for a berth as an ordinary seaman. Nobody would touch him. He was bad luck.

This was the fate of a captain whose ship sank.

He gave up. There was no point in trying. His shoes squelched back across the room. The guard ushered him out and slammed the door behind him.

Almost a month had passed since the *Bearance* went down in a storm. Twenty-five days, to be precise. This was all he had to look forward to for the rest of his life. Trapped on the land, his heart ached for the sea. He would have been better off if he'd gone down with his ship.

The stars blinked overhead, dimmed by the city lights. He found his way up the stairs by gripping the iron railing. His chest was almost too tight to breathe, and his stomach twisted from hunger. He'd run out of friends who would lend him money. Not that he had many friends left. His former shipmates now used his name as a curse.

A cool breeze revived him. There was nothing else for him to do. He resolved to walk down to the pier . . . and just keep walking. Then, he'd be where he belonged. Squaring his shoulders, he set off at a brisk pace. His footsteps echoed down the narrow street.

He only made it five paces.

The door of Flannigan's slammed hard. He whirled around. A man scurried up the steps and looked down the street, then bolted toward him. The unknown man stopped out of reach, fidgeted, and avoided eye contact. "Captain Carniegh?"

"Yes." Carniegh turned to face him, resenting the interruption. "What do you want?"

"I heard you were looking for a job." The man had a shifty face. He wore a slight sneer and dark, nondescript clothing.

"What kind of a job?" Under most circumstances, Carniegh wouldn't have given the man a second look, aside from making sure his wallet was intact. This wasn't a seafaring man, just one of the hundreds of scrounging hoodlums who frequented the waterfront at night.

"I didn't think you'd be particular." His eyes wouldn't settle in one place, roving down the street as if he expected to meet someone else. His hand went to his pocket.

"I just want to know what I'm getting into." Carniegh watched the hoodlum's hand. If the man drew a weapon, Carniegh could spring on him before he would be able to use it.

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“That’s none of my business.” The man brought out a crumpled piece of paper wrapped around a five-dollar bill. He separated them, shoved the money back into his pocket, and held the paper at an arm’s length. “I was paid to give you this.”

Carniegh took the paper and found a nearby address scrawled on it, barely readable in the dark. “Who paid you?”

“The guy who’s waiting there. He’s got a job for you. That’s all I know. Go talk to him about it.” The hoodlum turned away and melted into the shadows of the basement stairway.

Holding his breath, Carniegh stepped closer to one of the few working streetlights and studied the address on the paper: Twenty-three Titchener Row, only a few blocks away. He headed for it. The new sense of purpose quickened his steps.

Titchener Row, as narrow as an alley, ran up a steep hill. The houses that lined it may have predated George Washington. Unpainted buildings, crooked, and crowded close together. No working streetlights. Titchener Row was a black tunnel. If it sloped down instead of upward, he would have imagined it as the pathway to hell.

Climbing the hill slowed his pace. He glanced back, his neck crawling with the ominous feeling of being followed or watched. Twenty-three was abandoned. He’d seen it before, but never paid attention to the number. It had been empty for as long as he could remember. Now, the door stood open. A light flickered within.

“Hello?” He tapped his knuckles on the doorframe and stepped inside. The stench of mold and decay made him nauseous. The atmosphere of Flannigan’s had been unpleasant, but this was entirely uninhabitable. Gutted fish didn’t smell half as bad. The light beamed gently from beyond the next doorway. Haze drifted through the glow. “Hello? I got your message.”

“Come in, Captain Carniegh.” The voice was smooth and commanding, as if it belonged to a big man confident in giving orders. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Carniegh stepped through the doorway. An oil lamp flickered on a small table in the corner, the only piece of furniture in the room.

A man stood in the center, with the light behind him and his face in the shadows. He stood tall, with his shoulders square, and he wore coveralls that didn't quite fit him right, as if he had borrowed them for a dirty job. He leaned on an old-fashioned, single-flue whaling harpoon, almost four feet in length with a heavy spear point and a wickedly hooked barb.

"I came about a job." Carniegh took off his cap and stepped forward. After he moved through the doorway, two men closed in behind him. They were dressed like rough sailors, and both had biceps the size of whiskey barrels.

"I heard you're a good man, Carniegh, as long as you're not sailing into a storm."

"A job . . ." Carniegh glanced back. He'd never seen any of these men before. The way the two sailors approached gave him the helpless, sinking feeling of a lobster caught in a trap. He'd never be able to fight all three.

"Relax, Carniegh." The leader's voice demanded his full attention. "There's money in this for you, if you tell me what I want. I heard you're not above a bit of smuggling from time to time, and you know how to keep your mouth shut."

"I've done my share of rumrunning, as long as the price is right." Carniegh shifted his position, watching the eerie, flickering shadows across his host's face. "Who hasn't?"

The man had a three-pronged scar on his cheek, only visible when he turned his face to the light. His eyes glinted. "I heard it was more than that. Weapons, currency, rare artifacts . . ."

That had been his former employer's business. Carniegh hadn't owned the *Bearance*, he only commanded the crew while also following orders. He swallowed hard and glanced back at the sailors. Both watched him, as if waiting for any signal from their chief.

"Where's Teddy Bear?" The man in charge shifted his grip on the harpoon, lifting it off the ground and turning the point toward Carniegh.

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Following his motion, the two sailors grabbed Carniegh's arms. He tried to struggle, but they were both half his age and a full foot taller. "I don't know."

The harpoon shot past his face. The man jerked it forward again, and the hook bit into his cheek. The iron felt like ice, at first. The shock blinded him with flashing red lights, then the pain settled into a dull burn. Dizziness drained his energy and made his knees wobble. Blood soaked into his beard and dripped down the side of his neck. Reflexes urged him to put his hand over the wound, but the two sailors held his arms.

The man waved the harpoon in front of his eyes, the point glistening red. "Where's Teddy Bear?"

"I don't know, I swear." He pressed his eyes shut and turned his face away, straining vainly against the men who held him.

"Her brother stole a very expensive piece of merchandise from me, supposedly at her orders, but then he decided to keep it for himself, so she had him killed and took it. She had it with her when she ordered you to sail into that storm, but I have the crazy idea she wasn't aboard when the ship went down. What do you think?"

Cold iron prodded the other side of Carniegh's face. He leaned away, refusing to look. "Alright, she wasn't aboard. The police were watching, so she ordered me to set sail as a distraction. She promised me a share of the sale—ten percent of a million dollars—and full ownership of the *Bearance*, and nothing less could have made me put out into a storm like that."

The harpoon smacked against the other side of Carniegh's head, hard enough to shock his senses, without doing serious damage. The impact took his breath away. His torn cheek throbbed.

"Where's Teddy Bear?" The man's voice rose and warped. "What did she do with the staff?"

"I don't—"

The harpoon hooked Carniegh's shoulder, tearing through his clothing. The man jerked it back, driving the flue into his arm. Carniegh yelled. His knees collapsed, and he couldn't catch his breath.

“What did she do with the staff?” He twisted the harpoon, working it deeper.

“If I knew, I swear I’d tell you. I’m not *that* loyal.” Carniegh panted. His vision dimmed around the edges. The pain in his arm almost made him forget about his cheek. “I’ve been looking for her, too. She never paid me, and I need the money. She can’t use her real name because she’s supposed to be dead. She’s been trying to find passage to England, where she had a buyer for the staff, but I think she’s still somewhere around here. I swear, if I knew . . .”

“I believe you.” The man jerked the harpoon loose. The two sailors released him.

Carniegh landed on his hands and knees. Thick grime covered the floor, splattered with his blood. His cheek hurt too badly to touch it. He tried to examine his arm, but couldn’t see much in the dim light. The torn muscle stiffened, and every attempt to move it brought dizzying pain. His heart thudded. He glanced up, barely catching the motion of the harpoon swinging toward his head.



Chapter II

Late Wednesday morning, Detective Lieutenant Marx navigated his car down the narrow street and looked for a place to park. Sunlight glared off the windshield. He squeezed into a spot between a patrol car and the coroner's van, stepped out, looked around, and checked the address again.

Titchener Row wasn't much wider than an alley, featuring a steep incline and branching off of the road where he'd parked. He dodged a low-flying seagull and jogged down the cobblestones.

So far, all he knew was that an anonymous caller had informed the police about a murder. And when Captain Kramer assigned him to the case, he'd hinted that this one was different. He hadn't offered more details than that, and his strange tone of voice had given Marx ominous shivers.

Twenty-three Titchener Row was the shabbiest of the tumbledown buildings in sight. Not one window contained glass. The unpainted front door sagged, gray and pitted with age. Officer O'Neill leaned against the lopsided doorframe and took deep breaths. His eyes watered and his face looked slightly green.

"What's going on?" Marx peered through the doorway, but couldn't see very far into the dim interior.

"Ask Malone." O'Neill held his stomach. "I've never seen anything like that before, and I never want to see it again."

Marx ducked inside, instantly assaulted by mold. The reek of blood began as an olfactory undertone, but became more insidious the farther he stepped into the building. Identifying it set his nerves on edge. The lack of information, coupled with O'Neill's distress, provoked him into imagining the worst possibilities. His stomach twisted at the thought that the victim might have been a child.

A camera flashed, lighting up the next doorway for an instant. Marx held his breath and stepped through. A dim flashlight, held by Officer Sullivan, shone on a man's shoes. Sullivan purposely looked at the cobwebbed ceiling.

Malone, the police technician, held the camera. He habitually kept a stoic and professional manner, but his hands trembled slightly as he lined up the next shot.

Marx looked down, relieved at first to see that the shoes belonged to a man, not a child. The camera flash showed him a nightmare. The victim had been *shredded*. He couldn't think of another word to describe the carnage. Choking, he spun away.

"Not pretty, huh." Malone adjusted his camera, making clicking sounds in the semidarkness.

"Was he mauled by a lion?" Breathing hard only filled his lungs with mold and reeking blood, strong enough to taste. His stomach revolted. He barely held himself back from rushing outside to join O'Neill.

"It almost looks that way," Malone said, "but we haven't had any reports of a lion roaming the streets. He's been dead a few hours, since sometime late last night or early this morning. I'll be able to tell you more after the autopsy. Given the bruises, large stab wounds, and tearing, I'd say the killer used a blunt instrument, a dull blade, and a hook, and he had plenty of leverage."

"A harpoon," Sullivan said. "My grandfather was a fisherman, and he took me out on his boat a few times, but I've never seen a harpoon used like *that*."

"Who was this guy?" Marx avoided looking down.

"He had a wallet on him." Malone's camera flashed again. "No money, but his identification said he's Robert Carniegh, the captain

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of a coastal freighter called the *Bearance*. As badly as his face is messed up, I'll have to check his fingerprints to confirm that."

"The *Bearance* sank a month ago. I was there when it happened." Marx dared another glance, searching around the body for anything else on the floor. The dust was heavily scuffed. Blood stained the floorboards. "He sailed into a storm and was struck by lightning. The boiler exploded. The Coast Guard got most of the crew off, but there was supposed to be some expensive cargo onboard that wasn't recovered. Do you think somebody was trying to get information out of him?"

"Maybe, but this goes beyond that. I think a lot of it happened after he was already dead. Either the killer is viciously insane and just couldn't stop, or he was trying to send a message."

"A message to who?"

"To *whom*. I'm glad it's not my job to figure that out. And whoever the message is for, I wouldn't want to be in his shoes." Malone put his camera away. "I'll have a report on your desk this afternoon."

"Put the pictures in an envelope." One glimpse was enough. He didn't want to see that again.

"Sure." Malone snapped his camera case shut. Sullivan moved the flashlight away from the body.

Marx hurried outside and blinked in the sunlight. Breathing deeply to clear the mold out of his lungs set off a coughing fit. He wheezed and rubbed his face on his sleeve.

"See what I mean?" O'Neill asked.

"Yeah." Marx steadied himself against the wall. His stomach wouldn't settle, and his mouth got that watery feeling like he was about to throw up. Sudden nausea combined with uneven footing on the steep hill almost made him lose his balance. He closed his eyes until the dizziness passed.

"I tried looking for neighbors who might have heard anything, but nobody around here is going to talk to the police." O'Neill regained a little more of his normal color. "The door was wide open when we got here, so I figure whoever did it wanted the body to be

found. Otherwise, he could have made a lot less of a mess and dumped the guy in the ocean. It's not that far away."

"He was sending a message." Marx repeated Malone's assumption. "Either that, or we're dealing with a maniac."

"I'm glad it's not my job to figure that out." O'Neill patted Marx on the shoulder. "Good luck with that, Lieutenant."

"Thanks." Marx stepped away and brushed himself off. He glanced around, but the street was empty. Not just quiet, but filled with a tangible, deadly hush. A motion at a window caught the corner of his eye, then disappeared. Knocking on any of the doors on this street and identifying himself as a policeman could get him shot.

The whole neighborhood should have been condemned and demolished a century ago. The bleeding hearts at the historical society who wanted it preserved for historical reasons had obviously never been here.

He found his way back to his car, maneuvered out of the tight parking spot, and returned to police headquarters. The change from narrow, cobblestone streets to modern architecture and bustling traffic was as jarring as traveling a hundred years in twenty minutes. He left his car parked in the street near the rear entrance and headed inside, down a hall, up a short flight of steps, and around a corner. In the next hallway, he ran into Detective Schneider.

"I was just going to look for you." Marx signaled for Schneider's attention. "I have a name for you to run down." He scribbled on a blank page of his notebook and tore it out. "Robert Carniegh, the captain of a small coastal freighter called the *Bearance* that went down in last month's storm. See if you can find his address, anyone who might have known him, if he had any enemies, and what he's been up to since his boat sank."

"Sure, Lieutenant." Schneider took the paper and studied it. He didn't usually handle his own cases, but took tasks delegated to him from others, and he excelled at finding information about people. "Is this about the mess that was called in anonymously this morning?"

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“Yes, he was the victim. Or, at least, that’s the identification he had on him. Malone wants to check his fingerprints to be sure. His face wasn’t recognizable.”

“Captain Kramer wasn’t sure what to think when the call came in. The caller was pretty worked up about it, and Sergeant O’Leary at the desk thought he was nuts. The captain almost went out there himself.”

“You can ask O’Neill what he thinks when he gets back.” The stomach illness returned. Marx held his breath and looked away, trying to forget what he had seen. The mental effort only pulled the images into sharper focus.

“There was another anonymous call that came in while you were out. A woman who maybe knows something about this. Sergeant O’Leary told her it was your case, and she said she’d call back later.”

“Alright.” He stepped back and turned toward his office. While he was reaching for his keys, the telephone rang inside. He fumbled through his pockets, flipped through every key on the ring until he found the right one, and jammed it into the lock as quickly as he could. Finally pushing the door open, he dove for the telephone and grabbed the receiver. “Marx.”

“Are you in charge of what happened last night?” The woman sounded over fifty and frightened. Her voice quivered.



Chapter III

“What case are you referring to?” Marx gripped the receiver and settled into his desk chair, trying not to let it squeak.

“Bob . . .” She breathed audibly, almost sounding as if she was sobbing. “Bob Carniegh. When I called the main number, the sergeant said I should talk to you.”

“How do you know his name? It hasn’t been in the papers.”

“The man who found the body is my neighbor.”

“I’d like to talk to him.”

“Please leave him out of it. He has a record and he doesn’t want to be involved with the police. He was just out walking his dog, and he saw the door open. He recognized Bob by his clothes. That’s all he knows. At least I convinced him to report it.”

“Alright, what’s your name?”

“I’d rather not be involved either.”

“What did you want to tell me? Do you know who did it?”

“I have an idea.”

“I’m listening.”

“I don’t know his name.”

Marx sighed through his teeth. “What can you tell me?”

“I met him a few months ago. He’s a distinctive man, over forty, with a rugged face and a scar on his cheek. If you saw him, you would remember him. He called himself Poseidon.”

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“Why would he have killed Carniegh?”

“I don’t know.” She said it too quickly.

“Listen, Mrs. . . .” He wasn’t sure what to call her. “The way Carniegh was killed was . . . excessive. Brutal enough to make tough cops lose their breakfast. The man was beaten to death and ripped to shreds, like he was mauled by a wild animal, and any killer vicious enough to do that once would do it again. If he’s after you—”

“I can’t go to the police.”

“Lady, if this killer is after you, then you need help. If you don’t want police, would you consider hiring a private detective?”

“I used to have friends who could handle problems like this . . .” She sounded distant, almost resentful. “Who do you recommend? I saw three in the telephone directory. Marvin Kane . . .”

“Kane is dead, and the phone book hasn’t been updated yet. Fritz Gallop is a tough guy with a gun, if that’s all you’re looking for. Lowan is the smartest guy I ever met, and his partner, Sen, is twice Gallop’s size and a crack shot with a .45.”

“It will take someone with intelligence to match Poseidon. I’ll try Lowan. And I do want Poseidon caught quickly. If I hear anything that might lead you to him, I’ll call again.”

“Good luck.” Marx waited until the line clicked, then set the receiver down. He’d work on his report for a few minutes, then call Lowan. Lowan frequently acted as a police consultant, and never hesitated to share case notes. One way or another, Marx would find out what was going on.



Lowan sat stiffly at his desk with his eyes closed and his arm pressed against his side. He focused on taking slow, shallow breaths. His ribs ached. He’d broken two of them three weeks ago, and might have to wait another three to five weeks for them to fully heal. There had been some improvement,

but then his last case ended with a car accident. And another bad fall, after Sen had struck him.

He'd come to the office in the morning mostly as a matter of habit, and had participated in a short meeting with Marx to discuss a few final details from the previous investigation. Now, without a new case, he had no reason to stay the full day. He usually spent the time between cases working on his own radio engineering projects in the back room, but the constant, buzzing pain broke his concentration and drained his energy. He needed a cup of tea and a long nap.

What he really needed was a solid three to five weeks of vacation, but that wasn't likely to happen.

He breathed as deeply as he dared, held it, and eased himself out of the chair. Across the office, Rita, his secretary, glanced up from the novel she was reading at her desk. On days like this, he didn't have much for her to do, either, aside from answering an occasional telephone call.

"You may call me at home, if anything comes up." He crossed the room, paused for breath, and reached for his hat, hoping that the office wouldn't receive any calls for the next few days.

The telephone rang. The sudden interruption made him flinch hard enough to jar his ribs. He held his side again and steadied himself against the wall.

Rita dropped her book, pounced on the telephone, and answered cheerfully. "Lowan and Sen Detective Agency." She paused to listen. Thoughtful concern crossed her face. "I see. Your name, please?" Words mumbled through the receiver, inaudible at this distance. Rita waited, then covered the mouthpiece and looked across the desk. "There's a woman who wants to hire you, but she won't give her name. She said her life is in danger, and a man has already been killed."

He gritted his teeth and reached for her phone. Crossing the room to his own desk would have been too long of a walk. "This is Lowan."

"You were recommended by the police." The woman sounded authoritative and businesslike, but fear lingered at the edge of her

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voice. “A man was killed this morning, and I think the killer might also be after me. I want you to catch him first.”

“That is usually a job for the police. Why do you need a detective?”

“Lieutenant Marx is in charge of the case. He said you were smart, and he also recommended your partner, Sen. He said—”

“Marx recommended Sen?” Maybe he should have waited to hear what else she had to say, but something heavy and bitter settled in his stomach. His heart thudded and his vision blurred gray.

“He said Sen was better than Fritz Gallop.”

“On certain metrics, perhaps, but not on others.”

“I’d like to hire him as a bodyguard.”

“Sen never works directly with clients, and I must have a talk with Marx about this.” The recommendation annoyed him. Marx should have known not to bring Sen into anything, especially after last night. “What is your name?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why?”

“Does it matter?” She raised her voice, as if the question had been offensive. “I just want to hire you to find Poseidon before he murders anyone else.”

“Why does he want to kill you?”

“He thinks I have something that belongs to him.”

“Do you?”

“That’s beside the point. He killed a man.”

“If you cannot cooperate with the police because you have committed a theft—”

“You can’t accuse me like that!”

“If you refuse to answer any questions, I will not accept your case. Good day.”

“Wait! If you don’t help, he’ll kill me. Doesn’t that matter to you?”

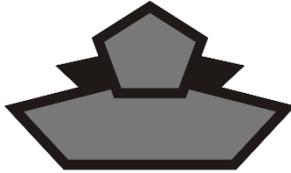
“I charge one hundred dollars per day, we must meet in person, and you will answer all of my questions fully and truthfully. This

is nonnegotiable.” The way the conversation had progressed thus far, he didn’t think she would accept.

“Alright.” Her voice relented, but he couldn’t be sure of her sincerity over the telephone. She gave an address for a diner on the southeast side of town. “I’ll meet you there and answer your questions.”

“I will be there in twenty minutes.” Lowan set the phone down. The clang echoed in the barely furnished office.

He expected to regret giving her this much of a chance. The case sounded like trouble from any angle, and he didn’t need another headache—or another kick in the ribs.



Chapter IV

While Rita called for a taxi, Lowan returned to his own desk and waited for her to finish with the telephone. Then, he picked up his extension and dialed Marx's office number. The phone only rang once.

"Marx." He sounded eager, like he was grinning.

"This is Lowan. You just referred a client to me."

"Yeah, a woman who wouldn't give me her name. Did she tell you?"

"No, but she agreed to meet me at a restaurant on the southeast side of downtown, a place called Bud's Diner."

"I know where that is."

"She sounded extremely uncooperative. I doubt that she is being truthful, and I may not accept her case." Normally, Lowan didn't object to working with Marx. But now, after too many eventful days, and Marx's unsolicited attempt to use him as a police proxy, his mood darkened.

"When? I'll meet you there, but I'll stay out of sight."

"Twenty minutes." Lowan hung up the telephone. His shoulders knotted. He grabbed his hat and headed out. Climbing down the stairs was tiring enough to take the edge off his anger.

The taxi waited for him. He eased into the back seat, mindful of his ribs, and gave the address to the driver.

They arrived within ten minutes. Lowan paid the driver, stepped out, and glanced around. The neighborhood wasn't much. Grimy glass-fronted brick buildings lined the street, including a pawn shop and several other stores dealing in secondhand merchandise. The next building, the same in appearance, contained tables and chairs rather than a shop display. Most of them were occupied.

He didn't need to check his watch to know that it was lunch time. The scent of greasy hamburgers drifted out into the street. Stepping through the door, the noise level thudded inside of his skull like a low-grade headache. Voices blurred and dishes clinked. He found an unoccupied place at the counter and glanced around.

Most of the patrons looked like employees from nearby shops or offices. A wide range of ages were represented, and most wore threadbare and faded but respectable clothes, suitable for low-paying professional jobs. They sat in groups, gossiped, and ate hurriedly.

None impressed him as the mysterious caller.

"What'll you have?" the waiter asked.

"Tea." As upset as he was, his stomach rejected the idea of food. The knots in his shoulders worked their way down his back.

"Tea?" The waiter muttered and scrunched his face.

"Do you have it?"

"I think so, but nobody ever asks for it. Are you sure you don't want coffee?"

"I never understood how a beverage which smells divine can taste so terrible."

"Ha." He stepped back. "Tea . . ."

Lowan checked his watch. Twenty minutes had passed since the telephone call. He watched the door, but no one entered who looked like a client. The waiter came back with a steaming mug of tea. Lowan wrapped his hands around it and waited for it to cool. He could have been at home now, taking a nap.

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Halfway through the tea, his knotted muscles began to relax. He blocked out the crowd and focused on enjoying his drink. The waiter refilled his mug with steaming water, but the tea bag was weaker for the second cup.

Forty minutes had passed since the telephone call. He signaled for the waiter. "I am here to meet a woman."

"You?" His eyebrows rose. "You don't look like no flatfoot."

"What?" Lowan tried to puzzle his way through the expression, wondering if his grasp on the English language had somehow slipped.

"A woman was here before you, but she had to leave. She gave me an envelope and told me to give it to a detective who came in asking for her." He grabbed an envelope from behind the counter and read the name on it. "You're Mr. Lowan?"

"Yes." He showed his business card.

"Then I guess this is yours." He pushed the envelope across the counter and waited like he was expecting a tip.

"Did she leave her name?"

"No, but I've seen her in here before."

"What did she look like?"

"Over fifty." The waiter shrugged. "Not to be unkind, but I didn't look twice, if you know what I mean." He went to attend to another customer.

Lowan tore the envelope open. In it, he found five hundred-dollar bills and a typewritten description of a man identified as Poseidon. There was no explanation of why his client feared Poseidon, or what she had stolen from him. There was also no starting point for finding him.

He shoved the money back into the envelope, tucked it into his pocket, and finished his tea. The crowd had begun to thin.

Marx crossed the room toward him and took the next barstool. "She didn't show?"

"No." Lowan choked back rising annoyance. "You recommended Sen to her?"

"Well, she was looking for protection, and—"

“Never recommend Sen to a client.” He left a handful of change on the counter and stood.

“Sorry.” Marx hunched down and looked sideways. “I just thought—”

Another glance silenced him. Lowan could tell that Marx was hungry, but he wasn’t about to offer him lunch. “This mystery woman has not met my terms. I will return her money and refuse her case.”

“But if she knows something about the murder . . .”

“That is your job, not mine.” Lowan stepped away from the barstool. “I intend to go home and take a nap. That is all I have wanted to do for the past week.” He deliberately turned his back on Marx.

The telephone rang when Lowan reached the door. He tried to step outside, but couldn’t stop himself from taking a quick glance. Marx leaned over the counter, with his shoulders drooping and his head in his hands.

The waiter stood by the telephone and shouted across the room. “There’s a phone call for Lieutenant Marx.”

Marx flinched. He slid off the barstool and crossed to the telephone, walking like his tail was between his legs. He spoke into the receiver, drooped further, and put it back on the hook, then leaned against the wall and rubbed his face. Noticing Lowan, he took two hesitant steps toward him as if expecting to be rejected again. When Lowan didn’t turn away, Marx hurried to cover the rest of the distance.

“There’s been another murder.” Marx’s voice wasn’t much more than a hoarse whisper, and he avoided eye contact. “The guy was whacked to bits with a harpoon, same as the last one. Something else, too. The last guy was the captain of the *Bearance*, and this guy was the first mate.”

“The . . . *Bearance*?” Lowan hadn’t expected Marx to surprise him, but this information left him speechless. “Then, the woman who called . . .”

“Do you think, maybe, Theodora Bearance didn’t go down with the ship?”

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“She told me over the telephone that the murderer believed she had something which belonged to him. If it is worth killing over, and in such a vicious manner . . .”

“The unicorn staff.” Marx glanced up. His jaw set, and his eyes took on a more determined expression. “It has to be.”



Chapter V

Lowan returned to his office. Climbing the stairs again reminded him of why he wanted a day off. By the time he reached the end of the hall, he was out of breath again.

Rita looked up from her desk. “The client called and apologized for having to step away from the restaurant. She asked if you were back yet, and then said she’d call again shortly.” She tilted her head. Curiosity shimmered in her eyes. “What’s this about? Did you find out anything more?”

“Yes.” Maybe some employers wouldn’t have shared so much information with a secretary, but he believed that she could do her job more effectively if she knew the details of his cases. Also, her overpowering curiosity would become annoying to him if he didn’t. “Our caller, who I would not yet consider a client, appears linked to two murders, and both victims were part of the crew of a costal freighter called the *Bearance*.”

“Theodora Bearance?” She dropped her novel into a drawer and leaned forward. “Does this have anything to do with that beautiful ivory unicorn horn?” She’d handled the staff herself, and had been more involved in that investigation than Lowan would have liked.

“It might. I know very little.” He crossed to his desk and settled carefully into the chair, then took out the envelope. He studied the description of Poseidon again. He’d shared it with Marx, who had

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copied it into his notebook before leaving the restaurant, but there wasn't any actionable information included.

The telephone rang. "Maybe that's her." Rita reached for it. "Lowan and Sen Detective Agency. Yes, he's in." She nodded.

He picked up his extension, then she set hers down. "This is Lowan. Why did you not meet me at the restaurant?"

"Did you get the envelope I left for you?"

"I prefer to discuss the details of a case in person." He listened for any cues in her voice, but his telepathic senses didn't work over the telephone. An entire dimension of the conversation was missing. "Mrs. Bearance . . ."

She sucked in her breath, making a slight hissing sound. "You're mistaken. I'm—"

"There has been another murder. The man who was killed last night had been the captain of your ship. The most recent victim was the first mate. If Poseidon is responsible, he may be closer to finding you, and I understand that the method of murder was unusually vicious. If you want my help, I require complete honesty."

"I . . . I don't know what to say."

"Two men have died." He put force behind his words. "If you know anything that might help to catch the murderer, tell me now. Is Poseidon searching for the unicorn staff?"

"Yes."

"And do you have it?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Then I cannot help you. If you will meet with me so that I can return your money . . ."

"Wait." She grumbled. "Can't you just look for Poseidon?"

"I am in favor of catching a murderer, and so are the police, but you have given me no information useful for finding him. Apart from the scar, this description could fit thousands of men. When and where did you see him last? What do you know of his habits?"

Where might he be staying? What would he do if he took the staff?”

“That last one’s easy. He’d sell it. He’s had an auction lined up for months, since before I got ahold of it, and he’s determined to stay on schedule.”

“When and where?”

“Tomorrow, but I don’t know where. Knowing what kind of people will be there, one of them would surely kill him if he canceled this late. That must be why he’s so desperate.”

Lowan could imagine. To buy a stolen item known for its long and bloodstained history, and valued at up to a million dollars, would require nearly unlimited resources—and no conscience. A dangerous combination. “Do you want my recommendation?”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

“Give the staff to the police.”

“I can’t do that. I have a buyer in England, if I can just find a way to get there . . .”

“Mrs. Bearance,” Lowan said strongly, “I have no interest in helping you to keep or sell stolen property, and I have not forgotten that you hired a gunman to kill your own brother—”

“How did you . . .?”

“Your nephew hired me to investigate his father’s murder. I tried to meet with you several times, but you were unavailable. I know all about Bearance Productions, and the methods you employed to authenticate stolen or counterfeit merchandise. I also had the staff appraised as genuine while it was briefly in my possession.”

“Then you know how much it’s worth.”

“Yes. And I can understand why Poseidon would kill you for it. If you value your own life . . .” He could hear her heavy breathing, as if the conversation was strenuous. “Mrs. Bearance?”

“They always said the staff was cursed. Everyone who touches it dies. I should never have . . .” Her voice trailed off and the line clicked.

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“Mrs. Bearance?” Lowan waited for another moment, then set the receiver down. Rita stared at him from her desk across the room.

Shivering passed through him, causing a strong twinge in the ribs he’d broken three weeks ago. He held his side and breathed slowly, then grabbed the telephone again and dialed Marx’s number.

It rang. No answer.

He set it down again and reached for a notebook to record what he remembered of the conversation, along with his impressions. Marx was probably still busy at the scene of the second murder.

The only lead was the high-profile auction tomorrow. Where would it take place? Somewhere lavish, extravagant, secretive, and high security . . .

Without knowing which part of the city to search, the chances of locating it by tomorrow were slim. He might have a better chance of finding potential buyers. Anyone in possession of over a million dollars traveling to Milford Falls would likely stay at the best hotel in town. The Noritonia.

He checked his watch. The afternoon was beginning to fade. If he went home and changed into a more formal suit, then spent the rest of the evening in the dining room at the Noritonia, he would have a good opportunity to mingle with the guests. Dining at one of the best restaurants in town wouldn’t be an overly strenuous way to spend the evening, and finding someone with nefarious intentions could be a relatively easy task.

After dialing Marx’s number and again receiving no answer, he called for a taxi, then stood carefully, caught his breath, and started across the room.

The telephone rang.

Rita answered. “Lowan and Sen Det—” She took on a sudden, shocked expression. “Mrs. Bearance? What?” Indistinct shouting came through the receiver.

Lowan was closer to Rita’s desk than his own. He took the telephone from her. “Mrs. Bearance?”

“He’s here.” Her voice was a panicked whisper. “My neighbor, the one who found Bob—Poseidon must have gotten to him. I just saw Poseidon through the window, and he had two big men with him. I hear them in the next room . . . no way out . . .”

“Where are you?”

“Boarding house on Water Street, eight-ninety-seven. Please, get the police. I’ll give them the staff, anything. . . . I didn’t think he’d find me here—”

A loud crash came over the telephone. Heavy footsteps, scuffling, and shouting. Theodora Bearance shrieked. The sound twisted and ended abruptly. More footsteps thudded, then the line clicked

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Book 1: Lowan's Checkmate

Lowan, a private detective and telepathic alien, teams up with Detective Lieutenant Marx, an introverted underdog, to catch a clever jewel thief terrorizing Milford Falls.

Book 2: Shamrock Hunt

When a famous Celtic medallion—the prize for a charity raffle—is stolen, Lowan competes with a rival private detective to find it in time for the St. Patrick's Day parade. Meanwhile, Marx investigates the murder of a history professor and faces off with a lifelong enemy.

Book 3: Murder on Harrisonville Road

After writing a newspaper story about the crimeless village of Harrisonville, Tom Nanning is ambushed and left for dead. When Lowan investigates, he finds himself trapped in a small town with a murderer hidden among its quirky residents.

Book 4: Orchid Hunter

While Marx investigates a murder committed via April Fool's prank, which renders alibis useless, Lowan dives into the black market orchid trade to recover the main attraction stolen before the Easter flower show. Both investigations lead to a thirty-five-year-old tiger attack in the jungles of Borneo.

Book 5: The Great Flamingo Robbery

When the mangiest flamingo is stolen from the zoo, Lowan is called in to investigate. He never expected to get mixed up with a beautiful ruby thief or a South American dictator.

Book 6: The Unicorn Staff

The murder of an archeologist and the theft of a staff made from a unicorn's horn lead Lowan and Marx on a wild quest for answers.

Book 7: Lowan's Circus Tricks

Lowan's search for Eloise Meer leads him to a traveling circus in dusty Dry Creek, Kansas. But the only Eloise at the circus is a ring-tailed monkey. Hunting for clues, he joins the circus and promptly finds himself framed for murder.

Book 8: The Starmaster

The Starmaster is hunting for aliens—and he's after Lowan.

Book 9: Murder in the Script

A movie is being filmed in Milford Falls. The script might solve an old crime for which an innocent man was framed, if the real murderer doesn't stop the production first.

Book 10: Murder at Woodward Retreat

Lowan and Marx take a vacation at a cabin in the woods. But their plans are disrupted when the woman in the next cabin claims that she saw her husband kill a man.

Book 11: The Pigeon Wing Murders

A wounded carrier pigeon with a coded message, a train robbery, and a stolen racehorse add up to one of Lowan's strangest cases yet.

Book 12: The Mattison Matter

When Tom Nenning is framed for murder, Lowan must work quickly to clear his name. He finds himself enmeshed in a case of corporate espionage involving the radio company he works for, and misused city funds linked to the mayor's office.

Book 13: The Unicorn Curse

When a madman starts killing the remaining members of the *Bearance* crew with a harpoon, Lowan and Marx begin to suspect that Teddy Bear hadn't been aboard the ship when it sank. To find the truth, Lowan goes undercover at a secret million-dollar auction aboard the killer's luxury yacht.

Book 14: Emerald Deception

After an attempted purse-snatching, a frightened woman goes to Lowan for help. Two men are following her, and she wants to know why. The strange emerald found in her purse might provide a clue—until it's appraised as fake. Why does everyone want it so badly?

Book 15: The First Chase

The three members of the insurance racket are still at large, and the last case ended with three new leads. Tracking down the first one leads Lowan and Marx to an illegal greyhound track outside of the city limits, race fixing, and murder.

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