

Chapter Twenty Six: The Best Laid Plans - Part One

"Here is what we know," Liana said.

James stood between Sam and Evan, overlooking the large table in the centre of the raised platform. They had returned to the room where they'd first met Jorak and Liana, called the Command Room. The table now contained a holo-projection of Riondon. The town was constructed in a rough diamond shape, the tallest buildings in the centre rising up to around a foot off the table. Papers and folders were collected around the edges of the table, some showing photos of people.

Liana typed into a tablet she held and a tall structure on the eastern edge of the town highlighted orange.

"Higero Jaxx bought the Riondon Iron Forge two seasons back," she began, "calling it a new expansion for his company, Dyna Core, who specialise in forging and distributing metals. Standard business."

A profile appeared on the large display screen overlooking the table. It showed a reptilian alien in a smart suit. A strong jawline gave his face a squared look, while his bald, scaled head was rounded.

"This is Jaxx," Liana said. "A Vivanni Shaa. While his businesses are usually law-abiding and well received, he's also known by some as an arms dealer with a not-so-good reputation. Some call him a gangster, although he's done well to keep on the better side of the news and law for most of his affairs. But make no mistake, he is very dangerous, and is very well connected."

"This is Jaxx?" Sam asked, pointing at the screen.

Liana looked at him. "Is there a problem?"

Sam seemed to pause, so subtly that James wondered if many others noticed it, then he turned back to Liana and said, "Carry on."

She gestured to several folders on the table. "Most of this never made it through the main news channels, but we have information of Jaxx once beating a man with his bare hands, after a business dispute. Several of his previous business associates have gone missing, or shown up dead. It's said that you never cross a Vivanni Shaa, and that is double true for Jaxx. "

Jaxx's image shrunk to the corner of the screen and two more profiles popped up. One was a large, thick-necked alien with a heavy beard, who held a fierce, growling expression. The other was a small-framed alien with a long mane of flowing hair, who had cat-like eyes and large pointed ears. James recognised the second one as a Firion, who were a local species in Tyken Town.

"These are his two bodyguards, with him at all times," Liana went on. "The big one is Rygol Yaan, a dJuggen with a nasty tempter and a worse reputation. The smaller one is Vogri Ratasakii, a Firion. Quiet and unassuming, but very deadly. Both are highly trained assassins with a long record of criminal activity, and on many more suspicious activity reports. We have files on all three of them, but their records have many gaps and details that cannot be found."

"A lot of muscle for one person," Sam noted.

"More than a *businessman* needs," Jorak said, his arms crossed over his beefy chest. He was beside Liana on the far side of the table, next to Castan who stood quietly and watched them all. The long-haired soldier who had met them outside the outpost, Aris, stayed further back.

"That's right," Liana said, pacing slowly as she spoke now. "Satellite imagery detected a hundred and fifty people in the Iron Forge. But it's hard to say how many of those are armed guards or just workers."

An image of armed men patrolling the iron forge came on the screen. They looked to have been taken from a far, possibly from a roof top.

"Now, Sam," Liana went on. "You said you recognised one of the soldiers when you looked around the forge a while back. Someone you served with once, but who had no recognition of you. After you called me earlier, I contacted some of our soldiers we had in town to inspect the forge." She paused, now looking troubled. "We requested they bring back one of Jaxx's guard. We've had him in for a couple hours now. After some interrogation we've only just managed to break through whatever cloud was over his mind, to gather his true identity. The man was classified as dead over four years ago."

The thought of them interrogating a man in the outpost sent a shiver through James. The Oneron seemed friendly and welcoming, but he had to remind himself they were soldiers, killers, who were capable of some terrible things. That's what fighting wars was like, wasn't it? Doing terrible things for the sake of the right thing? He had read something like that in a history book once.

"His mind had been affected, right?" Sam said.

"Correct," Liana said. "We believe he was subjected to some high-level mind alterations, which allowed him to follow orders easily."

"Sounds like that serum we discovered in the warehouse," Evan said, looking up at Sam. "The scientist, Dr. Velome, said it altered people's minds, to make them more agreeable soldiers."

Sam nodded. He crossed his arms and stared thoughtfully at the Riondon projection.

Liana brought up a list on the screen of what James determined to be drugs and poisons. Some he recognised from what they'd discovered in the Lailen warehouse. She gestured to the screen. "Jaxx is most likely using this serum, developed by Lailen Technical, to strengthen his guard force. Possibly with the aim of building his own army. We don't know how many men he's procured this way. If what you've said is true, Sam, that there are people being abducted all over the galaxy - military personnel, doctors, scientists - and enlisted into a hidden armada, then Jaxx may be the one you're looking for."

"Den and I hadn't realised how strong Jaxx's force had become," Sam said, almost to himself.

"A potion that makes someone do what you want?" Castan asked, furrowing his brows. "That's what they were making in Tyken Town?" A few heads turned to look at him. Castan spread his arms out and stepped back apologetically with a cheeky smile. "Carry on. No more questions. Don't mind me."

Evan appeared to think of something. "Can they truly create all they need to with iron?"

"Not just iron, no," Jorak said. "Steel for the most part, which is a form of iron, and other metal alloys. Carnan is a good source for some of the harder to find metals used in armaments. Likely why Jaxx chose this planet."

James could have answered that. He'd studied different metal alloys as part of his construction work exams. "And what are the chances," he said to the group, "that this secret army being built, the one we're looking for, is right here on this planet?"

"Carnan is a distant world," Liana said. "While it's well-connected within its system, most of the galaxy don't look around these Outer Rim parts. And as Jorak mentioned, it's a strong source for metals."

James nodded. Carnan was a good-enough place to have kept him hidden, it would also make sense for someone else to think they could hide an army here too.

Sam stepped closer to the table and paused. He finally looked up at them. "Jaxx's men wear Sacre armour, but does that mean he is working with them? It's not very likely that a notorious gangster will have access to the soldiers of an immense inter-galactic corporation."

"Not all of them wear the armour," Liana said. "The majority of them wear simpler light armour. Some in basic desert clothing. Jaxx might not be directly connected to Sacre, but he's worked with the warehouse in Tyken Town, and they have had correspondences with Codo Industries, who have had ties with Sacre in the past."

"Wearing feathers doesn't make me a duck," Jorak said. "And wearing Sacre armour doesn't make them Sacre soldiers. Some of these soldiers may have had their minds altered, but that's not to mean that all of Jaxx's men are the same. Many could be working for him of

their own accord. We estimate there are over a hundred people in the iron forge, but do not know how many have military training."

"Maybe the serum provides military training also," James suggested. "Or heightens what they already have?"

Sam nodded. "It's a stretch, but possible. It means though, that we can't risk hurting innocent people. I say we leave no casualties. We go to incapacitate, if it comes to that."

"Agreed," Liana said. She typed into her pad and the Riondon map shifted, zooming into a built-up section near the town centre. "Onto the next step. Jaxx's meeting with Dr. Velome is expected to take place in the Midgan Casino today, in approximately two hours. That's where you folk step in and take the doctor's place."

Sam turned to James and Evan. "The three of us will be posing as metal miners who are interested in striking up a business arrangement with Jaxx. We'll step in once it seems clear to him that Dr. Velome isn't showing up. This would hopefully allow us to learn some more of his business, or at the very least will tell us what kind of a person he is to deal with."

"And if he doesn't want to do business with you?" Jorak asked.

Sam shrugged. "The deal we'll give him will hopefully be too good to pass up. Now the fact that we won't deliver on our promises, that's his problem. It'll be enough at least to learn more about him, even if he doesn't take our offer."

James wasn't sure about the explanation, but held back any more protests. At some point he had to trust in his companions, and hope that the actions they were taking were the right ones.

Sam held an uneasy expression. "But we have a slight issue here." He pointed at the large screen, where Jaxx's image still showed. "Jaxx has seen me before. He saw me during one of my investigations of the Iron Forge, a season or two back. I didn't know who he was at the time, but now I do. His face hasn't been in any of the newscasts. He only saw me from a far, and I could have just been another local or tourist to him, or maybe a reporter. But he did see me. And that means I can't go to that meeting and risk him recognising me."

"If only you had access to our resources earlier," Liana said, eyeing him with a stern gaze and tight jaw. She seemed to relax somewhat as she added in a lighter tone, "You'll be a local metal miner. Maybe you can be that same man who was looking into the iron forge, before deciding to do business with him."

"That's a tricky angle to come at Jaxx from. He'll have trouble trusting a business partner like that."

Liana frowned. Beside her, Jorak looked troubled, lost in thought, his eyes locked on Sam.

"Then you're no good to us out on the field," Jorak said.

"I'm still in the game," Sam said, obviously trying to keep his cool.

"There's no use throwing blame around," Liana said.

Jorak snorted. "Sam has enough of that."

"That's enough, Jorak," Liana said hotly. "We're running out of options,"

"It has to be me," James said.

They all turned to him.

The words startled even James. They just came out. But he knew they were the right ones. "I'll take the meeting with Jaxx. Me and Evan."

"You sure about this?" Sam asked.

James's heart raced, but he tried to keep his composure. "How hard can it be to pretend to be a metal miner?" he said, trying to sound light and casual.

"It's a lot to ask of you," Sam said.

James sighed, looking away, before he met Sam's eyes. "I know the job. It's not that different from the work we were doing for the past two years at Rimas. It'll be enough to fool Jaxx. I hope."

Sam smiled, showing a hint of pride that James recognised. "I know you can do it. We'll go over the business plan I had in mind, and make sure you both know the offer for Jaxx."

James forced himself not to shake his head, fighting to calm his nerves at the very idea of confronting a dangerous gangster. He swallowed, as if to keep his fears down. "Okay. I can do it."

Sam gave James's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Good man, James," Liana said, and tapped into her pad.

Evan perked up, signalling his intention to speak next. "Has this man Higero Jaxx gone by any other aliases?"

"None on record," Liana said.

Evan nodded slowly. "I had once thought that Jaxx could have been the one who called himself the Arbiter. The man who aided in the destruction of my homeland. I had only ever caught a glimpse of the Arbiter from a far, but once I saw Jaxx's photo I was sure that it was not him. Nonetheless, I had to ask."

"We have people looking into the Arbiter," Liana said, giving Evana reassuring nod.

"Whoever he is, and what other names he may have, we'll find him. Before you leave, Evan, I just need you to answer some questions and help us fill in a few blanks."

"I will assist you in preventing Higero Jaxx from abducting and altering more people's minds," Evan said. He paused to look over them all. "But my main priority is with my people, and the restoration of my homeland. I will do what I can to make sure that this Arbiter pays for his crimes, and that my people are safe from him."

Liana wrapped her arms around her pad, holding it close to her. "Many more lands will be overtaken if someone doesn't prevent Jaxx and Sacre from gaining more power. It looks as though Jaxx is behind the abductions, based on all our findings so far. The wider scheme is to put a stop to any connections he may have involved also."

And where my father fits into it, James thought. If he is one of the abducted soldiers, he's out there somewhere, waiting to be found. Waiting to be saved. And, if the abducted forces were truly on Carnan, would his father be with them? Could his father be just in the next town over? It seemed like a foolish hope, one that James wouldn't allow himself to hold on to. Just yet.

He should have said something to them about his father, Hayden, but felt he would be interrupting the planning with his own personal business, and didn't want them to think any less of him. He had to show himself as the competent and professional soldier he was meant to be.

"About your plan," Jorak said to Sam. "It seems that with Jaxx in the Midgan Casino, it leaves the Iron Forge a little open."