

Chapter XIII - Deadly Designs

Jayrock watched from his suite's balcony as the procession moved past the hotel's front gates on a red carpet. He watched in amusement as the same people, who stood civilly a few moments ago behind the barricades, now turned into a mob that pushed and shoved each other in an effort to jump the barriers like a bunch of hyper schoolkids. The guards struggled to keep them out of the way as a couple of black, luxury cars made their way down the carpet at a snail's pace, hounded by camera operators and reporters alike.

His mind went back to Heraclark, the Loogmort who had saved him from the choppy waters of the Great Unzayi Lake. Heraclark had told him about an actress whose name Jayrock had forgotten. Her posters were everywhere in the hotel, along with step and repeat banners of a tournament or something. Apparently, she had arrived.

Jayrock felt the bandage under his teal shirt on his chest. The medic had patched it up real good, and it didn't pain anymore. He had been worried he would have to go to a hospital — that would have attracted attention, and his VBP would have been taken as well. But Heraclark brought him here, to the strange Hotel Grande, where no one asked any questions. Fortunately, Jayrock had brought a counterfeit credit card with him on the mission to Karomoz since Gylith and he were supposed to infiltrate the spaceport as civilians.

Jayrock was still unsure why Heraclark had saved him or not outed him as the 'terrorist' who had caused all the trouble at the spaceport. The Loogmort had vaguely mentioned how someone like Jayrock could turn out to be useful to him on his mission.

The mission in question seemed to be to kill a certain man who had once killed his father. Heraclark had been gone since morning, and it was getting dark now. Jayrock wondered if he had gotten into trouble. Before he left, Jayrock had declared that to go all on his own without a proper plan was reckless beyond the point of sanity. "I should have let you drown in the lake," was the reply Jayrock got for his troubles.

"Come in, Petrolons," the dreaded voice boomed from Jayrock's transceiver, which lay on the railing. "This is Sandywick. Do you copy?"

Jayrock closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He had been waiting for this, yet he did not have the energy to go through with it. Since the spaceport, he had been continuously wondering if he should allow himself to hope — hope that he would stand vindicated in the eyes of those back at Grebros. He wasn't even sure if he stood justified in his own eyes. Cliff was still dead, after all. What difference would anything he did make to that?

"Petrolons, do you copy?" Sandywick's voice disrupted his train of thought again.

Jayrock reluctantly picked up the transceiver. "Loud and clear, Colonel."

A long pause followed. The anticipation was killing Jayrock.

"Why are you not back yet?" Sandywick asked slowly.

"The spaceport is still a mess, sir. I was waiting for things to cool down."

"Hmm... that it is. At least the freighter is safely back home... and most of the crew."

Is that a compliment? Jayrock wondered. He was not sure how to respond, so he just said, "Yes, sir."

"Some of the crew isn't."

There it is, Jayrock thought. "They were dead before we arrived, sir."

"Yes, Gravelson told me so. Tell me, Petrolons, why did you not destroy the fuel tanks when I expressly ordered you to destroy the fuel tanks?"

And Gylith didn't tell you that? Jayrock mused. Jayrock recalled how bummed he had been when the arrival of that other spaceship had almost ruined their mission. In the heat of the moment, Jayrock had decided to drive up to it to stop it. The fuel tanks did not matter at all at that moment. But would Sandywick understand that? He doesn't want to, Jayrock thought.

"There was a spacecraft, sir. It arrived at the worst possible time," Jayrock began, carefully choosing his words. "It would have blocked the freighter if I had not confronted it. If I blew up the fuel tanks, our freighter would not have been able to escape anyway."

"Gravelson told me everything. My question still remains. Why did you not destroy the fuel tanks? You could have waited for the other spacecraft to leave," Sandywick said in a tone that suggested that everything was so obvious. "Your mission was to cripple the Karomozians' spaceport as a fuel station so that more spacecraft stop at the Grebrik asteroids. Or was I not clear enough?"

Jayrock looked out ahead at the hotel gardens, too taken aback to say or think anything. He knew Sandywick for a long time now. And yet, the Colonel never failed to surprise Jayrock with his utter selfishness.

"Petrolons, are you there?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. I thought the mission was to bring the freighter and its crew safely back home."

"Oh, don't pull that sentimental nonsense on me," Sandywick replied, annoyed. "Even so, you didn't 'bring' it back — Gravelson did while you stayed on Karomoz. Be that as it may. I am not entirely displeased with you. You did well."

The transceiver slipped from Jayrock's hand. It clattered over the top of the railing and bounced out into the air. Jayrock slid his hand through the gap between the lower horizontal bars and formed a deep-saffron rock bowl in his hand. The transceiver fell and deposited itself into the rock bowl. Jayrock breathed out in relief before retracting the rock and slid his hand back.

"You keep zoning out, Petrolons. Is there something wrong with the reception over there?" Sandywick complained.

"No... yes... maybe," Jayrock fumbled. "I didn't copy what you last said?"

"Didn't you? Oh, of course, you did. Are you surprised? Don't be. I didn't say you did a perfect job."

"But you think I did a good job?" Jayrock asked a bit too eagerly than he intended. He cursed himself for it.

"Yes. You badly wanted to hear that, no?" Sandywick said as if talking to a kid. "Unfortunately, Jayrock... I still have to evict you from the commandos."

"What?!" Jayrock gasped. Is today Surprise Day? Jayrock thought, baffled. There seemed to be no end to the surprises. The more the transmission was going on, the more Jayrock felt uncertain about what Sandywick was thinking. "Why?!"

"Because, as you said, the spaceport is a mess. There is talk in the media of a couple of Grebriks being involved in the shooting. We have to disown you, Jayrock. Grebros cannot afford to be associated with all this. Don't pretend you weren't warned this would happen," Sandywick replied somberly.

Jayrock waited for a moment, then said, "I see. So, I am not a commando anymore."

"Not all is bad, Petrolons. Think about it. You are effectively an undercover agent now. You are free to do my bidding on Karomoz now," Sandywick cajoled. "I have several tasks in line for you that these other officials at Fort Pedralt are too cowardly and unambitious to undertake. Think about what you can do for Grebros, Jayrock... and of course, there is the money."

"So, you are the only one with Grebros' best interests at heart? And that's why I should listen to you?" Jayrock demanded.

"Mind your tone, Petrolons. Yes, I am. These Karomozians will devour the entire galaxy if we let them. They have plans to create the perfect super-soldiers," Sandywick said. "You can put an end to it all, Jayrock. Sabotage their research and development projects, and you will set them back a hundred years."

"You know what, Colonel?" Jayrock said, suddenly getting up from his stool. "To heck with you!"

A deafening silence followed. "What... did you say?" Sandywick seethed.

"Is there something wrong with the reception over there, Colonel? You heard me," Jayrock shot back. "As you said, I am not a commando anymore. I am done being bossed around by an insecure lout like you. Goodbye and again, to heck with you!"

With that, Jayrock let the transceiver fall to the floor.

"You'll regret this—" were the last words Jayrock heard coming out of the transceiver as he smashed it under his foot. Good riddance, Jayrock thought as he let the peaceful silence flow over him. After a long, long time, it finally felt as if some chains holding him down were broken. He stomped over the broken transceiver a couple more times just to make sure it was truly beyond repair.

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"Your father is sure taking his time," Rook said sullenly. "Did he even acquire those blueprints?"

No, he didn't, you hag, Heraclark thought as he fiddled with some flowers in the vase on the table next to his chair. He turned to her and shrugged. "What blueprints?"

Rook studied him from head to toe. "You are a terrible liar, you know that, kid? I can see you know exactly what I am talking about. No matter. If your father has been wasting my time, I will make him pay dearly."

Now you're talking, lady, Heraclark thought. The woman's guards stood straddling the oak wood double doors, one hand on their weapons.

The room was larger than it looked from the outside. Heavy, crimson silk curtains were draped across all four walls so that despite the size of the room, nothing echoed at all. Even the floor was upholstered with squares of luxurious, teal velvet.

A console near the door served to adjust the amount and arrangement of the seating. Heraclark had caught a glimpse of the display, which stated the current seating style to be 'personal'. That seemed to entail four upholstered chairs placed equidistantly and at angles to each other along with two end tables. So little furniture in such a large room meant that the entire equipment in Heraclark's local gym could fit in the remaining space. Second day without the gym, Heraclark lamented.

The doors flung open, and in stepped Alir. "Mr. Scotnyx will now meet you."

Another man entered. He gazed about the room sheepishly as Heraclark stood up from his chair, his eyes fixed on the man. The man swung his gaze at Heraclark, and soon their eyes locked. The eyes with a gray so pale it seemed they were white, the hideous scar under the left one, the wormy lips stretched into a smug grin, the thin, greasy hair parted in the

middle — everything was still etched in Heraclark's memory since long, long ago. The face staring back at Heraclark had aged but was still painfully familiar.

Grelig Umberton's expressions betrayed his shifting emotions — from mild amusement to wariness to... perhaps, perplexity? The wrinkles on his forehead deepened as his eyebrows arched downward, his eyes narrowed, and his lips parted slightly. Both of them stood frozen in place, eyes locked on each other.

"I see," Heraclark heard Rook say. "It seems like even you were not aware your son has slipped into the meeting... really goes on to show how on top of things you are."

Umberton slowly shifted his gaze to Rook and then back at Heraclark. "Oh... Herac... Heraclark?"

Heraclark clenched his fists. How he longed to grab the pig from his collar and slam him down to the floor. He would then grab him by his hair and smash his face into the wall. He would then throw him down to the floor again and bash in his face with his fists until it was a mess of bleeding enertrons. When he was dead, Heraclark would throw his body from the hotel's topmost level for all to see.

The pig approached Rook and shook hands with her. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Please have a seat."

He could name any one of the weapons in his VBP, and it would be in his hands, literally in a flash. He could shoot the swine right in his face, and that would be that. He wondered if he could take the shot before Umberton's or Rook's guards fired at him. Even if he could, they would kill him afterward. Was it worth it? He pondered on that for a moment. No, he decided. I have to get back to my mother — alive — and tell her Dad's murderer is dead.

"Heraclark, would you be a dear and wait outside?" Umberton had the nerve to call out to him. "Alir, take him to his room," Umberton said while exchanging looks with his goon.

"No... father." Heraclark winced as he said the word. "I want to know about the blueprints," Heraclark said, coldly.

Umberton pursed his lips as his eyes shot daggers. "Very well. Sit down."

Heraclark sat down back in his chair as Umberton took one opposite Rook.

"Let's cut to the chase, Mr. Scotnyx. Do you have the blueprints?" Rook demanded.

Umberton clasped his hands as he opened his mouth to say something. He stole an uncomfortable look at Heraclark before speaking up. "Yes. That is, I am very close to acquiring them. I assure you."

A deadly silence followed as Rook took a deep breath. She then cleared her throat. "So, you don't have them?"

"No, but—"

"What is the meaning of this?" Rook yelled as she shot up from her seat. Umberton jumped in his chair. "The tournament is set to start in three weeks, and you still don't have the blueprints? Do you realize how much time and money we have wasted on you?" Rook nodded her head. "You will pay for all of it. I shouldn't have trusted you. When I first met you, I did have a hunch you are as useless as you look. But then there were your credentials. Never mind — looks like I was right."

"Yes, you were right," Heraclark said calmly. From the corner of his eye, he saw Umberton swiveling his head toward him in panic. "He is not Alcidiff Scotnyx. He is not my father."

For a moment, Rook kept staring at Umberton as if she had not heard. Umberton gripped the armrests of his chair and shifted uncomfortably. He opened his mouth to speak but could not manage.

"What do you mean, boy?" Rook demanded, still eyeing Umberton. "Tell me now before I shoot you both in the head."

Heraclark got up from his chair. "He murdered my father a long time ago."

Everything came painfully back to Heraclark. He had just been a kid playing with his dad's instruments in his lab in the basement — something he was expressly forbidden to do. He heard his dad and another man coming down the steps, so he dropped the instruments he had been playing with and hid behind a worktable.

Peering from his hiding place, Heraclark saw his dad pick up the instruments in embarrassment as he explained to the other man how his son frequently haunted his lab. It was then that they started talking about something — something about a project of Dad's. Heraclark had been too young to comprehend fully what was being said.

The conversation turned into an argument. Tempers flared as heated words began to get exchanged. Dad said something to the other man about trying to steal credit and that he would never allow it. The other man asked Dad if it was his final decision. Dad nodded.

The man had then produced a peculiarly shaped pistol. Heraclark still remembered how he had frozen in fear at the sight of it — how he had wanted to charge into the man and protect his dad but remained petrified. Dad started squirming in fear and begged for mercy. But the pistol went off, and just like that, Dad collapsed into a heap.

Heraclark had wanted to scream, but a big lump caught in his throat, stifling his voice. He shook with fear as the man glanced around. The pale, gray eyes darted around, looking for any cameras. As he turned, light shone on his face, and the scar under his eye struck even more terror in Heraclark's heart.

Heraclark remained hidden for a long, long time after he had gone. His mom found him and Dad's body in the basement. He told her what had happened. He even mentioned it to the police, but strangely, no evidence of a firearm wound or enertron loss could be found on the body — the autopsy seemed to suggest that Dad had suffered a cardiac arrest. Heraclark's pleas were discarded as the babbling of a scared child who had witnessed his father die a sudden death.

"His name is Grelig Umberton, and he murdered my father," Heraclark growled, looking accusingly at Umberton. "Still trying to steal credit after all these years, are we?"

Rook started nodding her head. "That explains it. Explains everything. Well, you made a very, very big mis—"

"OK, he's right. But I can still get the blueprints. He has them," Umberton explained hurriedly as he rose from his chair.

"He? Who? I thought they were in a bank," Rook said, irritated. Umberton opened his mouth, but Rook carried on. "You have already wasted a lot of time, and I am certainly not keen on wasting more. You stole someone's credentials, Mr. Umberton. I am not even sure if you are capable of building a paper airplane, let alone an augments. You should have started work by now, but you haven't even acquired the blueprints. Are you telling me you are somehow going to acquire them, then analyze them, and then build a prototype of the device, all in three weeks?" Rook sneered. "It was supposed to be deployed at the tournament, and you knew that."

"He has them," Umberton insisted again, this time pointing at Heraclark.

That gave Rook a pause. She turned her head toward Heraclark, looking curiously at him. Not good, Heraclark thought.

"Is this true?" she demanded. "Where are they?"

"They are in a safe place," Heraclark stated matter-of-factly. "But even if I give them to you, this lackwit here won't be able to make use of them. Do I need to tell you how stupid he is?"

Heraclark was pleased as he watched Umberton's face turn red. He continued, "This fool sent a hitman to retrieve the blueprints from the bank where I work — and he would have been successful, except that he also ingeniously told the hitman to kill me. And that started a chain of events because of which I am standing here in your company."

Rook looked back at Umberton incredulously. "You didn't inform me of any killing being involved in getting the blueprints!"

Before Umberton could say anything, Heraclark jumped in, "I will hand over the blueprints — I don't care. But only if you hand me over this pig. He is mine."

"Don't push your luck, fool," Umberton snorted. "You walk right into the lion's den with exactly what the lion wants, and I am the one who is stupid?"

"You fancy yourself a lion, pig?" Heraclark shot back.

"The enhanced spellbinder is ready, and I have already had it delivered to the tournament organizers." This was directed at Rook. "It might be that it is being tested on that Felitte actress as we speak."

Felitte actress? Pinz Ailoraw? What is being tested on her? Heraclark wondered in bewilderment.

"Seize the blueprints from him, give them to me, and see if I don't get the augmenter ready before the tournament starts," Umberton finished.

Rook gave a lopsided grin and then frowned as she considered both Umberton and Heraclark.

"I have changed my mind," Heraclark declared. "You are going to hand him over to me. About the blueprints, I will only hand them over once you tell me what you will do with it."

Rook's lips broke into a smile. "You're ambitious. I like that," she said, approaching Heraclark. She looked directly into Heraclark's eyes. "Color me impressed."

"I—" Heraclark began.

A hand covered in red energy smacked him in the nose. A searing pain shot in Heraclark's face as he staggered back, covering his face with one hand and blindly groping with the other. As he removed his hand from his face, he felt dark-orchid enertrons seeping from his nose.

He shook his head to clear his vision as much as to recover from the surprise. He saw Rook's hand still enveloped in amaranth energy. Her guards flanked her, their weapons trained at Heraclark. "Give me the blueprints. Now," she whispered.

"Who's stupid now, son?" a mocking voice called.

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What do I do now? Jayrock wondered as he lay in bed in his suite, staring at the ceiling fan for what seemed like an hour. He could not go back to Grebros. He would be lucky, even if he made it out of the Karomozian spaceport.

Suddenly, it occurred to him. Sandywick would most definitely attempt to get his counterfeit credit cards blocked, and nothing would be worse than being broke on a foreign

planet. Since it was an off-the-record mission, no one except Sandywick knew of this account, so he couldn't officially have it revoked, but still, there was no telling what he could do.

Again, his mind went back to Heraclark. Before they had checked in, they had visited a bank available in the hotel — The Bank of Loogmor. Jayrock had found the atmosphere inside as mysterious as the rest of the hotel itself. While Jayrock had withdrawn funds from his account, Heraclark had deposited a box he had been carrying with him. All he had told about it was that it belonged to his father.

Maybe he had gone to the bank again? In any case, Jayrock knew he had to withdraw all of his funds and transfer them to a new, anonymous account before Sandywick could do anything.

With that in mind, he sprang up from his bed.

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He walked across the lobby, grudging every step. If I give up the blueprints, I die. Alir, the scum with gangly limbs, walked alongside him with a knife pointed near Heraclark's spine. Heraclark imagined the idiot felt really important. He would have thrashed him to pieces except that one of Rook's guards and another of Umberton's followed them with their hands on their guns. No one passing them by in the lobby even thought to look twice at this unusual situation.

One thing he knew for sure was that they couldn't kill him before they got their hands on their prize. He contemplated trying to overpower Alir and hold him at knifepoint, but that would accomplish nothing. For all he knew, they would merely kill Alir and tell Heraclark to move on. In any case, they could wound him badly.

Maybe he could do something at the bank. In the hotel itself, he could not go out of the way to reach out to a security guard, but in the on-site Bank of Loogmor, a couple of guards stood right at the entrance. Surely, they would take the manager of the Loogmort branch seriously.

I would rather not have security or the cops involved, Rook had said. But if it gets to that, remember that you crashed a very private meeting and stole a critical document from us — or so the security will be led to believe. Things will not end well for you if security gets involved, I promise you that.

Think, Heraclark, think. They walked past the gigantic chandelier and got into the elevator.

"Which floor?" Alir asked.

"Eleventh," Heraclark replied.

Soon, they alighted onto the lobby of the eleventh floor.

"This way," Heraclark said and led them into a hallway to their left. After navigating their way through a series of passageways, they stopped outside a door — Room 1116.

"Get in there," Alir said, trying to shove Heraclark.

Heraclark took a deep breath and stepped forward. He fished the key out of his pocket and turned it in the lock. As Heraclark gently pushed the door, it opened ajar, soundless. Heraclark's heart sank when he saw that the lights were out.

He gingerly stepped into the suite, Alir following close by like a dog. As usual for a Loogmort, his senses heightened in the dark, his brain worked with much more clarity. He felt the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

"Aren't you two coming inside?" Heraclark beckoned to the pair standing outside with their guns.

"Turn on the lights," Rook's guard barked.

Heraclark reached for the switch and flicked it on. The overhead LED lights glimmered to life, almost blinding Heraclark's sensitized eyes. The two other guards cautiously stepped into the suite, guns trained ahead of them.

"Now, where are they?" Alir demanded.

The coffee table in the middle of the suite launched upward and charged through the air right at them. Heraclark and Alir broke away from each other to dodge it as it continued to sail and struck the two guards behind with a deafening crash.

Heraclark spun around to spot Alir staring wide-eyed at where the table had been standing. He shot out dark-orchid tentacles from his hand and pulled the scum from the collar. He drove his other fist right into the scraggy face. When Heraclark released the collar, the scum collapsed in place.

"I told you your plan was stupid," Jayrock said, standing in the middle of the suite.

Before Heraclark could say anything, he heard the table shifting behind him. He spun around. Rook's guard made a grab for his gun, which had fallen onto the floor. Heraclark dove behind a settee as a hail of red energy bolts charged at him while Jayrock stamped his foot into the ground to form a deep-saffron rock wall in front of him.

"Shadow Tagger!" cried Heraclark. A dark-orchid and scarlet cannon materialized in his hand.

"Pebble Revolver," Jayrock cried.

Heraclark took several potshots at his assailant. Wispy, dark-orchid orbs surrounded by crackling, scarlet energy shot at the target, exploding into damaging mist on contact.

Jayrock discharged pebbles from his machine gun that broke through his wall and spiraled their way onward.

"We need to get out of here," Heraclark cried. "The balcony."

They stumbled back toward the balcony, knocking furniture in the way and returning fire. Once they reached outside, both pressed the screens on their respective VBPs, and their weapons disappeared.

"Hold on to me, I can—" Jayrock began when Heraclark put his arm around Jayrock and shot a tentacle at the railing with the other hand. He leaped over it, clutching Jayrock like a rag doll.

"I didn't mean holding on to me like this," Jayrock protested as they plummeted.

They halted just above the ground with a jerk. Heraclark let go of the tentacle to land onto the grass down below.

"Let's go!" Jayrock shouted as he made a beeline for the hotel gates.

"No! I have to get the blueprints!" Heraclark protested as he grabbed onto Jayrock's arm.

"Get what?" Jayrock asked, bemused.

"The... the stuff I deposited in the bank," Heraclark explained frantically.

"Well, then go get it. I am out of..." Jayrock trailed off as he saw the security at the entrance gates, speaking into their transceivers and looking around with hawkish eyes. "We need to hide somewhere first. Let's blend in," he said.

Loads of people were streaming in from the entrance gates to the hotel building, some of them bearing Pinz Ailoraw's posters. Jayrock and Heraclark fell in with the crowd and entered the hotel foyer as if carried by a tide.

Heraclark stopped short in the foyer for a moment. At the far end, by the elevators, a stage had been set with a banner behind it. He caught a glimpse of Pinz Ailoraw, who was just getting off the stage, waving to her fans with her cat, Puff, in her arms. What do they want to test on her? Have they already done it? Heraclark stood lost in thought until someone nudged him into walking along.

Jayrock could see several of the security staff around them, searching through the crowd for them. His eyes darted around, looking for a place to hide until he spotted a fire exit door in the distance to the left.

"Can I have one of those posters, please?" Jayrock asked of the girl in front.

She shot him a look that said, "Whatever..." and handed him a poster of the Felitte actress she had been carrying.

"This way," Jayrock whispered into Heraclark's ear. He held up the poster to cover their faces and inched closer to the fire exit. Once the coast was clear, they ran through the door and stumbled into the emergency stairwell.

"I think down would be better," Heraclark said.

They raced down the stairs into the underground levels until Jayrock spotted a locked door on one landing. "We can hide in there," Jayrock said.

"Stand back," Heraclark said. "Night Stunner!" A dark-orchid and scarlet club materialized in his hand, which he used to smash open the lock.

Inside was an arched passageway, lined with metal sheets and lit with overhead white lights spanning its roof in arcs, every few yards. At the far end was an enormous pair of sliding metal doors. Heraclark closed the door behind them.

"Where are we?" Heraclark asked.

"I don't know, but it doesn't seem like this place sees much use," Jayrock replied, scanning the passageway. "We can wait it out here."

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They led her into a room lined with monitors displaying graphs and text scrawling over them. Personnel sat in front of every screen in white lab coats. Ahead was a glass partition separating the room from a vast testing area floored with metal sheets. Beyond that, Pinz could see huge, sliding double doors.

"If you're quite ready, Ms. Ailoraw," said the tall man who had introduced himself as Mert, motioning toward a door set in the glass partition.

I am ready, Pinz thought, marching toward the door.

Do give me your feedback about this chapter, and if you enjoyed it, please consider dropping a vote. Have a great day!

