

Winter Masquerade – Kevin Klehr

Chapter Two

“We’ll need the Detective to help us find the Alchemist,” said Olive. “That’s our only option to get you home.”

We were still in the Alchemist’s quarters. Cole studied the ransom note.

“It doesn’t specify whether the kidnappers are on the ship or in that other dimension,” he said.

“That’s why we need the Detective,” Olive replied. “Now, where did we see him last?”

“Can’t we just go to his cabin?” I asked.

“He’s never in his cabin,” Scallywag replied. “We’ll have to listen out for him on the ship.”

“Listen?”

“He has a very loud voice.” Scallywag shook his head. “Some say he sounds jovial. I say he’s loud.”

We left the Alchemist’s cabin and wandered. Soon, Scallywag pointed to a colourful piece of material on deck. “That’s his scarf,” he said.

“What’s his scarf doing on deck?” I asked.

“He’s renowned for losing things,” Olive replied. “Thank the goddess! With his items all over the ship and his loud yet jovial voice, we’ll find him.”

I picked up the scarf. It was sheer like stockings and had many small flowers in the design. I wrapped it around my hand. This was a queer adventure.

We continued our search.

“What’s your boyfriend’s name?” Cole asked me.

“Harris.”

We kept strolling until Olive cried, “Well, don’t stop there!” She eyed me eagerly. “Talk about him. Us single folk need titillation.”

“Titillation?” I smirked.

“Yes,” she replied. “We want to hear the good stuff.”

“Where do I start?”

“Appearance,” she continued. “How you met. Best qualities. Annoying habits. Does he cook?”

“Ah, appearance. He’s brooding. Short slick hair and arms I melt into.”

“How you met was the next question,” Scallywag said.

“At a petrol station. I was paying, and he was filling his car. I fell in love with his car before I noticed him. A maroon sports model. There was someone in the passenger seat, so I was summing up what type of guy drives a car like that and who does he drive around with. The passenger was younger, although at the time I couldn’t see much of him. Harris told me later he was a man he slept with the night before and I told him he was showing off to his one-night stand. He didn’t find the remark as funny as I did.”

“Doesn’t he have a sense of humour?” Cole asked.

“Yes, but it’s different to mine. Teenage boy stuff makes him laugh. Fart jokes. Things like that.”

“Is there anything sophisticated about him?” Olive again seemed weirdly fanatical.

“He appreciates nice things.”

“You mean expensive things.” Scallywag wore a know-all grin.

“That too.” I halted and then pointed. “Is that the Detective’s cap?”

“Yes,” Olive replied. “One of many.” She picked it up. “A floral scarf and a checked beret. He must have lost his glasses before he dressed.” She stepped forward. We followed. “Now, Ferris, let’s get to Harris’s annoying habits before his best qualities.”

“Staying up longer than me, doing god knows what, and then climbing into bed and using me as his hot water bottle.”

“Even in summer?” Scallywag asked.

“Even in summer. He’s as cold-blooded as a reptile, I swear.”

Cole stopped. “A pair of glasses.” He grabbed them. “They’re covered in salt. They’ve been here for a while.”

Olive took a closer look. “That’s the pair he lost before his last two pairs. He’ll be glad we found them.”

“Wait a second.” I’d just realised something. “Where’s the other passengers?”

“What do you mean?” Olive asked.

“Where’s Miss Assumption and Miss Represent and all the others on this ship?”

“We don’t need to talk to them.” Scallywag said this as if no other explanation was needed.

“So, where are they?”

“It is dark, Ferris,” Olive said. “We’d be in bed, too, if it wasn’t for your drama.”

“Then why isn’t the Detective in bed?”

“I’ve never seen him sleep,” Scallywag replied. “It’s not like I’ve gone out of my way to find him asleep because that’s when I’m asleep, but as I’ve never seen him sleep, I’m not sure he does.”

“He must sleep, surely.” Someone let out a hearty laugh. “Is that—?”

“That’s him.” They all replied in unison.

“He’s in the captain’s quarters,” Cole said. “She lets everyone hang out there as it’s the largest room on the ship.”

As we hurried toward his laughter, I noticed a magnifying glass on deck.

“It’s cracked,” I said.

“No point giving it back to him then, is there?” Olive took it from my hand and gave it to Cole. He shoved it in his pocket.

We entered the captain’s quarters. Her space was beyond luxurious. Large curved windows gave her an expansive view of the ocean. A never-ending modular lounge meant you could have an argument with someone and simply stroll to the other side, sit, and ignore the complainant without being too rude. And her choice of art showed she had an appreciation of Dada.

A chubby fellow in a yellow beret was watching the rainbow sheet flap in the breeze, chuckling at something, although I couldn’t tell what. A tiny horse poked his head out from the pink man-bag he was holding.

“Hello,” I said.

The man turned and waved.

“Hello,” the horse said. He wriggled to prop himself higher and studied me from head to toe. As he did, I noticed he had wings. “I don’t recognise you.”

“I’m Ferris.”

“Nice to meet you, Ferris. I’m Janus, and this is the Detective. What’s your business here?”

“I’m stuck on this ship with no way to get home.”

“Have you seen the Alchemist?” Janus’s little brows furrowed.

“He’s missing,” I replied.

“He’s been kidnapped.” Olive handed the ransom note to the Detective who held it so Janus could read.

“This is serious,” the Detective said. “How will we tend the sick?”

“No one’s been sick on this ship for as long as my memory serves me,” Janus

said.

“That’s true,” the Detective replied. “But we still have a crime on the ship!” He paced back and forth against the view. “This reminds me of the time Miss Endeavour went missing and the only clue I had was a man’s suit in her wardrobe.”

“And the note saying she was taking a side trip.” Janus looked to the ceiling as he spoke.

“Yes, and the note saying she was taking a side trip. But to where?”

“To Mister Rectomy’s cabin. She said so in her note.” Janus neighed. “She fell in love and was continuing her voyage in his cabin.”

“But there was still the mystery of her missing belongings, and the man’s suit in her wardrobe.” The Detective eyeballed his horse companion.

“Her clothes were in his cabin,” I figured.

“Yes,” Janus replied. “But Mister Rectomy insisted one item of clothing should be left in Miss Endeavour’s cabin, so if their affair didn’t work out, at least her cabin wouldn’t be taken by another passenger. So, he hung his favourite suit in her wardrobe. It was all in her note.”

“And another mystery was solved.” The Detective applauded himself.

“And now we have another to solve,” Janus said. “We have to question everyone onboard. The last person, or people, who saw him may just be our kidnappers!”

“Everyone’s asleep,” I noted.

“Has anyone considered giving in to the kidnapper’s demands?” The Detective waved the ransom note. “They want high tea and I make a divine banana and toffee tart.”

“Banoffee,” Janus said, proudly.

“*Gesundheit*,” the Detective replied.

“And Olive is an expert in cucumber sandwich construction,” Scallywag said.

“I am,” Olive confirmed. “And the captain has a wicked rosehip tea blend in her pantry. You should see her tea-drinking outfit, Ferris. A floral print with little cups and saucers sprouting pink roses.”

“As if the cups were pot plant holders.” The Detective sashayed like he was modelling the captain’s dress. “And she has a gown specially for desserts. It goes so well with my banana and toffee tart.”

“Banoffee,” Janus said again.

“Are you catching a cold?” The Detective asked. “I can fetch your cardigan.”

“You’re forgetting one thing,” Cole said.

“You’re right,” the Detective replied. “The captain is sure to have a blanket.”

Janus shook his head. “No. What Cole is trying to say is we don’t know how to contact the kidnappers.”

The others continued with their own version of reason, so I lowered myself on the couch realising the likelihood of me returning to Harris had the same odds as world peace. I shut my eyes. I longed to weep but no tears flowed. Not even a random drop. My surrealist setting wasn’t conducive to crying.

“So, what are Harris’s good qualities?” Scallywag was trying to make me feel better.

I opened my eyes. He was sitting next to me.

“He likes to keep me near,” I replied.

“How?”

“You know how I said he normally goes to bed after me. He watches me.”

“He watches you sleep?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you know?”

“I sense him.”

“His eyes burn into you, so you wake.” Scallywag’s voice changed. An asthmatic breath followed each syllable. “Harris sounds creepy!”

The boy’s eyes were dark and wide, and his body shrunk under his shirt. A cockroach scampered along the now grimy and worn couch. Scallywag’s anorexic fingers snatched the bug. He chewed its head off and made sounds of culinary contentment.

I stood. There was no Detective or winged horse. Outside the sky was jet black, and the ocean was no longer chocolate. It was greyish and littered with machine parts polluting the waters.

As I stepped away from the malnourished boy, the floor squeaked like rusted metal. I checked my own reflection in the window. I was still redheaded, thirtysomething, and expressing my own brand of melancholy. But I stumbled backward when Cole and Olive mutated.