

Chapter Twenty Nine: Higero Jaxx

The roar of the casino crowd, the strobing lights and bells and whistles, had all faded into the back of James's mind. He walked across the casino floor beside Castan, towards the booths in the far corner. James knew the angle they would play, and the background of their story. It seemed relatively simple enough, but at the same time he couldn't help but feel a great sense of dread overwhelm him.

James focused. They were about to meet the dangerous arms dealer Higero Jaxx, pretending to be other people. He forced his breathing to steady and told himself everything was going to be fine.

James hoped Sam would be able to jump to their rescue, if it turned out they needed it. But it shouldn't come to that. James had to survive this meeting without a fight. This fight was a talk.

They approached Jaxx's two bodyguards. The one nearest them, the shorter one with cat-like eyes and long ears, held a hand out.

"Keep back," he said in a high and nasally voice. "Restricted section." The short fur on his face blended into the longer hairs that ran over his head, overflowing down his back like a lion's mane.

James held his hands up apologetically. "Oh, no trouble here. No, sir. We were just hoping for a word with Mr. Jaxx, if that were alright." Without planning it, James had emphasised the common, local tones of his usual speech, which he hoped would make him appear more simple-minded and less threatening. It was almost like doing a bad impression of Castan and his Canarrian accent. Was that the right way to go? Maybe they would think him a simpleton. It was too late to back out of his character now.

"You have no business with Mr. Jaxx," the bodyguard said. As he looked them over, his short snout rose with contempt. He wore a close-fitting jacket, his furred arms bare aside from thin metal wristbands, and dusty brown trousers tucked into boots.

"No, but we were hoping to," James said, smiling. "You see, we're metal miners, from Dendo next door – that's the small green moon you see at night – and we'd love to talk to Mr. Jaxx about doing some business together. We'd love to tell him about our company."

"He is not interested in your business," the guard said. Beside him, the taller one remained looking ahead, as if he had no concern with them.

"Well that's a shame, if that's true," James said. "We'll just have to find someone else who wants an unlimited supply of metal. Perhaps someone in Victory City."

The hairs on the guard's forearms seemed to bristle with frustration. James had seen many of his kind before. Firions usually preferred to keep to themselves, but were generally friendly and peaceful folk, from what he'd known.

"It's alright," a calm voice said behind the guard.

Jaxx shifted in his seat to have a look over them. "Seems that I have some time." He waved a hand dismissively. "It appears that my appointment is running late. You have until they arrive."

The short guard's eyes tightened and he remained still a moment, before giving them room to sit. Castan followed James and they slid into the booth opposite Jaxx. Both bodyguards kept their backs to them and continued to survey the casino.

"Genetlemen," Jaxx said. "Please forgive my employees. They were not held enough as children." He was disarmingly softly spoken, which James was sure masked a darker side. There was a scaled quality to Jaxx's brown-green skin, and his wide nostrils and flat face reminded James of a serpent; perhaps he was a similar race to the reptilian muqgraa's and bahkschim's.

"But as you can imagine," Jaxx went on, "one cannot be too careful with whom they interact. Particularly someone who has become quite notorious around these parts. As I'm sure you're aware of."

James felt his throat tighten. He had gotten them this far, and now it was down to him to fully sell his character. If Jaxx felt any kind of deceit from him or Castan, they would probably be dead before Sam even knew something was wrong.

"I'm sure it can be difficult to determine the good folk from the bad," James said. He smiled, and then toned it down, unsure of how friendly and smiley he should be.

"Good folk from the bad. Correct." Jaxx eyed them. He poured a dark drink into his glass, then replaced the bottle top and settled with his fingers interlaced in front of him. His actions were calm and controlled. James had rarely seen someone so relaxed. Jaxx almost seemed... *gentle*. Not at all what James was expecting. "Now," Jaxx went on, "convince me which ones you are, if you will."

James gave a half shrug, elbows on the table and leaning in. In a way, he realised in the back of his mind, he was emulating Sam's cool and casual demeanour. "It's a simple thing. Myself and my partner here have a small mining company up on Dendo. Silver Gates Services, you've probably heard of us?" He waited for a response from Jaxx, although none came. James smiled and continued, "Well us Gaters - that's what we call ourselves - we came across these deep caverns filled with ore. A kind that, in time, regrows itself once mined."

"Ferrous metals," Castan said, beside James. He had also changed his voice slightly. It was now smoother, less cheery than his usual chirpy, fast-talking self. "We think their re-growth

is partly to do with their magnetism." It was information given to them by Sam, and James guessed that Castan wanted to show Jaxx some of his own knowledge on the matter.

Jaxx gave them a small nod, his expression unchanging.

"Now we don't rightly know how it does what it does," James went on. "I won't try and insult you with some moon-brain ideas or suggested facts. But we know we've stumbled upon something big. Bigger than us. Our first thought was to sell our supplies. And our immediate second thought was to see about going into business with you, the man himself, Higero Jaxx. You got a lot of our people excited when you showed up in Riondon and bought the iron forge. And we figured you'd be the only person who could handle what us small-timers have come across."

Jaxx nodded sagely. "I'm familiar with Dendo. Deep caverns must be within the Chattle Peninsula region, correct?"

James made to say something and caught himself. It was a genuine reaction but he made a larger, obvious show of it, falling back into character. "We'd rather not reveal the source of our ore, at this stage."

Jaxx nodded again. "And just what do you think I could do with your infinite supply?"

James raised his brows. "You're Higero Jaxx. If there's anyone within a ten planet radius that could make best use of what we got, it's you."

Jaxx's cracked lips curled up slightly. He leaned back and pushed himself into the corner of the booth with an arm over the back. He lounged as though he were in his own home, though still looked sharp and presentable in his suit. "Who are you folk?"

"Fans," Castan replied coolly. "Fans who want to be partners."

James had to give it to Castan. The man seemed to do well under pressure.

"You must have the resources to utilise our supplies, right?" James asked. "I mean, if not here in town then in one of your other facilities. But my partner and I would prefer to keep things local."

James kept his expression casual, hoping Jaxx wouldn't have caught on to the important element he was reaching towards: Jaxx's resources. The arms dealer remained watching them in his quietly intense way. He gave nothing away.

"I could work with unlimited metal," Jaxx said. "You mostly have iron?"

"We work with steel too, of course," James said. "We have our carbon sources for the alloy. To the tune of nought-point-five to one percent. We work with tungsten, and even some silicon and poly-meshes and tetra-weaves too. I'm sure you have a far greater wealth of metal and material types, of course."

"I primarily work with steel," Jaxx said. "I have customised alloys that create my own reinforced properties, enough to cope with the harsh conditions of space, even. Classified information, of course."

He was building materials for space? Did that mean he was building ships, also? Armour that doubled as space suits? Liana and the others at the outpost would know what to do with that information.

"Now we have a lot to transport," James told him, internally reading from Sam's script. "What would you say is your maximum load, at a push? If we were to ask for a hand to transport all our goods to you. We don't have the resources that you would."

Jaxx took another sip of his dark drink before putting the glass down. "I have enough to carry anything you might want to load up. If I was willing to be so generous."

"Good to know," James said. It had been a vague answer, but enough to tell him that Jaxx had many transport ships. Or at least had access to them.

Jaxx picked up his glass again and studied the contents a moment, before he asked, "What else can you tell me about the oxidisation of these nodes? And how quickly do they regrow?"

James paused, caught off guard. He had been going by Sam's information up to this point, but now Jaxx was asking something that hadn't been covered. James thought furiously. He could tell Jaxx that the information was classified; he might be able to get away with that. But James had to convince Jaxx that he was the real deal, if he was to get any more information out of him.

James kept his eyes on Jaxx, knowing that looking away would be a sign of weakness or deceit.

"Ferric hydroxide oxidises the iron once it comes in contact with the surface," James said, "and we work with the enzyme catalysis from the iron bacteria" He swallowed, searching for more information. He thought back to the books he'd studied for his construction work. Something about impure iron deposits. He just couldn't think in the moment, with Jaxx staring at him. "Their re-grow rate varies greatly, depending on moisture levels and ground depth, not to mention air pressure."

"We can go on," Castan said, leaning forward. "But I'm sure you'll understand that we're not comfortable with easily giving away our secrets. My partner here has already given away more than we were willing to disclose."

Jaxx seemed to accept them, then he leaned forward too, reaching half way across the table with his hands clasped together. The swift motion caught James off guard and he fought to keep his outward appearance cool and calm.

"If you wouldn't mind permitting me one or two secrets," Jaxx said, his soft voice hardening with a hint of menace. It was the first time James felt a real threat coming from him.

James wanted to swallow again and clear his throat, but those actions would give his nerves away. He wanted to look over the casino floor and be sure that Sam had a direct eye line on them. Just knowing that Sam was out there, waiting to jump to their rescue, would have been a comfort to him. But James knew that talking to Jaxx was something no one else, not even Castan, could help him with.

James didn't have enough time to think properly, and found himself talking while his mind raced. "Those ferric compounds reduce when exposed to the anoxic conditions once buried beneath the sediment surface, and re-oxidized once exhumed. And so on, the process goes. The rest, my partner and I will absolutely refuse to divulge in."

He watched Jaxx carefully, while trying not to look too hard. Not to look too eager. He hoped he had remembered the information correctly.

In a way, James thought that this was what Sam had been doing for two years. An Oneron soldier, under the guise of a construction worker. For all intents and purposes, Sam had been a capable and experienced worker. Just like James was now. Or so he hoped.

"I can appreciate that," Jaxx said to them. His cool and stern manner remained, as if nothing could harm him. He was in control at all times. From the way he held himself, James couldn't imagine Jaxx ever knowing fear or doubt; those emotions must not exist for a galactic arms dealer. "A smart man doesn't give away everything he knows."

James felt his shoulders ease with relief. He hoped the action was small enough not to be noticed.

"And a smarter man knows when to share," James said with a small smile, hoping to come across as cheeky and confident.

"Let me guess," Jaxx said. "You want to visit the iron forge? See our production line and exactly how we can use your supplies."

James held a hand up defensively. "We understand how it is, confidentiality and all. We've read just about everything there is to know about the iron forge. From all the articles and newscasts. You've been highly exposed, and very open to the public, which tells us you're the right kind of person to deal with. Nothing to hide. And, well, that makes us feel safe to do business with you."

Jaxx sipped his drink and gave them a half nod. He looked over the casino floor. "Seems as though my appointment is not going to show up. How unfortunate, for them. And how fortunate, for you." His cold eyes searched them, giving James that tense, uncomfortable feeling again. An intense air seemed to burn between them, gripping James and holding him in place.

"Must be our lucky day," James said with a smile.

The burning energy cleared as Jaxx spoke. "I've always believed we make our own luck." Something in his voice told James he mistrusted them, almost as if he was accusing them. Was Jaxx just playing with them? Lulling them into a false security? James thought frantically, wondering where he'd gone wrong.

A heavy silence came over them.

Did Jaxx know they had something to do with his appointment not showing up?

"I've never believed in luck, myself," Castan said in his calmer, clearer voice. He seemed non-phased by Jaxx's intense gaze. "We never needed such a thing. Not after our years of mining, and not when we founded our own business. Now if you can appreciate determined and passionate folk like ourselves, who can make things happen and who know this business just about as well as anyone, then I believe we can do business together. If not..."

"If not, you fellas can leave here and never come back," Jaxx said sharply. "No problem for me. No problem if no one sees you folk again."

"I guess that won't be a problem," James said. "Except for all that renewable ore waiting to be picked. Someone will get to it eventually. Whether it's you or someone else."

Jaxx remained eyeing them for a long moment, as if he were looking inside them. It was like how Evan seemed to look *through* people at times. "There is something to say about those who try," Jaxx said, the tension in his voice fading. "I tell you what. Get in touch, and we'll see if we can work something out." He pulled out a thin data card and held it out to them, leaning on his elbow. "Here's my information."

James reached over and took the card. "We'll be in touch, for sure," he said, letting his eagerness show. This would be a big deal for his character and he should show it. "And if we could get that tour sometime, we'd love to see how you work."

Jaxx gave another nod. "Any day after tomorrow will be good." He leaned back into the corner of the booth. "Feel free to stop by, before you head back to Daldano."

"Dendo," James corrected. Had Jaxx been trying to catch them off guard?

Jaxx looked casually over the crowds. "I never saw the draw of this place. Too noisy and too many people. But, they do the strongest Red Husk I've found on this continent." He raised his glass to them. "Now if you'll allow me some respite."

"Thank you for your time," James said, nodding appreciatively as he and Castan shifted out of the booth.

James paused as he stood up, something catching his eye by the main entrance of the casino. A group of Red Guards were making their way through the crowds. Tall and

armoured, their visored heads scanned the area. James locked eyes with Castan for an instant but quickly looked away, keeping his face neutral.

Jaxx was still watching them. James hoped he hadn't noticed their hesitation but couldn't help but feel that Jaxx had become suspicious.

The two bodyguards remained standing beside them, looking out over the casino with blank, stern expressions. They reminded James of dormant machines, awaiting activation.

Castan followed James down the few steps to the main casino floor and waded through the mingling people and the rows of machines. The Red Guards spread out over the room, causing some looks and mutterings. Their shiny armour glinted and caught the lights, highlighting the guards like beacons in the crowd.

"You think they're here for us?" James asked Castan.

"Fo'wshwai," Castan said. "You said they know your names and faces, right?" He led the way down an alley of machines, away from the open floor.

They found Sam around the corner by the bar on the far end.

"How did it go?" Sam asked.

"Later," James said, keeping his hand low as he signalled for his sword from Sam. "Red Guards. Here."

Sam showed no signs of alarm but moved into action, already stepping away and nodding for them to follow.

James turned and saw two Red Guards across the floor, wading through the crowds. They were heading towards them.