

High Stakes/Chapter One

Kwiwa City...

Thulis 12, 3056...

Hykes held his breath. A web of intersecting beams danced from floor to ceiling to wall, red as the cones on Nukesaki Airstrip; in fact, one could argue they were the exact same shade, but that would mean Trigonton Palace had a pact with the Gushnies and Hykes doubted that.

He took a step, padded shoes touching the glass floor with nary a squeak or squawk. He'd planned for this. Heck, he planned for everything...except that odor! He looked left, then right, then took a giant inhale and waited for his eyes to pop. This place was beyond creepy. The royal Fushigians had ruled for hundreds of years and the old homestead not only looked but smelled the part. Must, mold, mildew: three m's with x's in Hykes' black book of cleanliness. *And was he clean!* Ritual hand washing, antibacterial serums, detox bubble baths: the whole nine yards of germ removal was a pet peeve. He had few others.

Flanked by his latest "team" — two hyper-fit muscle bots with biceps bigger than the series 7 Uzis they toted - Hykes ducked beneath four-foot laser lines. He could change cohorts faster than he changed his mind on flowered swim trunks. Fact is, he trusted no one; and no one trusted him.

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This month saw former Wontoon special-ops turn professional thieves; the “Twin Togos” he called them, mainly because they were just that - Togo soldiers who looked uncannily alike. It would be a disastrous who’s who had Novis not cultivated a thread-like caterpillar on his upper lip. Gronto detested facial hair; so Hykes said his hallelujahs and kept the twins straight, for the first time in his short but illustrious career.

Hykes was not filled with brotherly concern. The universe, the planets, the creatures therein, human or otherwise — and there were plenty of otherwise — could not move him to lift a plastic noodle cup and recycle. He just didn’t feel the love. His parents were either burning or playing on clouds; he didn’t care. And his sister, his only sibling, was too busy honing her intellect at a tri-planet run university to even write. So, he squandered the family fortune, maxed out his credit, bought far too many Hydra booths, and wound up getting a side-job as a thief. Or, as he preferred to call it, a gentleman’s burglar.

Hykes lived in the fast lane and couldn’t afford to back out. If money kept his world spinning as fast as a moon top, then black market sales were high on his list. Bbay was a thriving business for the lowest of the low. Swiping one-time items like pods and vocalizers was a nifty way to earn a buck — or two — and it was easy to list them on community pads as available for interplanetary shipping and delivery. But Hykes aimed higher and tonight, the Fushigian Sacred Rhombus would look good in his photo album.

Snip. Snap. Gronto passed his magnetic code over the alarm panel. The web vanished as power to the palace died and silence became their new best friend. Did the tour book mention that the Fushigians had been dead almost

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as long as they had lived? Trigonton was a museum of priceless antiquities. The Rhombus was the Holy Grail.

Through baroque halls they moved, in all-black jumpers that blended with shadows and played tricks with the eyes. Hykes had a silver stripe down the side of his pants, and a small bit of bling on his hoodie; otherwise, they were as good as invisible. And when he took his next breath, it was for the ornate, stuelvian marble pedestal center stage. There, encased in shatterproof glass, shone the Rhombus in all its glittering glory. Every angle of oddness was encrusted with gems; every gem was a different shade and hue; every hue was dazzling enough to send shivers down Hykes' spine.

“Yes, boys, yes, indeed!” He lowered his Mofkat pistol, a sophisticated weapon for an equally sophisticated man. “You are looking at one of the most coveted treasures on Oberon. Six months of planning have come to this,” Hykes motioned to Gronto. A single brass key would unlock the case and transfer ownership of the Rhombus to “yours-truly”. He entrusted one-half of the Togos with this task.

Novis frowned. “What about Tigg?”

Tigg. Now, why did he have to utter that name?

“That scruffy little pick-pocket? What about him?”

Hykes didn't like to scowl. It twisted his handsome face. He was dark as the velvets of Aquador - a rich, luxurious shade of smooth, eye-pleasing chocolate — with a drop of extra-dark goatee and kinky hair. He didn't need to mar his beauty with an unpleasant expression. *But when it came to Tigg...*

“He wouldn't dare show his mug, not after I snatched the Egg of Roskin clean out of his hands!” The memory brought a laugh. “And I got twice the