

LASTChancePUBLICATIONS

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written

by

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episode 4

In episode 3..

"I am sorry old friend it is not as easy as I had thought. I am not able to get close to the boy, perhaps it will have to be enough that he will become a great Ranger now."

Kaio regrets that his relationship with Headwire is souring and could there be more to his reasons for wanting to train the young Ranger than he has let on.

Headwire is determined to show doubters like Kaio that he is already a great Ranger, destined to become the greatest of all.

"I will make them notice me. I will make them notice me..."

Headwire woke up to his buzzing alarm, his muscles aching from his efforts the day before. It was early morning and he could have done with more rest. Nevertheless he rose quickly from his bed, he was on morning patrol and that was enough to make him move swiftly. After a quick shower he dressed and hurried to the mess hall for breakfast.

"Come on!" he shouted as he waited in the line with other Mercs and some workers for his food. Although it was almost an hour before his patrol set off Headwire was anxious to get there early, as always. He looked around the hall for his partners while he queued, Silver was no doubt sleeping after his night patrol that was the longest stretch, a full ten hours. Chance, he considered was probably out on his morning run, but Kaio should be around.

"Well he probably doesn't want to eat with me" he thought as he took his seat at the usual table. He finished up his meal quickly and headed off to the patrol muster point, where he would receive his Ranger suit and weapon load out.

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"Headwire, Merc 27.68 reporting for AM Patrol" Headwire offered eagerly to the orderly at the armoury depot.

"Why is it you're always here so early Head?" The orderly replied with a smile as he began preparing Headwire's gear.

"I like to warm up before we get serious, you never know, we could meet something nasty out there."

The orderly stopped preparing his equipment and gave him a resigned look "Head, in the six months I've been working here there hasn't been a single patrol, not one that has ever had any story of enemy attacks for me when they have checked their shit back in. You know why?" He asked sarcastically then continued before Headwire could even think of replying. "Because their ain't any enemies out there, that's why"

Headwire smiled "What about JBC huh? They are just over the hill"

"You know the rules, they can't attack us and we can't attack them, not till all the Artifacts are recovered."

"Pfft, what about the Skaarj then."

"Skaarj! Don't make me laugh kid, they aint anywhere near this solar system let alone this base. I doubt you'll ever see one in your life time"

Headwire smiled from ear to ear before replying.

"I've seen em," he said, "I even killed one."

"What! Shut up, you never did" The orderly replied shocked.

"I did mate, one of my first patrols" This time the orderly completely stopped what he was doing, giving his full attention to Headwire, who smiled again at the orderly's obvious interest.

He recounted the tale of his patrol last year, shortly after Kaio had begun training him as a Ranger. He had been on patrol on a Class-C planet called Ransom IV with five other Mercs and a Captain when they had been set upon by three Skaarj. Large alien beasts, bigger then a man with deadly close combat blades and superior strength. Although caught by surprised the Gunners and Techs engaged the creatures as they charged and bore the brunt of the terrible attack. Three of the patrol team were taken out within the first few seconds in exchange of one dead Skarj. The patrol was forced to retreat and call in back up.

Headwire was fortunate enough to be scouting ahead with the other Ranger when the attack had come and as they sprinted to support their patrol they saw them in full flight. The other Ranger joined in immediately by fleeing towards the base.

"Run you idiot, they are done for." he shouted to Headwire as he took off over the cliff.

Disgusted at his partners cowardice Headwire threw himself into the battle. Just as the nearest Skaarj was leaping for the Mercenary Captain Headwire snapped off a shot with his sniper rifle it punched straight through the aliens skull killing it outright. The creature dropped out of the air and landed at the feet of the petrified Captain. Headwire landed by his side and seeing more Skaarj coming over the hill helped his remaining team retreat to the Base.

As he finished recounting his tale, with some slight embellishing of the details, Headwire looked up to see that five more orderlies were standing at the desk listening, the entire Armoury staff. Headwire had their full attention.

"That was you?" said one "I was working on that base, I heard that story" he exclaimed, the others were suddenly immensely impressed having had someone confirm Heads account.

"And the rest then, is history" Headwire finished with a nonchalant look on his face. The five men immediately burst into a round of applause, shouting praise for his bravery and ability. Headwire stepped away from the counter beaming from ear to ear. He took his equipment towards the prep room.

"Well that was quite a story" came a call from off to the side. Headwire looked over to see a middle-aged man with short brown hair, about six feet tall and of slim build leaning against a support pillar in the waiting area.

"Oh, hi Dante, hey it's all-true you know" Headwire said as he walked over to shake his hand.

"I don't doubt it Kid, figured you could pull something like that off to be honest." Dante said as he reached out and shook his hand. He pushed himself off the pillar with his shoulder and stood upright.

"You did?" said Headwire a little surprised. He had looked up to Dante and his abilities since he had heard he was onboard as an Arti runner. When and if Mercs saw battle in a traditional way, between two Mining Corps, then they organised themselves in three distinct areas. These were Defence, Midfield and Attack. The Four battled in Midfield and as such Headwire had never attacked the enemy base. This was the job of designated attackers and although other Mercs could do this there were those that made their living solely from attacking. Although they weren't rare most Merc forces only carried about two of them and in this base OSN had hired Dante and his attacking partner Knight.

As Headwire had begun to learn about Rangers and the frontier laws of battle he began to hear stories of great attackers and began to admire their ability to take Artifacts from often heavily defended enemy bases.

Dante continued "You've got natural ability, its easy to see when your duelling and in the past when we have duelled."

"Ha, I haven't managed to get more then a few rounds off you in those duels yet."

"As you say Head, *yet*, you're still young, still gaining experience. I'm gonna grab my kit see you in a sec." and with that Dante walked off to the Armoury.

"*I knew it*" Headwire thought to himself as he stood by the pillar watching the others assemble for their patrol. "I knew I had natural ability, its nice to hear someone acknowledge it for once"

. . .

The patrol set off on foot, in total there were four Mercs. Dante, having the most experience, had been given overall charge of them; they were Headwire, a Tech named Dio and a Gunner called Brock, all

wearing their classes red battle suits. The patrol took the well-worn path up to the left and away from the base. Generally day patrols would be out for six hours, passing through controlled areas and in this case along the borders separating the two Mining Corps, OSN and their rival JBC.

"Right lads, we'll trek for three miles West and up past the crater, then me and Headwire will go ahead and scout The Rocky Climbs where the borders meet, whilst the two of you take the path around and into the plains." As Dante spoke the team were giving nods of familiarity with the instructions, they had done this patrol route before and knew exactly what to do and expect.

"If all goes well we'll be taking a break in the shade at the end of the pass when you get there."

"Hmm, nice to know you'll be getting your rest." Brock joked to the laughter of the men. Dante was pleased everyone was relaxed; he knew his patrol would not meet any hostiles and he wasn't too worried about the formalities. He still felt the need to go through the basic instructions though; he was a soldier after all.

After an hour of walking along the track into the west the four men came to a fork in the path. Ahead it thinned dramatically and wound up and around the high rocks and hills of The Rocky Climbs. To the left it continued in much the same fashion as it had been since they had left the base. At this point Dante and Headwire said goodbye to their comrades and headed up the Climbs.

"See ya in about an hour and a half fellas." Dante said as they moved up the hill.

"Don't go too fast guys I'm gonna need a rest when I get there." Headwire called as he boost jumped up the first hill and disappeared behind a massive rock.

"I will monitor comms channel seven should you need us." Dante finished as Dio and Brock continued along the path. Then he continued after Headwire, walking up the path when it allowed and boost jumping when it didn't.

The Rocky Climbs were a series of hills made from sand and rock, at their tallest they were two hundred metres high. The Climb flattened out nearer the top and spread for a mile in each direction. Giant rocks covered the surface, some as much as five times the height of a Ranger and the two men had to spend a lot of time boosting over them and even dropping between them to walk when they got too high.

Headwire was boosting ahead of his current partner as he did on all his patrols, enjoying the freedom of the landscape and the opportunity to use the Ranger suit in the open air. He sprinted up to the side of a giant rock and pushed himself off the ground into it then pushed against the rock with his feet and launched himself off it in the other direction. At the same time he activated the boost unit on his back and flew high into the air and over even the highest rocks.

"Woot!" he yelled as he rose into the air.

"Don't break your ankles when you land those trick jumps Kid, I ain't carrying you back" Dante said with a laugh.

"Never happen" Headwire replied as he began to drop lightly to the earth. He looked around at the stretch of the Climbs. With the rays of the hot Suns shining off the sand he enjoyed quite a vista in the few seconds before he landed. Releasing the slight burst of energy that had recharged in his boosters before he hit the ground brought him lightly onto the rocks. With adrenalin running through his body Headwire began to think again of battling as a Ranger and the most challenging role of all.

"Hey Dante, what's it like attacking? You know in the enemy base, when you've got defenders blasting at you and turrets locking on?" Headwire had seen defensive layouts in his own forces base a few times and heard many stories from other Mercs.

"Ha, well it can sometimes get pretty hectic in there. To be honest though if the enemy base is full of turrets and force walls then we attackers need the midfield to step up the pressure on the enemy Generators."

"Yea fair enough, but you've still got to go in there and get an Arti out."

"Of course, well to be honest kid you rarely get time to think about what to do once you get in the base. These battles are so fast and the attacks sometimes need to be faster. That said there seem to be two schools of attack strategy. Speed is the most common one but some prefer to use stealth and confusion against the defenders."

"How?" enquired Headwire, clearly becoming very interested.

"Well I'm not big on it myself, these guys take all day to get into the node room because they don't push forward once they have made an opening."

"So you're a speed man?"

"That's right mate, the speed attack relies on teamwork and knowledge of the enemy bases and defensive set ups and when you have been doing it as long as me and Knight have there aren't many base layouts or defensive strategies we haven't seen. Once you're in the enemy base you can run into defenders at any time, and not just defenders you may meet midfielders or attackers that are heading out to the battle after respawning."

"So there's death at every turn?" Headwire said with a far away awe.

"Ha, well let's just say your average life expectancy once in the enemy base is normally less than ten seconds. That's why we move fast, head straight for the node; destroy some turrets on the way if they can't be avoided. Blow some mines, take down Force-walls and run through the node and out the quickest way possible."

"What about the defenders?"

"That's the whole point of the fast attack, you don't want to have to engage the defenders, usually they are either techs with their explosive shotguns or you meet a big ass Gunner who has no concerns about filling the whole node room with napalm. By the time they hear 'Artifact stolen' you wanna be halfway out of their base."

"Yea, I like that, too fast to be hit. How long have you and Knight been attacking partners?"

"About five years now. We were regulars in the Planetary Defence Force before this."

"So you guys must have no problem getting Artis out?"

"I wish that was the case, see you can never really be sure how tight the base defences will be and how good the defenders are."

"Yea but you guys must know what to expect when you get in there"

"True, most base constructions are built to similar specs, in accordance with the laws of course. So we do know what to expect with regards to likely spots for turrets and mines etc. Doesn't mean we can always get in and out though. On rare occasions we haven't been able to get into the node rooms for most or all of the battle."

"Really, so what happens then?"

"Well then you need support from the mid, maybe extra attackers but ideally you need to limit the enemies power supply. You know that the deployable defences are an enormous drain on the overall power supply and if there isn't enough energy they go off-line."

"Zekkari was an attacker wasn't he?" Headwire enquired.

"The first, or so they say. But his legend contains so many things, I'm sure they can't all be true." Dante began in reply.

Just then a broadcast came through from the base, active on all channels.

"All patrols this is OSN Technician Unit 683, we are going to be taking the Deployment points off-line for some routine maintenance. Re-spawning will not be possible for approximately twenty minutes. All caution to be taken during this time."

In episode 5 of 8 WAYS TO LOSE...

"Headwire? Head? Can you read me?"

Has the young Headwire's carefree attitude landed him in trouble?

"One hundred yards ahead, on the very top of the Border fence sat a blue Ranger. He was balanced perfectly in a crouch, his toes on the wire. The Ranger had his sniper scope up to his eye and was looking through, pointing his rifle directly at Headwire..."