

Chapter Twenty Seven: The Midgan Casino - Part Two

Such a grand place it was too. Floor to ceiling doors were left opened at the far end of the lobby, leading to the main floor of the casino. Loud bells and machinery bombarded them as they entered, flashing lights and throngs of people everywhere. A few extravagant marbled statues reached the high ceiling, like pillars in a grand ballroom.

"Keep an eye out for our contact," Sam said, raising his voice slightly to be heard. "I'll get us a drink while we wait. How about a table over there?"

"Waitress service will be better," Castan said, smiling. "Come, let us sit and be served. Will take you longer to wait at the bar."

Sam nodded in agreement. "Better than standing around and looking suspicious." He gestured for Castan to lead the way.

They crossed the main floor to another section against the left wall, partitioned by a tall glass divider. The room opened to another large floor where a band played a soft, mellow tune in the corner. The sounds of the main floor diminished a little here. Castan found a round table a few rows in. They sat and looked around.

Pink-skinned alien women with black, glistening eyes navigated the tables, holding trays. Their glittery uniforms and shapely bodies drew obvious attention from some of the customers. A small bar was against the wall, where a talking mech with long appendages served several customers at once.

"This is some place," James said, taking it all in. "You ever been here, Sam?"

Sam sat with an arm draped over the back of his chair. "I've visited Riondon a couple of times, but never managed to come to the casino before."

One of the pink-skinned waitresses came over and took their order. She almost looked doll-like, with her smooth skin and shaped hair. Castan said to trust him and ordered the drinks on their behalf, giving them a wink and smiling brightly at the woman. Her Standard was almost inaudible and very basic, but she was friendly and winked at Castan as she left.

"I'm going to have a little look around," Sam said. "Keep your eyes open. For more than just the waitresses." He smiled at Castan as he stood, then left them.

Castan leaned back with a satisfied expression as he looked over the room. "This is some life, huh?"

"It's a bit much for me," James admitted. "But good for a short visit, for sure."

"Ah, the lights, the ladies, the money, I love it. Just wish I could afford to spend time here."

James watched Castan. He thought to ask about the man that had approached them in the street; the one who sounded like he was threatening Castan. They still didn't know anything about their guide, and James wondered how much they should really be trusting him. Sam seemed to trust Castan a great deal, though James couldn't shake the feeling that the Canarrian was hiding something.

An announcer came on a speaker system in the room. Time for the Fighting Fury contest in Hall B. Make your way to see the fight of the year! Gozin Gaal versus The Crow!

Castan perked up. "You hear that? Let's watch."

James stayed where he was, unsure of what was happening.

Castan stood up and said, "Come on, there's a show happening in the room next door. You won't want to miss it, I promise! Better than staying here and feeling the wind. Sam and our drinks will find us in there."

James hesitated. "We're meant to be keeping an eye out for Higero Jaxx."

Castan nodded enthusiastically, urging James up. "Better to notice him out there than in here."

James sighed and reluctantly said, "A quick look. But remember why we're here." He tried a firm voice as a kind of warning for Castan not to get too carried away, but it didn't seem to do much good.

"Right, right. Good, good," Castan chirped, ushering James back out into the main hall.

James looked out for Sam, and tried to keep the image of Higero Jaxx in his mind as he scanned the crowds. A short walk along the wall led them to the next room: a wide open hall with curved walls and domed ceiling. A rowdy crowd surrounded a platform in the centre of the room, the chairs fanning out in concentric circles. At James's insistence, they remained near the entranceway, which meant they were bumped by people moving around them, but also allowed James to keep an eye on the main hall.

A slug-like alien in a voluminous dark suit stood in the centre of the platform, besides two men. The crowd hushed a little as the announcer spoke, his smooth voice enhanced to fill the room. He announced the show, *The Fighting Fury Contest*, along with a lot of fancy preamble that energised the crowd.

"Vova! This will truly be a sight," Castan said excitedly beside James.

James nervously checked his sat-com again. They still had enough time before the meeting was scheduled. Unless Jaxx was early. "You said it was a show?" he asked.

"Kind of. More like a deadly fight."

James raised his brows. "To the death?"

"Well not so much, no. But they can get bloody." There was a morbid excitement in Castan's eyes that gave James pause.

He looked back towards the main hall, wondering if Sam was looking for them.

On one side of the announcer, the taller of the two fighters caused some awed hushes as he scanned the crowd with tendrils of electricity sparking lazily around his hands. He was powerfully built with overly large muscles that stretched over a dark body suit. He stood over seven feet tall.

"That one is called Gozin Gaal," Castan said, pointing at the large man. "They call him a lightning god, if you can believe that. The other man is called the Crow. I forget his real name. But he is one of the most deadly fighters. They both are."

The other fighter, spiked hair and bare chested, brandished long knives on his gloves, like claws. He was lean with a hard build, although from the outset did not seem like a match for his domineering opponent.

The announcer called the start of the match and shuffled to the side, his long tail slithering and flopping off the platform as he descended.

The one called the Crow immediately sprang into action, darting around his opponent with startling speed, testing him with a few swipes of his clawed gloves. Bright electricity surged over the beefy man's arms as he moved. A stream of lightning shot towards the Crow, who back flipped away and let it scorch a section of the platform. The two continued to move around the platform, weaving in and out of attacks as the crowd roared, mostly with chants of 'Gozin! Gozin!'

James felt a presence right beside him.

"How is the fight?" Sam asked, leaning in close to be heard.

James smiled, feeling the reassurance of Sam's presence. "Just started. Did you see anything interesting?"

"Still no sign," Sam said.

A flash of blue light brought James's attention back to the fight, and he saw the Crow dive down from a high jump, dodging an electric blast and slicing Gozin's arm in a spray of blood.

"My money is on the Crow," Sam said.

"I tell you," Castan called to them, "the lightning god has this one. Easy."

"Is he really a god?" James asked.

"Nah," Sam said. "Just a fancy title. I think, anyway."

The Crow spiralled away from a blast of electricity that flew directly towards the crowd. The energy struck an invisible barrier in the air and dissipated several feet away from the nearest chairs. For an instant a section of a domed barrier could be seen around the platform, before the light faded.

The large fighter, Gozin, growled and moved back, his empty white eyes flashing. He pointed a fist to the ground and electrified a section near him, leaving a circular layer of blue energy. "Clever," Sam said beside James. "Leave less ground for his opponent."

The Crow darted around the circular traps and struck out with a series of attacks, flipping over a stream of lightning and managing to slice a line across Gozin's back as he spun over him. The crowd roared at the sight of more blood.

James turned around to see that Sam's focus was now on the main hall.

Higero Jaxx is here, was James's first thought.

"What is it?" James asked.

"Nothing," Sam said.

"Jaxx?"

Sam shook his head, nudging himself closer to the main hall.

Castan waved an arm over the rowdy crowd. "I should have put money on this one," he said as he and James pushed themselves through the people by the entranceway and came out into the main hall.

Sam's focus seemed to be on the bar across from them. His firm gaze told James that something wasn't right.

"The man in the long cloak by the bar," James said, following Sam's eyes. "You know him?"

While he waited for Sam's response, James noticed the cloaked man's eyes shifting to the other bar on the far side of the room – to a bald man in the crowd who was looking back, also wearing a heavy cloak that covered his body. The man nearest them had his hood down, and he carried himself with an edgy, uneasy manner. The bald man had a similar light complexion and heavy brows; perhaps they were related, James guessed.

Now he had seen what Sam was seeing, James realised that these two men, hidden among the crowds, were planning something. He had seen similar agitated expressions and the

constant shifting eyes from the street folk in Tyken Town. The ones that would steal from someone without being noticed.

"Seen friends of yours?" Castan asked.

Sam gave a small nod towards the bar without looking at it. "Someone up to no good. Nothing, really."

"Should we do something?" James asked.

Sam remained casually looking over the room with an expression James couldn't read.

Through the crowd ahead of them, James saw the heavyset bartender bring a large black chest out from under the bar.

"That's it," Sam said quietly, his voice almost lost by the loud sounds around them. "The coin chests."

The bartender ducked back behind the bar, leaving the chest on the counter for a moment. Something shot out from the cloak of the shifty man, towards the chest. James perked up and tried to see what was happening. The chest sprung away from the bar and flew towards the cloaked man, propelled by a retracting grappling device. It disappeared within his cloak in an instant.

Sam moved quickly. He made his way towards the cloaked man, who was turning and looking for his exit route. Nudging past a few people, Sam casually stuck a leg out. The retreating man tripped and sprawled onto the ground, sending the heavy black box thudding beside him. A few people gasped and called out, although many remained oblivious.

James saw the bald man by the far end bar breaking into a run. James sprang into action, barely thinking and acting on instinct, and ran towards the other man, pushing his way through several people. As the man reached for the exit door, James came to him and lunged. He collided with the man and sent them both onto a table, scattering glasses and playing cards. They slid off the table and dropped to the floor in a rolling heap.

James held onto him, pressing the man's arms down, his head spinning from the twisting fall. The man cursed and struggled, but James held him down firmly, adrenaline coursing through him. He realised a heavy murmur was rippling through the crowd around them, over the bells and whistles of the main floor. The crowd parted and several men appeared, heavy boots thumping. James looked up to see men in dark security uniforms.

"We'll take him now," said the first security guard, his hard voice distorted by a helmet that covered his head. Two of them picked the bald man off the ground, and another helped James up. Other guards kept the crowds back.

James was suddenly aware of all the people looking at him with awed mutterings. He turned from them, wishing he could just make them look away and forget about him.

"Vova! That was some tackle," Castan said, approaching. "That'll teach them for trying to rob a place with these two heroes around." He waved a hand behind him to Sam, who was handing the other cloaked man to a group of security guards.

James stepped closer to Castan, hoping the crowds would lose interest with him and stop looking. "I guess it seemed like the thing to do," James said, shrugging sheepishly.

"It certainly seemed to be, didn't it," Sam said as he came to them. "Thanks for the help there, James. Wasn't much time to make a plan, but you did well."

"Well it was your fault," James said lightly. "I probably wouldn't have done anything if you hadn't gone first."

"Oh, I'm sure you would have," Sam said.

"And all remained right with the world," Castan said, clapping them both on the shoulder and smiling. "I told you, I knew it, you fellas are full of excitement."

"Where, where are they?" a voice said, rising over the crowd.

They turned to see guards in dark suits leading a well-dressed alien. He was a stocky red-skinned man with small studded spikes around his head and face. A wide, thick lipped mouth was smiling and showed spiked teeth. Despite his appearance, which could have been described as devilish or even demonic, the man had a friendly, agreeable look about him, reinforced by kind, deep-set eyes.

"You fine men," he said, breathing heavy with a distressed excitement. "You the ones that stopped those thieves just now?" He cleared his throat audibly and tried to regain his composure, pulling his shoulders back. "You have my deepest thanks. Most brave of you to risk yourselves so selflessly."

"Not a problem at all," Sam said. "Just happy to help."

"Of course you are," the man said. His foreign accent was nasally but he was well spoken. "Fine folk like yourselves. Of course you are. Let me introduce myself. Hawdrawish Guyshawk. Owner of this establishment."

They shook his extended hand in turn. Castan's brows had risen up to his forehead.

"Pleasure to meet you," Sam said. "You have a fine casino."

"And more," Guyshawk said to them. Golden speckles flashed in his eyes as he gestured around them. He had an air of a politician about him, someone who was used to being the centre of attention and knew how to work a room. And he knew how to wear a suit. "Six

floors under my roof, and they're all yours. I insist on you fine men spending the night. On me. Whatever you like."

The look of sheer, dumbfounded excitement on Castan's stunned face was almost enough to make James laugh.

"A very kind offer," Sam said. "We aren't staying in town, however."

"But we could," Castan quickly said. "If it works out so. Never know. If we're in the area, I mean."

A corner of Sam's mouth rose.

Guyshawk waved a dismissive hand over them. "Rooms will be available for you three. Take them if you like. It is my wish that you enjoy all that the hotel and casino has to offer. In my line of business, I have learned that if I look after valuable customers, they look after me. In this case the order has reversed."

"We can see if that works with our schedule," Sam said. "Thank you again, you're most generous."

Guyshawk nodded with a humble, respectful look. It was a well-rehearsed expression that reminded James of the Judges in Tyken Town, advertising their policies on the big screens and saying how they kept the cleanest and safest districts in town with modest, grateful expressions. Like they were indebted to the people, rather than ruling over them.

"Hadda Al'si, kind sir. Very generous," Castan said. He shook Guyshawk's hand again and stepped closer. "Tell me, you are a Bubzoop, correct? The nicest people in the galaxy, my old hamba always used to say."

"A wise lady, your hamba," Guyshawk said, nodding appreciatively. "And a good eye, you have. Not many of us around these parts."

"Oh, I am a big fan of your people," Castan went on, "and yourself. For instance, all you went through to build this place up in town. I read about the adjustment to the gambling laws that had to be passed before you could turn the original restaurant into a casino. Not to mention the planning rights to build more floors. You're a remarkable man."

Castan's flattery went on, but James's attention faded into the crowd. Something drew his eye to the side, and he immediately tensed.

There, by the bar on the far end, not too far from the entrance, walked Higero Jaxx.

James recognised him immediately. Jaxx was shorter than he expected, with a burly, powerful frame under his foreign-styled, well-tailored suit. Two others walked beside him: a small alien with furred forearms, just shorter than Jaxx, and a tall, imposing alien with a serious expression and long mane neatly pulled back.

Careful not to draw too much attention, James caught Sam's eye and then darted his eyes in Jaxx's direction. Whether Sam had already spotted Jaxx or not, he kept his expression neutral as always.

Sam laid a hand on Castan, gently interrupting them. "Sorry to tear Castan away from you. We should let you get on. I'm sure you're a busy man."

"Oh, it's no problem," Castan said before Guyshawk could respond. "We're getting along just fine, aren't we?"

Guyshawk smiled but seemed to welcome the chance to disentangle himself. "Indeed, you're a fine fellow, Castan my man. I must be on my way, however."

James's pulse was racing, his focus purely on their target. Across the casino floor, Jaxx made his way up some steps to a series of booths within an alcove on the wall. The arms dealer carried himself with a powerful, assured air.

"We can catch up later, perhaps. Mako," Castan said cheerfully.

"It would be my pleasure," Guyshawk said, shaking his hand. He turned and also took Sam and James's hands again with a quick firm shake. "My offer still stands. The lay of the land is yours, if you wish to partake. Simply mention my name in reception, they will be expecting you."

Guyshawk left them with another quick, definitive nod. He strode into the crowd, followed by several guards.

"Such a nice man," Castan said.

"Time to step up," Sam said, his tone suddenly serious.

James realised Sam had been keeping his back to Jaxx the entire time, and had not looked over once.

Sam gestured for James to hand him his sword. "You shouldn't be armed when you speak to Jaxx."

As James handed his sword over, he could feel his face had grown hot and sweat was building on his forehead.

"You ready for this?" Sam asked.

Jaxx had sat himself in one of the booths, on the raised section away from the main casino floor. His two bodyguards stood a short distance away, facing outwards and still as statues.

James nodded, clenching his fists. "Let's meet Higero Jaxx."

