



The Unicorn Voyage

Book 21

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PREVIEW

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Chapter I

Thursday, May 21, 1931

Pounding shook the apartment door. Startled, Marx spilled coffee on his hand, swore under his breath, set the coffee pot back on the stove, and switched the burner off. The sound echoed, surely disturbing the neighbors as well. He grabbed a towel to wipe his hand off on the way to the door. The knocking continued.

The front hallway was too narrow, with no room to stand beside the door. Standing directly in front of it always made him nervous, especially when he had no idea who was on the other side—or what they wanted. He tossed the towel on the small table beside the coat rack and picked up his .38. “Who’s there?”

“Sergeant O’Conner, sir.”

Marx relaxed a little, but not completely. Whatever O’Conner wanted implied a new set of problems. He pulled the door open, finding the brawny Irish plainclothes detective in the doorway. Officer Mackay, in uniform, waited behind him.

“Chief Benson sent us to pick you up,” O’Conner explained. “He wants you in his office right away.”

“Now?” Marx stepped back inside. O’Conner followed him in, his proximity implying urgency. He waited while Marx slipped into his shoulder holster, then his jacket and hat. Marx was glad that he had gotten dressed this morning. He’d spent the previous day in his pajamas, but intended to go grocery shopping after breakfast today. “Captain Kramer told me not to even leave my apartment until tomorrow.”

“Something new came up. A couple of British guys showed up first thing this morning, and then Captain Kramer got called into the Chief’s office, and now they want you there within the next . . .” he checked his watch, “ten minutes ago. We’d better hurry.”

“Alright, I’m coming.” Marx followed O’Conner into the hall, pulled his door shut, and locked it. Before he could return the keys to his pocket, O’Conner grabbed him by the arm to hustle him along.

The door of the next apartment creaked open. Marx’s neighbor Frank peered out, his eyes big and nervous. He jerked back and slammed the door as they passed. Marx choked on a laugh. As thin as the walls were, Frank must have heard everything.

“What’s so funny?” O’Conner asked. Mackay tromped along at his side, then leapt ahead to open the door.

“My neighbors . . .” Marx stepped outside into the disorientingly bright sunshine, then ducked into the back of the police car waiting at the curb. O’Conner climbed in beside him while Mackay slid behind the wheel. “My neighbors,” Marx said over the rumble of the engine, “they’ve noticed that every time I leave my apartment, there’s a report of murder in the next morning’s papers.”

Mackay steered into traffic. “So?”

“They think I’m a killer-for-hire.”

“You?” O’Conner sounded confused at first, as if nothing could have been more unbelievable. He stared at Marx, wide-eyed, his expression blank and his mouth open. Then he broke into a fit of uncontrollable laughter that shook the car. “And now they’ve just seen you get arrested.”

He kept laughing during the five-minute ride to the station. Mackay parked at the rear entrance. Marx hurried out and dashed up the steps, leaving O’Conner still laughing in the back of the car.

The rear entrance led to a dingy corridor, another short flight of steps, and the back hallway near his own office. He passed it without stopping. Farther down, on the opposite side of the hall, Chief Benson’s office had a window in the door. Five men already waited inside. Marx’s palms sweated. He wiped them on his jacket and let himself in without knocking.

Lowan sat in a chair at the far side of the room, his arms folded, one leg stretched out stiffly as if he was in pain. Rather than the usual sparkling blue, his eyes were the dull gray of an overcast sky. Two strangers occupied chairs closer to the desk. One was tall and composed, sitting with the posture of a man who’d spent years in uniform. The other wore a dark suit and maintained a calm but watchful silence.

Chief Benson sat behind the desk, his expression unreadable behind his large moustache. Captain Kramer stood beside him, red-faced and square-jawed. He glared at Marx.

Marx closed the door quietly and edged around the room to stand beside Lowan. Uncomfortable silence lengthened, and he felt all eyes on him. He glanced around indirectly, avoiding eye contact and trying not to stare, then looked down and shuffled one shoe. The air felt too tense for him to breathe.

“Detective Lieutenant Marx,” Chief Benson said. It sounded more like scolding than an introduction for the benefit of his guests. “These gentlemen are from London. Captain Reginald Haynes, British Museum security. And Detective Inspector Alistair Pierce, Scotland Yard.”

“Hi,” Marx said automatically, his face hot from his own awkwardness. Haynes inclined his head politely. Pierce gave him a brief, assessing glance, as if he was being weighed, measured, and found wanting. Marx swallowed hard and looked toward Chief Benson, then Captain Kramer, and waited. Benson folded his hands on the desk. There weren’t any papers out to give the answers away.

“You’re being assigned to a joint security operation,” Kramer said. His German accent came through stronger than usual, not quite a bark, but too loud for the small office. Something between sarcasm and a threat.

Marx blinked and looked to Benson for confirmation. “I . . . what kind of . . .?” Rising panic made him dizzy. He wasn’t sure what Kramer meant, but it sounded far bigger and more important than anything he wanted to be involved in.

He wasn’t being given an option.

Haynes stood, putting himself on an equal level while speaking to Marx. “The British Museum is retrieving an artifact currently being stored here. A staff of considerable historical value. There have been . . . incidents surrounding it.”

“The unicorn staff,” Marx blurted. He looked to Lowan, who had also helped to protect the staff in the past. Lowan nodded. It wasn’t really a unicorn’s horn, but rather a narwhal tusk, a special kind of whale’s tooth that looked like twisted ivory. It was also centuries old and featured a gold

setting encrusted in precious gems—valued at up to a million dollars. Several people had already died because of it.

“We’ve been informed you assisted in protecting the artifact during previous attempts to steal it,” Pierce said. His tone was dry, but not unkind. “Your involvement makes you uniquely qualified.”

“*Ha*,” Kramer muttered.

Qualified wasn’t a word that Marx heard often. Chief Benson rarely handed out compliments, and Kramer showered him in vicious insults at every opportunity. Marx reminded himself to breathe. “You want me to help escort the staff?”

“Scotland Yard formally requested cooperation from the American police,” Benson said. “They want a detective who has already dealt with threats to the staff. You’re being temporarily seconded to the British delegation for the duration of the voyage aboard the RMS *Sovereign*. They depart this afternoon.”

“Today?” Marx tried not to let his voice squeak. That gave him no time at all. Not long enough for him to get used to the idea of a transatlantic voyage, an international assignment, or a joint operation with Scotland Yard. “Why me?”

“We heard all about your involvement from the museum,” Pierce said. “You’ve already proven that you can handle yourself under pressure, and you know the local criminals who’ve targeted the staff before. We need that knowledge. We’ve also hired Mr. Lowan as a special courier consultant.”

“All the—” His thoughts jammed together. Too much new information at once. He took a deep breath and paused long enough to put his words in the right order. “Everyone who tried to steal the staff before is dead or in jail.”

“Thanks to you and Mr. Lowan, we’ve been told,” Haynes said. “We’ll brief you both on the details aboard the ship. Your travel arrangements have already been made. For now, all you need to know is that the staff must reach England safely. And we intend to ensure that it does.”



Chapter II

After the meeting, Lowan left the police station by the front exit. He gritted his teeth at the sight of the steps and took them slowly, pausing on each one while gripping the railing. They'd been given all the travel details they needed. Further security arrangements would be discussed aboard the ship. Several hours remained before they would meet again at the harbor. He couldn't hide his limp.

Marx walked with him, matching his pace while radiating an aura of nervous tension. Before leaving the station, Kramer had pulled Marx aside to speak with him privately. Marx returned pale and shaking, and Lowan didn't have to ask what Kramer had said.

They both had numerous preparations to make in a short amount of time. Lowan took the next step gingerly, but still winced.

Marx touched Lowan's arm. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"Yesterday, I stepped wrong on the edge of the curb and twisted my ankle. It was a long day." He moved forward again, one step closer to the street. Traffic flowed past. In

this area, it was never hard to find a taxi. “Also, Fritz Gallop was struck by a car and is in the hospital.”

“What? I mean . . . is he okay?”

“He was feeling well enough to insult Rita, though he might not return to work for several weeks.” Lowan reached the bottom step and leaned against the railing for another moment, watching the traffic. “You are welcome to share my taxi. I will drop you off.”

“Thanks.” Marx stepped toward the street and waved at a yellow cab still a block away. “But . . .” he looked away and whispered, “when I stepped on that egg decoration and sprained my ankle on Easter, you did . . . something. You fixed it somehow. At least, you made it stop hurting. Can’t you . . .?”

“As exhausted as I am, at the moment, I cannot.” Lowan stepped forward carefully as the taxi pulled to the curb. He trusted Marx more than anyone else, but still wasn’t ready to admit his extraterrestrial origin. As badly as Thomas Nenning had reacted to that information, he didn’t want to tell anyone else ever again. Revealing his limited healing ability had been enough of a risk, but so far, Marx hadn’t asked too many questions. “I am only able to do that when I feel well, when I am fully rested and in good health.” He shook his head. “The last several weeks have been far too draining.”

Marx climbed into the taxi beside Lowan and gave the driver his address. He glanced sideways at Lowan, at the edge of a question he wouldn’t ask. Not because he wasn’t curious, but because he was afraid that prying too deeply into Lowan’s personal affairs might be offensive. He wouldn’t risk losing a friend. Instead, he faced the window. “What about the unicorn staff? Do you think we’ll run into any trouble?”

“The British delegation will not be taking any chances with security, and I would not mind a relaxing and quiet cruise.”

“Ha, me too.” When the taxi stopped at Marx’s building, he stepped out and closed the door.

“The bank next,” Lowan told the driver. “Then Water Street.”

The driver leaned around, his expression aghast. “That’s no place to go if you’re carrying money.”

“That is not your business.” Lowan glared until the driver shrank back and faced the street again. The cab eased into traffic. Stopping at the bank took only a moment. He withdrew a hundred dollars, Sen’s standard demand, and tucked the envelope in his pocket.

Ten minutes later, Lowan walked down a narrow alley. The taxi’s engine idled in the background. A burst of wind stirred dead leaves and litter, skittering along the edges of the brick walls. The first door that Lowan passed was boarded shut. Farther along, the next door wasn’t locked. Lowan turned the knob and pushed it open. The hinges creaked.

“Sen!” Lowan stopped at the top of a stairwell leading into total darkness. He tried reaching with his mind, but exhaustion impaired his senses. “Sen?”

With only the slightest impression that Sen’s presence was near, possibly his imagination rather than a certainty, Lowan started down the steps. Two flights down; not just the basement under the warehouse, but the subbasement another level deeper.

The temperature dropped as he descended. A rotten stench intensified. After a landing, the stairwell doubled back. The light dimmed. He felt his way along the railing. Sen’s presence grew. Lowan’s side suddenly ached.

“Sen?” Lowan found the end of the railing. There were no further steps. He kept his hand on the wall and inched forward, seeing nothing but blackness. In closer proximity, he sensed Sen’s location relative to his own, but still felt at a disadvantage. The giant had excellent night vision. “Sen, where are you?”

A deep growl came from somewhere farther back. “Come here.”

The command sounded irritable. A harsh order. Lowan stepped away from the wall, stretching his arms out to feel for obstacles. Blindness affected his balance. “This is too dark.”

“There’s a lamp on the table.”

“The table?” He took another tentative step.

“In front of you!”

Lowan tried to judge the table’s position based on Sen’s knowledge of it. He sensed the giant watching him. After two more steps, he reached to the left and bumped against it, then put both hands on it for balance. He felt around carefully until his fingers encountered the oil lamp. There was a book of matches beside it. He struck one. The flame flared, startlingly bright for an instant, then dim. He lit the lamp and adjusted the wick.

Light flickered against the nearest wall. Massive black shapes made Lowan stumble back. Huge and gaunt, glaring eyes and bared teeth, not just foreign and uncanny—but wholly alien. Lowan’s heart skipped. He gripped the edge of the table while Sen’s harsh snickering grated in the background. Rough drawings, maybe done in black paint or smeared soot, had been scrawled across the walls, extending beyond the range of the lamp. The flickering light gave them the appearance of motion.

Breathing hard, he leaned against the table until he stopped shaking. His side burned. The animals came into focus, denizens of Sen's homeworld, all carnivorous and extremely vicious. He'd walked into a predator's lair.

"Come here," Sen repeated.

One chair stood beside the table, heavy and reinforced to support Sen's size. His black jacket was draped over it. Against the wall, a small coal stove took up the corner, cold for now. Lowan had no idea how far the darkened portion of the basement extended. The smell choked him. He sensed Sen's direction, but saw only blurry motion in the shadows.

"I brought your payment." Lowan took the envelope from his pocket, moving slowly and showing what he was doing. He held the envelope in the light, then set it on the table.

"You could have brought it to the Green Light later tonight." Mattress springs creaked. Sen's eyes reflected catlike in the darkness, surprisingly low. "What else do you want?"

"I..." Speaking Sen's harsh and growling language burned Lowan's throat. He tried not to limp. Showing fear or weakness would only make Sen more aggressive. Not trusting his shaky hands to hold the oil lamp, Lowan left it on the table and stepped toward the reflective eyes. "I have another mission. I have been hired to take something important to England, another country on the other side of this ocean. I might be gone for two weeks."

"Huh." Nothing more than an animal-like grunt. The mattress springs creaked again, and blankets rustled. The eyes moved upward, his giant form outlined by shadows at the edge of the lamp's range.

Lowan shrank back. The burning pain in his side didn't originate with him. He never wanted to be within arm's reach

of Sen. If the giant was injured, he would be far more dangerous and difficult to deal with.

Shirtless, Sen stepped into the light, his impressive muscles developed during intense military training on a planet with extraordinarily powerful gravity. He turned and moved his arm to show his bloody side, the result of a gun battle the previous night. The wound was a long gouge above his hip where a bullet had grazed him. Not deep enough to cause any serious internal injury, though infection would be a concern. Sen's medical knowledge didn't extend beyond rinsing it with alcohol.

Sen's hand shot out with the speed of a striking snake and closed around Lowan's forearm. The giant jerked him forward and pressed his palm against the wound. "Heal it."

"I—" Lowan wheezed. The crushing pressure on his arm brought tears to his eyes. His heart pounded in his ears. He reflexively tried twisting away, but the giant's strength made his efforts less than useless. A kitten in the jaws of a crocodile.

"Heal it!" Sen jerked him and squeezed harder.

Lowan choked on a whimper. Pain blinded him, and his knees gave out. He fell against Sen, only remaining upright because of the giant's grip on his arm. "I . . . have no energy."

Sen's left hand grabbed Lowan's chin and turned his face upward, looking into his eyes. In good health, Lowan's eyes glowed blue—noticeable in the darkness. Not now. Not a sign that he could fake. Snarling, Sen shoved him away.

Lowan stumbled and collapsed. Grime covered the floor, cold against his face. A wave of throbbing pain overwhelmed his senses. He breathed in gasps, already feeling his arm swelling. Heavy footsteps thudded closer. Lowan edged back, shaking, and put his good arm over his head. He'd

come to Earth as Sen's prisoner. Effectively, that hadn't changed.

"You're lucky you're worth more to me alive. If you think I'd let you out of my sight for two weeks—" Sen's growling voice took on a harsher edge. "You're supposed to be looking for a way off this planet. That's your mission. *Your only mission*. Everything else is a waste of time. It's been three years! What have you done so far?"

"Building a ship is impossible. I have been working with radios, trying to find a way to send a signal . . ." He'd explained about his work with radios before. Calling his own world was beyond the realm of possibility. The best he could hope for would be to reach someone traveling in the area who could help him or relay his message. A new idea formed. "This is why I want to go to England. I want to know if anyone there has done more work with radios than I have. If there is more research, better components . . ."

Sen grunted like a bull and resumed pacing. Lowan cringed whenever the heavy boots approached. He didn't dare stand without permission, and he didn't have the slightest hope of defending himself. In this condition, he couldn't read the giant's thoughts. Through the haze of pain, he had enough trouble putting his own thoughts in order.

Finally, the pacing stopped. Sen stood over him, his black boots inches from Lowan's face. "I'm not letting you out of my sight for two weeks. If it's this important, I'll go with you."



Chapter III

Marx snapped his suitcase shut. He had no idea what he would need on the trip, but he also didn't have much to pack. A few changes of his own clothes, pajamas, his shaving kit, and a toothbrush. The one thing he would miss was his piano, his only relaxing hobby. The prospect of going without it for two weeks bothered him. This wasn't going to be a relaxing vacation. It would be two stress-filled work weeks.

Before leaving the station, Kramer had warned him viciously that any mistake would cost him his job. Kramer would personally ensure that Marx never held another job at any other police department, either. *You shouldn't even be a detective.* Still shaking, Marx glanced around the apartment to check for anything he might have forgotten, then went to the kitchen.

Nothing in the icebox would last two weeks—especially not the ice. Not that there was much else in it. He set the half-melted ice block in the sink, drank the remnant of a quart of milk, and packed the bread and cheese in his suitcase to keep for a snack. The half dozen eggs, he wasn't sure what to do with.

He grabbed the suitcase and the eggs, locked his apartment, and knocked on the next door.

Frank opened it and cringed. “Joe . . .” He forced an insincere smile. “I’m surprised to see you back so soon after . . . this morning.”

“I’m going to be out of town for a couple of weeks.” He held out the eggs. “I don’t want these to go bad. Can you use them?”

“Sure, thanks.” Frank clutched the egg carton, his voice a squeak. “Going out of town, huh? The police . . .?”

“Yeah, the police. I don’t really want to leave, but I’m going to England. I’ve got my first international job.” It wasn’t a lie, though Frank would surely interpret it the wrong way. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck.” Sweating, Frank retreated and slammed the door.

Marx went out to find a taxi. Twenty minutes later, it left him at the harbor. The RMS *Sovereign* towered over the pier, black hull gleaming. Dockworkers shouted over the clatter of cargo cranes. A line of passengers stretched along the gangway, their luggage piled high on porters’ carts.

Seagulls squawked and darted along the edge of the pier, diving down to look for scraps. Marx paused at the foot of the ramp and focused on the birds to avoid noticing the size of the crowd. Voices buzzed in the background. Large crowds often made him lightheaded and nervous, worse than claustrophobia. Holding his breath, he stepped onto the ramp.

An endless string of cars stopped at the pier. People swirled in groups behind him, men in suits that cost more than a year’s pay, ladies with fancy hats and high-pitched voices. He tightened his grip on the suitcase handle and

watched the seagulls. A spring breeze blew a fishy scent off the water. The line moved forward slowly, but steadily.

Someone touched his shoulder. Marx flinched and turned.

Pierce faced him, wearing a dark overcoat that looked too heavy for the spring day. "We can skip the queue." He pressed ahead, his official bearing and a few curt words clearing people out of the way. Marx followed on his heels, embarrassed to find himself at the center of attention as the other passengers moved aside.

A ship's officer greeted them at the top of the gangway, nodded to Pierce, and waved them through. Marx hurried after him, too overwhelmed by unfamiliar surroundings to notice much. Then he skidded to a stop.

Lowan sat in a chair on the deck, watching the people as they boarded. He clutched his right arm to his chest, his hand balled into a fist. His unnaturally pale face glistened with sweat, and he breathed hard.

"Hey," Marx called after Pierce. Pierce turned and joined them. Marx edged closer to Lowan. "Are you okay?"

"I . . ." Lowan pushed himself stiffly out of the chair with his left arm, then held his right against himself again. He looked away, and his voice lacked the usual pleasant and melodic accent. "I slipped and fell on the gangway."

"You should have that seen to," Pierce said. "The ship's doctor—"

"Has no cure for bruises."

"If it hasn't improved by tomorrow, you should go, nonetheless. He can still give you something for the pain, and you look like you could use it." Pierce glanced toward Marx. "I'll show you to your quarters, on B Deck."

Pierce set off at a brisk pace, then slowed to allow Lowan to keep up. The decks still felt crowded with people finding

their rooms, meeting friends, and exploring. Pierce brought them up several flights of steps, then down a polished corridor lined with brass fixtures and framed prints of English landscapes.

“Have you ever been on a ship before?” Pierce asked. The question sounded more official than friendly, though it might have been an attempt to get to know him better.

Marx’s thoughts froze. Poseidon’s yacht had been the height of luxury and extravagance, though far smaller. And he’d been too busy battling gangsters to enjoy the amenities. More recently, he’d been kidnapped and taken aboard a salvage vessel. That was no comparison at all. And he didn’t want to think about the time he’d intentionally sunk a coast guard patrol boat. “Not like this.”

“I think you’ll find it comfortable.” Pierce stopped at a cabin, unlocked it, and pressed the key into Marx’s hand. “Lowan’s room is adjoining.”

“Thanks.” Marx pushed the door open and gasped. Light shone from a row of windows overlooking the ocean. An ornately carved wardrobe, a writing desk, a large bed with a beautifully embroidered bedspread, thick carpet with geometric patterns. Another doorway stood open to reveal a private washroom.

“Something wrong?” Pierce asked.

“I’ve never stayed in a room like this in my life.” He stepped farther inside and put his suitcase on the bed, then touched the desk to make sure it was real.

“If it’s that bad . . .”

“This is bigger than my whole apartment.” Marx stuck his head in the washroom. The porcelain sparkled. His apartment building only had two bathrooms per floor, and they were usually filthy. “I guess I was expecting a narrow

bunk and not enough room to turn around, and I thought I'd have to share with a roommate."

"I can arrange that instead, if you'd rather—"

"Nah, this is good." Marx faced Pierce again and waited.

"You won't have much time to spend here, in any case."

Pierce motioned for Marx to follow. Lowan walked with them down the corridors, while Pierce pointed out rooms and named other passengers along the way. Overwhelmed by the new surroundings, Marx doubted he would remember much of it later.

They descended to a lower deck. The purser's office was situated behind a brass-barred window, similar to a bank teller. The purser himself, a nondescript man with a neat moustache and a crisp uniform, unlocked a reinforced door and led them into a secure storage room.

Marx recognized a long, narrow crate on the table. Steel cabinets lined the walls, and a heavy safe was bolted to the floor in the corner, but the staff wouldn't fit in any of them.

"This room remains locked at all times," Pierce explained. "Only the purser and myself have keys."

"Has there been any trouble so far?" Lowan asked.

"None, but the staff was only brought here under heavy guard an hour ago. We're not taking any chances." Footsteps echoed in the hall. Pierce led them out of the vault and locked it. The purser remained on duty.

Three other men waited in the corridor: Haynes in his security uniform, and two others who looked more scholarly. One wore thick glasses and the other fussed with a leather folio of documents.

They reconvened in a small conference room beside the purser's office, wooden chairs around an oblong table. Haynes spread a deck plan of the ship in front of them.

Pierce finished the introductions. “This is Dr. Edmund Forsyth.” He motioned to the man with the folio. “Curator of Medieval and Early European Antiquities, with the British Museum. He’s the official custodian responsible for verifying the staff’s authenticity and signing the transfer papers.”

Marx mumbled a greeting. He wasn’t sure if he should offer to shake hands, since the distance across the table would have required them both to lean awkwardly. He settled for a nod. Lowan kept his right arm on his lap, hidden under the table.

“And Mr. Lionel Pemberton,” Pierce finished, indicating the nervous man with glasses. “Lloyd’s of London Insurance Assessor. The staff is insured for an enormous sum, of course, and Lloyd’s wants someone present to document the condition of the artifact at every stage.”

“In other words,” Haynes added, “if anything happens to the staff due to our negligence, Lloyd’s might not pay.”

A sudden pang hit Marx’s stomach. Nothing indicated that the warning was specifically directed at him, but he took it personally anyway. He glanced around the table, then at Pierce. “What do you want me to do?” The question sounded more awkward than he intended. He cleared his throat, looked down, and waited.



Chapter IV

“**Y**our duties are as follows,” Pierce said. “If the artifact needs to be moved for any reason, you will accompany it. You will guard the purser’s vault or patrol the surrounding quarters at staggered intervals. You will respond to any disturbance reported near the purser’s vault.” He tapped on the map spread across the table. “In general, you will mingle with the other passengers and watch for any suspicious activity. If anyone has plans to steal the staff, we need to stop them before they have a chance to act.”

Marx listened and studied the map. Mingling wasn’t something he wanted to be involved in. The setup sounded like his assignment at the museum’s gala, and that had gone horribly wrong.

Beside him, Lowan nodded. “We have handled similar situations.”

Forsyth cleared his throat. “And I will require daily access to the staff for inspection. Strictly for documentation purposes.”

Pemberton raised his hand. “And I must verify the condition of the crate each morning, for the insurance records.”

Haynes sighed. “Yes, yes, everyone will get their turn. But security comes first. I will meet you here every morning for an inspection. If we are going to work in shifts . . .” He looked around the table.

“I will be able to do very little until tomorrow,” Lowan admitted. “After hurting my arm . . .”

“If you’re not fit for duty tomorrow, I’ll order you to see the ship’s doctor,” Pierce said. “Haynes will take the next shift, then I’ll stand guard overnight. We’ll meet tomorrow at eight o’clock for Forsyth and Pemberton to have their daily look, then we’ll have another discussion about shifts. Until then, familiarize yourselves with the ship. We sail at two. Once we’re at sea, we’ll be relying on each other.”

Pierce stood and folded the map. The meeting adjourned. Pemberton and Forsyth filed out, then Haynes. Marx and Lowan left together, long corridors and narrow stairways bringing them back to the upper deck. Activity swirled around them as other guests found their rooms and explored the ship. Lowan set the pace—*slow*—and continued to hold his arm against his chest, wincing with every step.

“How did you hurt your arm?” Marx spoke quietly. He glanced sideways at Lowan, then at the floor. “I don’t think you fell on the gangway. You’re not that clumsy, and you look like you’re in too much pain for just a bruise.”

The next corridor brought them to their rooms. Lowan stopped at his door and unlocked it, working left-handed. He motioned Marx inside. Marx stepped in and waited while Lowan closed the door again. Then Lowan sat in a comfortable chair in the corner, laid his right arm across his lap, unbuttoned his cuff, and pushed his sleeve back. Black,

red, and purple clashed from his elbow to his wrist. His arm looked badly swollen.

"You didn't do that by falling," Marx insisted. "Are you sure it's not broken?"

"I can move my hand. It is not broken." Lowan demonstrated, but winced. "Sen was not pleased when I told him I wanted to leave the country for two weeks."

"Why did you tell him? You don't need his permission . . ."

"I do." Lowan pulled his sleeve back down over his arm. "If I fail to maintain regular contact, he might kill my friends. In your absence, he would start with Rita."

"No." Marx's stomach turned cold. He paced, not sure what to do with his hands. The room suddenly seemed much smaller. "Why do you put up with him? What does he have on you?"

"Why do the police not arrest him?" Lowan countered, not fully making eye contact. "He is a known murderer, many times over."

"Most of the guys he's killed haven't been much of a loss to society. It would take an army to bring him in, and nobody's volunteering to go first. Besides, we don't know where he lives."

"You know where he spends his evenings."

"Yeah, but . . ." Even raiding the Green Light speakeasy only seemed to make the trouble multiply and spread. "Can't you do something?"

"The impasse between us will only end when one of us is dead. Given his lifestyle and my profession, it is unlikely that either of us will reach the end of our natural lifespan. In the meantime, he prefers me alive. I am in no danger of worse than bruises, and he is occasionally useful to me."

Lowan closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair, making an effort to breathe slowly.

Marx continued pacing, unsure what else to say. It wasn't his place to argue. Sen had saved Lowan's life several times—and also Marx's. "So, if he didn't want you to leave town, and you left anyway . . ."

"He decided to come along."

"He . . . what?" Marx couldn't picture Sen among the first-class passengers.

"I arranged for him to join the baggage handlers. He is supposed to leave the ship before it sets sail, but instead he will remain hidden in the hold."

Marx groaned and rubbed his face. His loyalty to Lowan might mean helping to hide Sen—and he wanted nothing to do with it.

"I apologize if this puts you in an awkward position," Lowan said. "It is also uncomfortable for me, but this is the only way he would allow me to leave. You should also know, he was injured in the gunfight last night. It was not life-threatening, though there is a risk of infection, and the pain will make him more irritable."

"So he's not invincible?" Marx snorted.

"No, he is not, but it would take more than one shot to kill him." Lowan said it dryly, like he'd spent plenty of time thinking about it. He closed his eyes again and sank back into the chair. "I will order dinner brought to my room, and I will spend the remainder of the day sleeping. With enough rest, I might be able to do something about this bruise by morning."

"Alright." Marx stepped back and turned away. "I just don't like seeing him hurt you."

Lowan said nothing. Marx stepped outside, pulled the door shut, and bumped into a dark-eyed young woman in a

plain dress. She yelped like he'd attacked her and scurried away. Farther down the hall, she caught up with an older heavysset woman who walked with a slow and awkward gait.

"Sorry," Marx mumbled, but by now, the women were out of range. He waited for another moment before turning in the same direction, not wanting to appear as if he was following them. Spending the rest of the voyage in his room, away from people, would be his version of a perfect vacation. But that wasn't what he was being paid for.

He checked his watch. One-thirty. He'd hoped more time had passed than that. This was only the beginning, and he already couldn't wait for the next two weeks to be over. Grudgingly, he stepped onto the deck.



Chapter V

Marx still wasn't sure what he was supposed to be doing. Watching for threats seemed extremely vague, and "mingling" sounded like one of his worst nightmares. Familiarizing himself with the ship was the only viable option, but the flow of the crowd made that difficult. He strolled along the deck, keeping his hat pulled low while avoiding the streams of men in expensively tailored suits and the women displaying the height of spring fashion in dresses and hats. He tugged on his old beige raincoat, hoping the patches weren't too noticeable.

The ship would be leaving the harbor soon, and the crowd gathered to wave farewell to their friends ashore. Marx picked the nearest door and stepped inside, breathing easier after he shut it behind him.

The sound of a piano caught his attention first. Something tinkling, light and forgettable, as polite and substanceless as carbonated water. The instrument had a beautiful tone, better than his old upright, but the music wasn't his style at all. Still feeling as if he'd just escaped from the crowd outside, he turned around slowly and took a deep breath.

The First-Class Afternoon Lounge was a sunlit room with tall windows and pale green carpeting. Potted palms filled a dozen brass planters. A stewardess in a crisp white uniform poured tea at a sideboard, while a pianist played a glossy black grand near the far wall.

And at the center of the room, an afternoon buffet stretched artistically along a linen-draped table. Too late for lunch, but too early for dinner, this must be a snack. Tiny cucumber sandwiches, scones with clotted cream, slices of pound cake, a variety of little pastries, bowls of grapes and sliced apples, cold cuts arranged like flowers, and a silver urn of tea attended by a smiling stewardess. The sunbeams angling from the windows gave it all a heavenly glow.

While his mouth watered from the scent of food, he paused long enough to look around. A man in an expensive suit fawned over a woman in a silk dress and pearls. The pair giggled and pawed unashamedly, feeding each other little pieces of cake. At a table in the corner, a woman in black silk and diamonds sipped her drink and stared across the room. A hat with a short veil screened her eyes. She frowned at the affectionate couple, then faced Marx. She might have been thirty, or a few years more. Something cold, judgmental, and exceedingly cunning sparked in her expression.

Marx shifted and turned away. Near the windows, a hefty older woman occupied a wicker chair. Enough jewelry to sink a small boat draped her arms and neck, and her jerky hand motions showed rings on every finger. Her string of pearls looked heavy enough to bruise her throat. She scolded her companion, a dark-eyed girl around twenty, revealing a shrill voice. Marx shuddered, remembering a particularly cruel schoolteacher. The girl, who he'd seen in the hallway earlier, bore the scolding without a word.

While the tirade continued, Marx slipped past them. He supposed that socializing was part of his job, but striking up a casual conversation with any of these people was out of the question. All were out of his league. They'd never missed a meal in their lives.

He kept his head down and took a plate from the buffet. The sight of so much food—*free food*—flared up something old and instinctive. The stale bread and piece of cheese he'd hoarded in his suitcase seemed laughable. He loaded his plate with sandwiches, pastries, and cold cuts, trying not to take more than one of each, though the variety was astonishing. Filled to the rim, he took the plate to the side of the room away from the bejeweled woman, sat with his back to the wall, and watched the others while he ate.

The woman in black, two tables away, continued to stare. He avoided looking at her and focused on his plate. Across the room, the hefty woman started shouting. "Steward! Steward!"

The stewardess left the teapot long enough to speak with her, then hurried to the kitchen. She returned a moment later accompanied by a man in a white uniform, broad-shouldered and with an official bearing.

The woman in the wicker chair raised her voice at the steward, then pointed to Marx, glaring like he'd tracked mud through her parlor. The steward turned in the direction she indicated and strode across the room.

Marx hunched down and gripped his plate. It wasn't hard for him to guess what the trouble was. He'd already been told too many times that he didn't fit in, that he wasn't good enough, that he shouldn't even be a cop, that he didn't belong. He braced himself for more of the same. Heat crept up the back of his neck.

“Excuse me, sir.” The steward squared his shoulders and spoke with authority, though a slight hesitation in his movement signaled that he wouldn’t have been sure of himself in a fight. “This lounge is for first-class passengers only.”

“I am.” Marx reached into his pocket. Putting his hand out of sight made the steward fidget until Marx retrieved his key. He set it on the table.

The steward stepped close enough to reach for it, then backed away while he checked the number. “Cabin B-12?”

“Yeah. That is in first class, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” The steward paused. “Your name?”

“Joe Marx.”

“Would you mind waiting here?”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Marx glared over his plate of cold cuts.

Still fidgeting, the steward kept the key and turned around. He glanced back every few steps. The ship lurched, and the crowd outside cheered and shouted their last goodbyes.

Marx focused on his food, icing from a pastry making his fingers sticky. The chair beside him scraped on the floor. He glanced up and found the woman in black seated inches away. Startled, he almost choked.

At closer range, the diamonds looked real—including a wedding ring. The dress, too, didn’t come off just any clothing rack. It belonged on the cover of a scandalous fashion magazine. Even more disconcerting was the way she stared. He couldn’t see her eyes through the veil, but he felt her watching. A twist in her lips betrayed cool amusement.

Marx wasn’t in a polite mood. “What?”

“Just curious.” Her voice was smooth, and she leaned back slightly. The fluid motion showed off more of her figure.

“You can be curious from your own table.” He made a shooing motion.

“Well . . .” She chuckled softly, amusement without humor. “I’ve never had a reaction like that before. Don’t you like me?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” He stuffed the next pastry in his mouth. If she didn’t leave him alone, he’d take his plate to a different table. Across the room, the woman in the wicker chair stared with a horrified expression.

“The steward took your key, but he didn’t escort you out of here. If he was going to get reinforcements, you wouldn’t be so calm about it. I’m guessing he went to check if your name is on the register for first class. Is it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“In that case, I’d also guess that you didn’t pay for your ticket.”

“You do a lot of guessing.”

“I wondered if you were a bodyguard. *Hired muscle.*” She smirked. “You don’t quite look the type. And if that was the case, why aren’t you busy guarding whoever you work for?”

Marx finished the rest of the pastries and started on the cold cuts.

She moved closer and reached toward him, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “You’re not like the others—and that makes you interesting. Why are you here?”

He stared at her perfect, soft hand, then at her face. Feeling her watching him without being able to see her eyes left him jittery and cold. “I can’t talk about that.”

“That only proves you’re working for someone else.” Her mouth gloated. “Who—”

The steward returned and set the key in front of Marx. “I apologize for the misunderstanding, sir. Please enjoy the lounge.”

“Thanks.” Marx pocketed the key and nodded toward the judgmental woman in the wicker chair. “Would you mind telling her to quit gawking and leave me alone?”

The steward winced and glanced in her direction. “Yes, sir.” He dawdled across the room, then quietly explained the situation in a low voice.

“Nonsense!” The old woman huffed. “First class has standards.” Beside her, the dark-eyed girl fidgeted and hid her flushed face with her hand.

“Her . . .” The woman in black snorted. “If the standards were that high, we wouldn’t have to put up with her, either. Poor girl, having an employer like that.”

“What can you tell me about them?” Marx asked.

“Miss Cunningham. Yes, the old hag is *Miss* Eliza Cunningham, and don’t call her Mrs. unless you want a scene. It seems that her fiancé jilted her for a prettier face a few decades ago—more than a few—and that put her off men for good. The girl’s a paid companion, Mary Brown, and she must have needed a job desperately to put up with that. After what Eliza’s been filling her head with, she’s probably terrified of men by now.”

“Hmm.” Marx finished his plate and watched. Miss Cunningham grumbled and steamed, venting her sharp opinions on Mary. The woman in black watched them with the same amusement as an onlooker at the zoo. “What about you?” Marx asked.

“I’m not afraid of men.” Her lips twisted upward and she faced him again.

“I meant, what’s your name? Mrs. . . .”

“Maureen.” Her voice remained low and smooth. “Mrs. Maureen Vale. There is no mister.”

“Oh.” Marx nudged his empty plate and looked around, wondering if he was supposed to leave it on the table or return it somewhere. Whatever had happened to Maureen’s husband, she didn’t sound the least bit sorry about it. “I should get back to . . . what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“I do hope you’ll be staying in the lounge more often.” She leaned closer and reached for his hand. “You make things interesting.”

Marx jerked away and stood. He pushed his chair in, positioning it between himself and Maureen.

“*Ha*. Are you afraid of women?” She rose from her chair, somehow putting catlike grace into every motion.

“Just the ones in black who don’t show their faces.” He stepped back and touched his hat brim before turning away. “Mrs. Vale.”

He started for the door, feeling the motion of the ship more as he walked. By now, they had left the harbor, and he expected the deck to be less crowded. When he reached for the door, it opened.

An older man dressed in tweed stepped through, narrowly avoiding a collision. His surprise turned to recognition. “Oh, I’m glad I found you.”

“Professor Doyle?” Marx stopped and moved aside. They’d met several times, most recently at the museum on the night of a disastrous gala. Doyle was a history professor at the local university and sometimes gave his opinion on artifacts that were evidence in police cases. “What are you doing here?”

“I was looking for Lowan.” Doyle took his glasses off and wiped them with his handkerchief. “Have you seen him?”

“He wasn’t feeling well and was going to spend the rest of the day in his room. Why did you come?”

“I heard about the staff.” He adjusted his glasses on his nose and blinked. “That must also be why you’re here.”

Marx flinched and glanced back. Maureen still watched them. “That’s supposed to be a secret. Keep it quiet, okay?” He gritted his teeth, pushed past Doyle, and reached for the door. Doyle was a security risk.

Thank you for reading this

PREVIEW of

The Unicorn Voyage!

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After writing a newspaper story about the crimeless village of Harrisonville, Tom Nenning 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 brings Lowan and Marx to an illegal greyhound track outside of the city limits, race fixing, and murder.

Book 16: The Second Course

Lowan and Marx track down the second member of the insurance racket, and he's nothing like they expected. Caught between a case of mistaken identity and a prestigious

banquet at his restaurant, he agrees to tell them everything he knows—if the killer doesn't get to him first.

Book 17: The Third Conspirator

The third and final member of the insurance racket proves to be the most elusive and dangerous of them all.

Book 18: The Unicorn Heist

The unicorn staff is going on display at the museum, and Lowan is hired to guard it. When Poseidon escapes and Mori returns, both intent on stealing the staff, the fundraiser gala turns deadly.

Book 19: Murder at Battle Rock Lighthouse

Lowan is hired to pick up a historic ship's bell from the Battle Rock Lighthouse and return it to the museum. But when the lighthouse keeper is found murdered, the bell turns out to be counterfeit, and Marx disappears, the problem becomes far more dangerous than he expected.

Book 20: The Pesticide Plot

Lowan's search for a missing man uncovers a secret kept hidden since the war and a plot to steal dangerous chemicals from a research laboratory.

Book 21: The Unicorn Voyage

Lowan and Marx join a delegation bringing the unicorn staff to England. Five days aboard a cruise ship turn into anything but a peaceful vacation as they deal with jewelry thefts, attempts to steal the staff—and murder.

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