

Chapter Twenty Seven: The Midgan Casino - Part One

The rickety hovercraft had been hot and stuffy, even without the roasting desert air blowing in. The soldiers in the outpost hanger had given them an old model craft, one that would not look out of place among the local townfolk.

James had enjoyed the luxury of travelling by craft again, having spent enough time walking and riding mousslos the past few days. Flying the craft, Sam had spent the journey with a thoughtful, troubled expression.

James spent the journey thinking about what Liana had told him. That Sam had been in charge of a transport craft during a war called The First Fire Wars. The ship was destroyed, and over five hundred people - soldiers and civilians - were killed. Sam blamed himself and never recovered. Liana mentioned that Sam went into a dark time for a long period, but she wouldn't go into detail about that. Sam had decided to leave the military and try and start a new life, but he had never figured out how to be someone else. Someone he wasn't.

And that explained a little more about Sam. Now James could understand him a little better. Why he never carried a grapple hook. Why he was so guarded and secretive. Why James had yet to see him use any Light Magic. Sam was holding back because he didn't want to be an Oneron any more. And yet he had been helping James become one again.

James regarded Sam in the seat beside him. He would confront Sam about it all some time, but for now, they had to keep their minds on Higero Jaxx. The thought of meeting the dangerous arms dealer sent a familiar shiver through James. Castan made conversation at times, not seeming to care if they responded to him or not.

When they reached Riondon, James saw a dense collection of brown and red buildings—mostly flat roofed, with some pointed peaks— that made up the majority of the town, with some taller structures near the centre. None of the buildings were anywhere near as large as the skyscrapers in Tyken Town, but still, the bustling town was larger than James had thought it would be.

"Here resumes Castan's tour services," Castan said, leaning forward from the back seat. "Here we have the town of Riondon, best known for its restoration of mechs and tech. Home to over sixty thousand residents. Its main source of income comes from reselling and exporting its restored tech. The iron forge is another main focus, which used to work alongside the restorations and provide new metals, along with trinkets and commonplace items supplied to nearby towns.

"Although the forge has been shut down for several years, it has recently been bought by an outsider. This fellow Higero Jaxx, you fellas are interested in. He has declared he will restore the forge to its original glory, and the townfolk love him for it."

"Aye," Sam said, coming out of his thoughts. "While using it for his own purposes too, no doubt."

"Is the forge closer than the casino?" James asked. "Will Evan and Liana get there before we arrive at the casino?"

"Roughly the same distances, I'd say," Castan said. "Just different directions. The forge lies near the eastern edge of town while the casino is close to the centre, which is more directly in front of us."

"We can keep in touch with them via sat-coms," Sam said. "Hopefully they won't run into any trouble there."

"Hopefully neither will we," James said.

"One thing to caution you on, James," Sam said. "As the local authorities may be looking for us, I wouldn't show that we're Oneron in public. No big jumps or fancy acrobatics."

"No big jumps or acrobatics," James repeated.

"And no using your grapple hook. That's a clear giveaway of an Oneron. If the news casts have marked me, or both of us, as Oneron, then we especially don't want to reveal ourselves in public."

That sounded good to James, as he still wasn't confident with jumping high, and definitely wouldn't be performing any spectacular acrobatics any time soon.

At this time of the late afternoon, dozens of ships dotted the air over the town. Mostly public transports, James figured, but also likely many craft that had licenses to fly within the built up area.

A blue surface caught James's attention to the side, and he once again saw the gleaming river that ran into the town. He marvelled at the winding river, still not used to seeing such a thing on Medropon. Sporadic patches of dull grass and shrubbery were spread along the landscape, giving the rocky terrain a different feeling to the sand and rocks of the Carnan Sand Dunes. Ahead in the north, and particularly to the east, he had heard that the land was greener and more thriving, but seeing glimpses of this first hand was something else.

This is the farthest I've been from home, James thought. He knew how incorrect that statement was, but technically this was the farthest he had been from Tyken Town since he had awoken there two years earlier. It was as far as James had been in the existence he'd known. *I wonder how far I've really travelled before. Probably this distance is just a speck compared to the light-years I've covered in my earlier life.*

Sam parked the hovercraft in a docking station, paying a fee to the short bo'Breih worker there.

James stretched when he left the vehicle, thankful for a breeze that cooled him somewhat. Harsh stench of oil and metals came from a garage on the other side of the docking station. The smells brought a melancholic smile to James, reminding him of the strong odours of the construction sites he worked on in Tyken Town. The life he was leaving behind.

"This way, friends," Castan said, nodding ahead.

Rounding a building, the street opened to a larger road lined with shops and eateries. The area bustled with a multitude of aliens and humans, their contrasting voices and accents flowing together in a soft cacophony. It was similar to Tyken Town in many ways, although everything was on a smaller scale – narrower roads, shorter buildings, less tightly packed with people.

"This is the aptly named Southern road," Castan said cheerily as they walked. "Which leads to the River Walk, the main road that runs through town. That's the road that comes all the way from Tyken Town. The centre where the casino is found is called the Town Core. Or just the Core."

They came to a flat platform beside a metal track running parallel to the street. The station consisted of little more than a waiting area and a bulky information mech, beside a sign that read the time for the next shuttle. James had expected a shuttle, at least, but what approached after a few minutes was an old blocky tram that shuddered to a stop. Castan ushered them in, explaining that the tram would take them closer to the Town Core.

After a few stops within the stuffy confines of the old tram, Castan led them out to the next main road. Taller buildings spread out around them in this part of town, some with large glass exteriors that reminded James of the nicer buildings in Tyken Town. He had a somewhat run-down impression of the town up to this point, but the closer they got to the centre the more impressed he became with the modern structures.

Sam asked James how his first proper training session went.

"It was a little overwhelming," James said. "But Liana is a good teacher."

"She is."

"You and her were good friends?" James asked. "Back in your academy days?" He thought to try and get Sam to talk about the past he was hiding, but knew that would be too much to get into. He still didn't know what kind of man Sam was. Maybe he would get angered if he felt James was prying into his past.

"We were close," Sam said. "But never that close."

"Maybe now?" James asked, unsure of why he did.

Sam shook his head. "I wouldn't. And she isn't in the right space for that, anyway. She lost someone very close to her recently. A few seasons back. A loss that devastated her."

James blew out a breath, taking in the information. "Someone she was close with?"

"Dulsten," Sam said. "Dulsten Habrrakle. They had been together for many years. He was a good man."

"I see," was all James could say. He had no idea Liana was hiding a deep sorrow like that. She seemed able to keep her emotions locked down well enough for him to not notice anything.

"Poor lass," Castan said beside them. "Not easy, losing loved ones."

They entered an open square lined by trees. Several people moved around stalls and kiosks that were set up.

Castan stopped suddenly. James turned back to see the man's eyes had widened.

"What is it?" Sam asked.

"I just remembered," Castan said, speaking quickly. "This is the wrong way. Yes. Over here. Back the way we came. Here."

He turned and stepped, but a voice among the crowd called out to him. "Castan!"

James picked out the caller. The man wore a light-coloured suit and polished shoes that looked out of place among the dirt and grit of the streets. He came to them and stood tall, his shoulders back and posture rigid. Dark shades hid his eyes from them.

Castan sighed quietly and turned to face the man. "Eammon," he said enthusiastically, spreading his arms. "How goes it? I'm glad I ran into you."

The man nodded curtly. His brown skin had a blue tint to it, gleaming with a light sheen of sweat. "We haven't forgotten you, Castan. Dear friend." His voice drawled with a slurred, foreign accent.

James had become aware of the tension in the air as the man glared at Castan, and his dangers senses heightened, though he wasn't sure why.

"Your time was up long ago," said the man, Eammon. "Boss is not far away."

"That's great," Castan said lightly. "I'd love to see him. But, I just need some more time. You're in town? Let me come see you later."

James noticed Sam's hand had inched closer to his sword hilt, and his shoulders were tense.

"No more tricks," Eammon said sternly. "Next time we see you, a decision will be made. Up to you how it will go."

Castan remained still, swallowed, and eventually nodded. "No problem," he said, rather meekly.

The suited man maintained his hard expression, letting the tense moment linger, before he turned and stepped past them. "We will see you soon," he said as he left.

"Friend of yours?" Sam asked once the man had become lost within the crowds.

Castan steadied his breathing. "An old acquaintance, aye. He's always had a flair for the dramatics."

"Everything okay?" James asked.

Castan nodded firmly and attempted a broad smile. "Oh yes, of course. Just a misunderstanding is all. He and his friends are old customers of mine." He caught himself and quickly added, "Not that I caused any problems for them. No, no. Just a matter that needs to be cleared up. Just a misunderstanding. No problem." He smiled again and pointed his head towards the square. "Anyway, to the casino."

They followed him through the square. James shared a look with Sam, attempting to see what his friend thought of the encounter with the suited man. Sam gave a small shrug, though he held a contemplative expression that told James he thought more to the situation. Castan seemed like a pleasant man; James couldn't imagine him having any enemies. Then he remembered when they had first seen Castan, in the tavern in Toolin. He had been arguing with the bartender there, about some misunderstanding. Another misunderstanding.

After a series of side streets they came to a wide road with four lanes of traffic. Unlike some of the smaller cobbled streets, this road was layered with concrete and lined with railings. James guessed this was the River Walk road that ran from Tyken Town to Riondon and went all the way up to Victory City.

What was most notable about Riondon were the colours. Window frames of faded green, yellow doors or blue-trimmed roofs. The pastel colours were mostly muted, faded from years in the sun, though some were fairly bright and eye catching.

Castan went on to give some information on the area. His voice was still a little shaken from being confronted by the suited man.

A tall building stood out down the road. Despite the sunshine, several lights and bright screens were placed around the front. A large, brightly lit sign at the very top of the building read: *Midgan Hotel*.

"Here we are," Castan said, pointing ahead. He had recovered some of his childish excitement. "So, a hotel sits above the casino. The finest luxury in town, it is. Some call it the Guyshawk Hotel, named after the owner, but most simply refer to it as the Midgan Casino, seeing as most local folk only visit the casino part and leave the expensive hotel to the tourists."

"It looks impressive," James admitted, eyeing the large crowds and shiny vehicles outside the building.

"A nice choice of venue for a covert meeting," Sam said. "Blend in among the crowds."

James brought out his sat-com and saw they had some time before Jaxx's meeting was scheduled. He could feel his nerves growing, the closer the meeting approached.

Sam had gone over their stories with James and Castan. They knew their parts and what to say to hopefully get Jaxx's interest in working with them. As much as James had briefly studied metals, alloys, and their chemical compositions for his construction exams, not to mention his time on various sites, he still felt a great apprehension about posing as someone else.

He hardly knew how to be himself, let alone someone else.

They entered through the grand front doors of the building, into a long, brightly lit lobby with an arched roof. Smaller rooms ran along the sides, one of which was a brightly lit barbershop. James saw a man holding a paddle over a customer's head, which raised the hairs up with a magnetic field and allowed the barber to cut the stretched hairs. Having not seen such a thing before, James shook his head with a bewildered smile and looked around. The clientèle were a vast mix of well-dressed individuals and some of the rougher-looking desert folk in robes and knitted clothing, with many aliens that James had never seen before. There were some venues in Tyken Town that acted as a hub for all kinds of galactic species, but he hadn't seen so many in one place like this before.