

## Chapter XII - Heraclark II

"He is posing as one Alcidiff Scotnyx," the hitman sent by Umberton had coughed up. "You will find him at the hotel under that name."

My father's name, Heraclark thought bitterly, sat in a lone seat in one corner of the grand foyer just within earshot of the front desk.

He had already scouted the suite where Umberton was staying from afar. As expected, it was heavily guarded with hawk-eyed goons prowling the doorway. He could have taken out one or two of them, but Heraclark could count at least five. He had wondered if the Grebrik he had rescued the night before was capable enough to help him clear the way. He had to be to escape the spaceport alive, but Heraclark was not sure he had enough leverage over the Grebrik.

In the end, he had decided to fall back to his backup plan to gain access. Umberton had a meeting organized with an executive of an organization of some sort, the hitman had told Heraclark. The blueprints the hitman was sent to steal were somehow crucial to the meeting since he was supposed to have recovered them before the meeting took place. Heraclark still had no clue what the blueprints were for, and he meant to find that out. Before I strangle the pig with my own bare hands, of course, Heraclark resolved.

His body was stiff by now from the waiting. He had been sitting in the same place since morning. He could not afford to leave his seat for more than a moment, or else it might get taken — there was no better place for listening in on the front desk.

The foyer of the fifty-story Hotel Grande somehow reminded Heraclark of the lobby of the Bank of Loogmor save for the fact that the hotel was brightly lit. A breathtakingly enormous, crystal glass chandelier descended from the roof of the hotel far, far above like a

gigantic, upside-down tree and hung over the foyer still and weightless and yet also so palpably heavy that Heraclark almost felt like he was being crushed underneath. The lights on it twinkled like a thousand stars in the night sky as the crystal itself sparkled and gleamed at every turn of the head.

To Heraclark's far left was the spacious, exquisitely furnished waiting area proper. A holographic projection hovered in midair, silently displaying news about some forest in Karomoz involving angry Wystals, some logging company, and an archaeological dig site.

The sleekly dressed patrons crept about the foyer, most of them heading for or coming out of the half a dozen elevators. Everybody seemed to be about their own business, looking straight ahead as they ambled about so that an eerie quietness hung in the air. The only sounds were of boots clacking and echoing against the exquisitely polished marble floor, the telephones ringing at the front desk and the soft murmur of the desk clerks themselves... and the crunch of the chips Heraclark munched on every now and then. He tried his best to be discreet about it but gave up after he found it to be impossible. Moreover, he was already hating missing the gym and his protein bars.

Heraclark patted the device in his pocket — shaped like swirling, dark-orchid mist with a scarlet screen, he had taken the VBP from the hitman. He had made the hitman format the voice-user interface so that it no longer recognized his voice. Heraclark had then fed in his own voice and renamed the weapons stored inside. If things went wrong, at least he would have something to shoot the pig with.

Client after client came to the front desk, but none said anything about Alcidiff Scotnyx. Heraclark was beginning to worry if there were some code words involved, and he had already missed Umberton's visitor. A man in a long, black trench coat and a hat arrived at the front desk and softly said something about room service. A woman with a pixie cut and an oversized scarf around her neck came next, followed by another morbidly overweight man with a heavy gold chain.

"I'm sorry, sir, but pets entail extra charges. How much exactly depends on what pet we're talking about," one of the desk clerks said to the obese man.

"Yes, Loogmort. Scotnyx." Heraclark's ears pricked up. It was the woman's voice.

"Right, ma'am. You may proceed to the conference room seven — on the seventh floor. They will receive you there," a clerk told her as he picked up a phone.

Heraclark's pulse quickened as he shot up from his seat. OK, here we go, he prepared himself. He briskly crossed the woman and walked toward the elevators up ahead. He glanced behind him and saw the woman nod toward two heavily built men standing near the waiting area. They fell in behind her as she proceeded toward the elevators.

Heraclark checked himself in the faint reflection from the glass elevator doors. He brushed off an imaginary speck of dust from his navy tuxedo, adjusted his matching bow, and took a glance at his white shirt, black trousers, and gleaming, navy loafers.

When the woman neared the elevators, Heraclark abruptly turned around and accosted her. "Oh, welcome, Ms.... um..." Heraclark said pleasantly, with his best smile, holding out his hand.

The woman regarded Heraclark with suspicion. "And who are you?" she asked cautiously.

"Oh! I am Heraclark Scotnyx — son of Alcidiff Scotnyx," Heraclark said cheerfully.

The woman loosened up a bit, but her mouth twitched with disapproval. "I had the understanding it was a very private meeting," she said and stiffly shook Heraclark's hand.

"Oh, it is," Heraclark said as he summoned an elevator. "I am his heir, after all. I have to learn."

The woman gave him a steely, cold look with her gray eyes, so Heraclark thought it better to stay quiet for now. Mercifully, the elevator doors opened just then. Heraclark beckoned the woman to get in first, who then walked inside with her guards. Heraclark followed and then pressed the button to the seventh floor.

"So... uh... I didn't catch your name?" Heraclark asked as the elevator ascended, the floors sinking down around them.

"Good," the woman replied, all the while staring outside through the elevator doors.

Salty hag, Heraclark thought angrily. "Pleasure meeting you, Ms. Good," Heraclark said with a sigh, shifting his gaze outside as well.

Soon the doors parted, and they walked out onto the seventh floor. Heraclark couldn't help but marvel at the spectacle of the chandelier hanging just beyond the railing, although he had experienced it multiple times from multiple floors by now. It looked even more majestic from this level, its intertwining crystal branches and intricately adorned silver lights visible in much more detail as it descended past the floor. Massive steel beams radiated out of it in all directions and safely anchored it to the floor.

"I take it your father doesn't take you to places like this much?" the woman said wearily. Heraclark realized he had been gawking too obviously at the chandelier.

"This way, ma'am," Heraclark said, flustered and led the way.

They turned a corner and then continued into a carpeted hallway lined with doors on both sides. At the end was an ornate fountain, and the corridor branched off into three directions. The overhead sign to the left pointed to the 'Conference Room 7' so they continued that way.

Heraclark promptly spotted a pair of goons skulking around the door at the far end of the hallway. They noticed Heraclark's party coming their way as well, and one of them whispered something into the other's ear. Heraclark slowed his pace so that the woman overtook him while he matched stride with her guards.

"And here is your guest," Heraclark announced as they approached the goons at the door. "I'll let her introduce herself." Heraclark's body tensed as he waited in anticipation for the goons' response. I am with the hag, I am with the hag, Heraclark mentally beseeched the goons. Don't ask me questions.

The goons surveyed Heraclark from head to toe before turning their noses up at him as if he was stinking badly. Then they turned their attention toward the woman.

"Tell your boss Rook is here," the woman said curtly.

"Right away, ma'am," one of the goons said, nodding his head. "Please, have a seat. Alir, go fetch Umberton—" the goon said to his partner before stopping mid-sentence, after realizing his mistake.

Rook narrowed her eyes as Alir glared at his partner. "And tell him to inform Mr. Scotnyx," the goon hurriedly added.

Heraclark almost felt his blood boiling at hearing his father's name from the goon's lips. He clenched his teeth and his fists just so he had something to do other than bashing in the scumbag's nose. The goon perhaps sensed that and insolently raised his eyebrows at Heraclark. Not now, Heraclark, he calmed himself. You have come this far, just a little more patience. He took in a deep breath and followed Rook and her guards into the conference room.

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