

LASTChancePUBLICATIONS

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written

by

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episode 18

In Episode 17...

"Kisama baka yaro! You've cost us the planet!"

Headwire failed to get the last Artifact registered and now OSN must leave the planet..

Headwire sat at the usual table in the mess hall; he was the only one in the room besides the orderlies. He wasn't surprised; the Miners would all be hearing the news about now. The news that the base needed to be shut down and they would be leaving the planet. The base was already running on back up generators to power the essentials, Headwire couldn't see any difference in the power output, all the lights were on and the doors and lifts all worked as normal. He knew though that the power hungry equipment, the mining machines were all shut down by now, there was not enough power to support them all and there was no need to mine anymore.

When a Mining Corp registered all four of the planets alien artifacts they immediately gained control over the planets geomagnetic energy. This included not just the Generators that had been hooked up to it but also the Seishou in the air and the planet not hooked up. There was no need for Generators, they simply connected everything up to the Artifact Node and this would give them all the power they needed. Once all four Artifacts were registered they could not be removed from the Node and the frontier mining laws forbade anyone from attacking and taking over the node.

Even in the short time after the battle Headwire didn't doubt that JBC's small on-planet base had announced its victory to its HQ which was already preparing to send additional base construction units and thousands of colonists and miners to begin populating the planet. This was certainly the most lucrative business victory a Mining Corp could hope for Head thought, and he had let JBC win it. It took about twenty four hours for all the Seishou to come under their control, OSN's generators would allow them to prepare for leaving the planet for about two days, but the Mercs that were simply contracted for this planet, including The Four, would probably be long gone before then.

Headwire looked down at his food feeling thoroughly disappointed with himself. Despite what others had said he couldn't believe that he had done the wrong thing when he decided to attack, apart from disobeying orders, for which Chance was sure to discipline him. Chance was at this moment having to explain Heads actions to McGregor.

Head didn't believe that they would have won the battle if he had followed those orders and given up the ground he and Kaio had gained. If Jago hadn't dropped and they hadn't gone in one man short from the beginning they would have had a better chance. No, Headwire didn't blame himself for OSN's loss because he attacked instead of defending; he blamed himself for the loss because he couldn't get the Artifact back to their Node and keep them in the battle.

Thinking about how he had let down The Four made him feel sick, those guys had always stuck with him but then he had never done anything as bad as he did today. He began to think that maybe he didn't belong in The Four. Maybe he should head out on his own, where only he would be responsible for his actions; perhaps he could make a name for himself as an attacker. Dante's words from the argument in the Deployment room came back to him.

"Cage, by the grace of Zekkari, this Kid got an Arti out from a node room packed with defences, on his first try. When Knight and me couldn't even get in the damn base..."

Head tried to force a smile; he had managed a great feat. He started to remember how he had felt during his attack. His heart had beaten so hard in his chest he thought it might explode out.

"This is it Head" He had said to himself *"When you go there's no stopping"*. His heart thudded against his chest again and his head began to ache. He could feel the blood flowing in his veins.

That was amazing Head thought, but not as amazing as what had happened next. Headwire replayed the scene in his mind.

Just then something came over Headwire, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and the air around him seemed to grow with static energy. His head began to ache even more and he closed his eyes. He allowed this strange feeling to envelop him; he could feel a current of energy flowing around him and through the air. He opened his eyes.

"I can feel the defences" He said in realisation.

He had been able to feel the location of the defences, the Turrets, the Landmines, the force-walls and even the trip-mines. He had filled the room with smoke and taken the defences apart then rushed in and grabbed an Arti. He felt adrenaline begin to flow through him just remembering the event. He was amazed at how good it felt. He wanted to be an attacker now more than ever.

Then he remembered how it had all ended and his face changed to a sullen look once more, the feeling of adrenaline left his body as quickly as it had surfaced. Headwire didn't want to leave The Four, he would miss them a lot he knew. Chance, he considered, was like a father to him, always there providing sturdy support. Silver was a genuine friend and Headwire honestly believed that the big Gunner liked having him around.

Then he considered Kaio, his thoughts turned sour almost immediately. Kaio had never shown Head any sign that he was pleased with his training results, he had simply pointed out Head's mistakes and failings. Would he ever be good enough for Kaio, he doubted it. Kaio was boring and old fashioned, he lacked flair and desire. He never expressed any joy from what he did and he never wanted to challenge himself. Headwire wondered if Kaio had ever taken a risk in his whole life.

At that thought Headwire remembered one risk that he knew Kaio had taken. He had convinced Chance to recruit him into The Four, with no knowledge of his abilities and no guarantees that Headwire could be of any use as a Ranger. For the first time since joining The Four Headwire wondered why Kaio had recruited him. They had only just met, but Kaio seemed to be, very interested to meet him, Kaio had personally taken on the responsibility of training him.

Perhaps there were other sides to Kaio that Headwire just hadn't noticed. He began to remember events from the battle just lost.

Kaio had taken out Crying, the sniper in the window of the enemy base with a single shot. He remembered his own words.

"Hey! You only hit him once! Did you shoot him in that instant kill spot? Can you aim for that?! Hey, c'mon Kaio is that what happened?" Kaio stopped at the ridge of the cliff and looked back at the anxious Headwire

"Perhaps" he said, then he jumped down the other side of the cliff out of site.

Perhaps? Headwire had spoken about the instant kill shot to Kaio many times and he had never hinted that it even existed let alone that he could aim for it. Then Headwire remembered later instances in the battle. He was sitting in their base and Kaio had arrived, carrying an Artifact, that had surprised Headwire to say the least but what happened next had surprised him even more. He had explained to Kaio how he had got the Artifact out then about his strange senses and his feeling of sickness..

"I could feel where the defenses were Kaio. I didn't need to see them, I...I don't know how" Headwire looked up at Kaio.

"Aenbiki" Kaio muttered

"What did you say?" asked Headwire

"Don't worry about that now. Do you still feel weak?"

"Yes" Headwire answered.

Headwire watched as Kaio placed his hands together, crossed his legs and bowed his head. Headwire felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up again and the air become denser and electrical.

"What...what the hell is going on!" he shouted. Kaio placed one hand on the stone platform they were

sitting on and he reached toward Headwire with the other.

The energy building in air seemed to pull Headwire towards Kaio's hand. Kaio's finger tips were a few centimeters from Headwire's battle helmet when there was a sudden sharp jolt to Head's body.

"Ow!" he shouted in reaction

Then the air was clear and the hairs on his neck lay flat. Kaio opened his eyes and raised his head.

There was definitely a lot that Kaio had to explain. He had seen many different sides to Kaio in just a few hours, more than in the whole year he had known him. Headwire's most recent memory of Kaio's support came to his mind.

"We are still fighting outside our base. You two have gotta get out 'a there" said Chance

"Roger that, over and out" replied Kaio.

At that moment the garage door opened behind them and the sniper from earlier came running in with a tech. Too the front another Jugg came rumbling round the corner and the two techs returned.

Kaio looked at Headwire

"Go" He said.

"What?" said Headwire

"Smoke the ranger behind us and get out through the door. I'll keep them busy here."

"We can make it out together" Headwire said

"Negative, were both on low health and low ammo. We can't win a fight and if we both disengage they will cap us both. Now, fire your smoke behind us."

Kaio launched a smoke grenade down the corridor towards the exit. Headwire reluctantly followed suit. The oncoming tech and ranger were covered in the dense smoke which filled the corridor.

"Now! Head, go!"

Headwire began to question his relationship with Kaio. Did Kaio care for Headwire a lot more than he let on? Did Headwire care for Kaio more than he believed. He considered this for a while, then said to himself with absolute surprise.

"I will miss Kaio most of all."



Headwire's solitude was suddenly broken by a shout from across the Hall.

"That's him" Headwire looked up to see six men walking over to his table. Their looks were grim and angry. He recognised two of them as Cage and Dio, the other four he didn't, probably miners judging by their large builds.

They reached his table, Headwire didn't rise but he did meet their gazes.

"You're Headwire?" one of the miners asked threateningly.

"Yep" Head replied with deliberate disinterest.

"Well you cost us our jobs!" another miner threw in. Headwire looked at him for a second, then he

returned to his meal.

The Miner began "Because of you we gotta give up this planet and search for another one. You have any idea how long it might take before we are re-located. The company don't pay ya till your mining for 'em."

"We got families to provide for!" Another one added. Headwire continued to eat his meal and avoid eye contact with the group. He was determined not to offer resistance or allow himself to get angry and it was clear to him that they were not interested in a discussion.

"Hey we're talking at you, you stupid kid!" With a swipe the man threw Headwire's tray of food across the hall. Headwire stayed motionless looking down at where his food had been.

"That's right, he's a kid." Cage began with spite "Shouldn't even have been on the battlefield. He's a disgrace to the Ranger class." Something inside Head snapped upon hearing those words.

"That's it!" Headwire shouted as anger and hurt filled him. He jumped up from his chair and took a step onto the table and launched himself towards Cage.

Cage couldn't react quick enough and Headwire's clenched fist connected squarely with his nose. It crunched in and exploded with blood as Headwire fell into him pushing both of them to the floor.

The miners now began to react. The nearest one dealt a strong kick to Headwire's ribs. Then Dio and a Miner bent in and pulled him off Cage.

As he rose head struggled with their grips on his arms. He leaned forward and delivered a swift kick behind him straight into a Miner's jaw, lifting him his feet and sending him flying backwards into a table. Head jerked his arms free from Dio's grip and dealt four swift punches to his chest before swinging into a full round-house kick which floored Dio and two of the Miners closing in.

Headwire stood in the middle of the circle the group had created watching as they rose to their feet. He adopted his martial arts stance and kept himself focused. The six men rose and circled him wearily, although he did not show it Headwire was concerned. He had never fought this many men with his martial art and certainly not men the size of these Miners.

Well if I'm gonna go down I'm gonna make them remember this fight for a while, he thought.

The nearest Miner launched at him with a right hook, Headwire ducked under the swing and rose sending an uppercut into the man's jaw. His hand burnt with pain as it connected with solid bone but the man was still knocked backwards. A fist thudded into Head's back and he arched in pain, still managing to deal a swift reverse kick into the miner that dealt the punch, who went down hard. Then a punch came in from the front, straight into Headwire's ribs, he doubled over in pain as another punch connected squarely with his face. He was just able to see Cage's angry grimace as he fell to the floor and was immediately set upon by the men.

Headwire braced himself, curling into a tight ball with his arms up to protect his face as angry kicks and punches came in at him.

"You've broken Jared's jaw you bastard!" came in with one of the kicks. The other insults blurred into one as blackness came over and Headwire began to lose consciousness. Then he heard a series of heavy thumps and silence.

Tentatively Headwire lowered his arms and opened his eyes, ready to brace should he see another kick coming in. Instead he saw that all his assailants had been knocked to the floor. Standing next to him, hands in his pockets was Kaio. He looked down at Headwire.

Head tried to stand but a sharp pain in his chest, followed by another in his back forced him to forget the idea. He closed his eyes as a wave of black slipped over him.



Chance maneuvered the small craft out of the spaceport hanger and up into the planet's atmosphere, where they joined the hundreds of other small ships that were completing the same operation. Although OSN had huge transport ships preparing to load up the thousands of miners and their families and those Mercs that were on long-term contracts with OSN, there were still hundreds of people hired simply to provide a service on this planet whilst OSN mined for the Artifacts and it was these contractors that filled the sky as they left the planet in search of a new employer.

The cockpit of the ship was reasonably large for a light craft. There were two pilots' seats, at the front, Chance was sitting in one and Silver was sitting to his left in the other chair. Both men were strapped in and sitting upright while the ship pushed through the atmosphere. Behind them the cabin was long and lined with three seats on either side, Kaio sat strapped into the nearest one. The lighting was subdued and the grey and black metal of the inside of the compartment did little to remove the brooding darkness from the corners where the light was weakest.

Chance and Silver had taken possession of the ship back when they had decided to set out on their own as Mercs. Before that it had belonged to their Mercenary Captain Alexander, who had commanded a team of three other Mercs before he recruited Chance and Silver. Unbeknown to them Captain Alexander had taken to being a Merc after committing a series of major crimes against a confederation of planets in the Stellar system. They enjoyed a two year career with the team before Alexander's past had caught up with him and he and his team were ambushed by military forces and bounty hunters. In the battle that followed the entire team were killed or captured, Captain Alexander himself was shot dead by one of the bounty hunters. The entire team that is except for Silver and Chance who managed to escape after fighting bravely to save their comrades.

Chance had learnt to pilot small crafts during his military service and was able to launch Alexander's ship and flee from the slower military forces; given that there was no bounty on their heads they were not perused. The two men made the decision to continue the Mercenary life, now simply as a two man team. The ship had served them well in the following four years and Chance hoped it would continue to do so for many years yet.

Silver looked across at Chance.

"So you decided where we're heading yet?" he asked

"Well, I figured that the Omega system would probably be a good place to find some work. I've heard of a couple of Corps that are looking for Mercs for various contracts. Dante said him and Knight were probably gonna head over to the Menas quadrant as there's some new planet landings taking place. So we've got options, that's for sure." Chance completed the atmosphere pass and the ship broke free of the planets gravity pull and cruised gently into space. The men unbuckled and Chance flicked on the autopilot, which would guide them safely into a transport lane. He lent back in his chair and put his feet up on the dashboard.

"We've got plenty of supplies so I'm not too concerned if it takes us a while. What do you think about just taking a break from all that formal shit for awhile, just cruising around while we find a good contract?" He asked

"Yea I'm all for that Chancie" Silver said "This old girl's not too cramped and be nice to kick back for awhile." Chance smiled in reply then looked back at Kaio

"What about you Kaio?"

Kaio had gone from his sitting position to lying stretched out on all three of the seats with his hands behind his head. It was obvious he was in deep thought and there was a pause before he answered.

"A break would be very good for young Headwire. There is a lot I wish to share with him and there is a lot he needs to think about."

"You haven't had a chance to tell us what happened in the base during the battle Kaio, how did Headwire get an Artifact out? Was the node room empty or something?" Chance enquired. Kaio sat up to speak to his two partners as they swiveled their chairs around to face him properly.

"The node room was far from empty, when I passed through their after him I counted maybe eight destroyed turrets and a couple of force-walls. I also met one defender so I would have to assume that he met one if not two during his attack."

"Must have been strange for you, taking an Artifact again?" asked Silver

"Yes. Anyway when I found him he told me how he had done it. Taken all the turrets down and got an Arti out himself."

"Well how?" asked Chance

"Aenbiki" Kaio replied

"Aenbiki? He has this ability?" Chance replied shocked

"It would seem so Captain. The extrasensory perception to feel, through the geomagnetic energy, the Seishou, in the air, where objects emitting or using the same energy are. That said he still had to confront them and his victory here shows that he has immense skill as an attacking Ranger."

"Surely he cannot control this ability?"

"No he cannot, this was clearly the first time he had ever experienced it. No doubt it was awakened by the adrenaline rush of attacking and the amount of Seishou in the air within the node room, perhaps even heightened by his proximity to the Artifact node itself whilst it contained two Artifacts. To be honest no-one claims to understand the strange phenomenon that some experience because of the Seishou."

"No, of course." Began Chance "Scientists have been studying the effects of prolonged exposure to Seishou for decades, well since it was discovered. Some people are just attuned to these things I guess. Personally I've never felt any kind of ESP ability within me."

"Me either, guess were just two stupid ass oldies" laughed Silver

"Kaio do you think the kid can become an attacker?"

"Chance I think he could become a great attacker. If..."

"If what?" asked Chance

"If he would learn to focus and allow me to help him grow. Despite my efforts I cannot find a way to communicate with the boy."

"Give it time mate; perhaps his recent experiences will have sobered him a little." Said Chance

All three men turned towards the doorway as they heard footsteps on the metal staircase at the end of the next room. Headwire's legs became visible as he walked down the stairs. He walked across the room and stood in the doorway. He looked tired and the bruising on his face was still very obvious. He gently rested his weight on the door frame, flinching as he felt pain from his ribs.

"You should be resting in Medi-bay, Head" Chance said

"What did McGregor say?" Head asked

"He said that we did a fine job in our three and a half months with them and that he was sorry to lose us."

"So he didn't wanna keep us on"

"No and that's fine with me"

"What about the money?"

"Well truth is kid you disobeyed orders and for that we were fined fifty percent of our wages." Headwire's face dropped.

"I'm sorry guys, I didn't mean for that to happen" Headwire apologised, Chance got up and walked over to him.

"Hey Head, don't worry about it ok, we're in this together. I speak for all of us when I say we don't blame you for losing the battle."

"You don't?"

"Not at all. I am disappointed that you ignored *my* orders though, but I know you're not gonna do that again. So we're all good, right guys?" He asked the other two

"Absolutely" said Kaio

"You bet" replied Silver "You got guts kid going in their like that and taking an Arti. Wish the rest of those Mercs had your balls." Headwire smiled

"He'd give ya a pat on the shoulder kid but he's scared that's broken too." Chance said to the laughter of the men.

"So where are The Four heading now then?" asked Headwire with a smile.



Headwire sat in the Medi-bay, dangling his legs over the edge of the bench as a Medi unit scanned his chest and ribs. He raised his left arm as the unit moved its blue laser up and down and surveyed the state of Head's cracked rib and muscle damaged. A high pitched beep let Headwire know the scan was complete and everything was repairing as it should. Head lowered his arm but remained seated; he lowered his gaze to the floor.

He began to remember the fight and how he had busted Cage's nose; anger began to well up inside him as he remembered why he had hit him.

"That's right, he's a kid. Shouldn't even have been on the battlefield. He's a disgrace to the Ranger class."

"What's the read out say kid?" Headwire looked up and saw Kaio standing in the door way. His thoughts returned to the present.

"Oh, It's all healing up nicely."

"Was a nasty beating you took there Head." Kaio said.

"Not as nasty as the beating you gave them. Wanna explain that? I looked up and they were all on their asses"

"I might ask you the same question Head" Kaio began as he walked into the room and sat on the bench next to him. "How long have you been practicing Sude Sentou?"

Headwire looked down at his feet a little embarrassed "Since I was a young kid at home with only my mother. I picked it up from movies and books."

"Well then you have done exceptionally well to reach the standard you have without a tutor." Kaio drifted away as he spoke, his words seemed to come to him as he recalled memories from what seemed like a life time ago. "I trained in a variation of Shintaijutsu, an ancient Sude Sentou style. It encompasses many techniques but also relies on the spirit of the student, in translation from the old tongue it can mean movement, the course of ones actions and even ultimate truth. I trained with a sensei on my home planet as a necessity of my employment" Kaio paused for a long time, deep in the past. Headwire didn't interrupt, he had known Kaio for over a year and he had never heard him speak of his past at all. Often he had wondered about his partner's history but every time he had brought it up he was met with silence. He continued to remain silent as he waited and hoped for Kaio to continue.

"When that time of my life came to an.....end." Kaio continued with carefully chosen words "I trained on my own, much like yourself and began to modify and develop my fighting style to something beyond what it was." Seeing that Kaio had finished, Headwire decided to ask one of the many questions he was bursting to ask.

"I've never seen you train." He said

"I made a vow to a.....dear friend that I would not use or practice martial arts again. The mess hall was the first time in seven years that I have used any form of Martial Art."

"Why?" Headwire asked. Kaio looked at him for what seemed like a very long time.

"Would you like me to train you Headwire?" Kaio finally said as he stood up.

"You mean train me in your Sude Sentou?" Head replied as he also stood up.

"That is exactly what I mean"

"That would be..fantastic Kaio. Lets start right now" Headwire was clearly brimming with enthusiasm.

Kaio smiled "Well, ok. If you are able to, assume your basic stance" Headwire hastily got up from his sitting position and positioned himself with one leg back and one forward and the same with his arms, fists clenched and held firm, one against his side and one out in front. Kaio observed it "Your stance is very solid, like your fighting style I observed in the Mess Hall. Your technique was not far from perfect but you lack rhythm."

"Rhythm?" Head asked reverting to a normal standing posture.

"Yes, it is essential to feel the rhythm in your movements and to express this as you fight. You must not be rigid in the face of an attack but move with it and even use its force in your attack." Kaio assumed his basic stance and saw that for the first time in a long while he had Headwire's full attention.



After the training session Kaio and Headwire sat together drinking revitalising fluids.

"Kaio, what happened to me during the battle? You called it something, Ao..nbiky?"

"Aenbiki" Kaio corrected "An extrasensory ability."

"Extrasensory?"

"Yes, like a sixth sense. Throughout history a small number of people have been born with ESP abilities, some could see a little into the future, some could sense things around them that they could not see, others could read minds. These people were always very few and far between and their abilities were very limited, often they were ridiculed. In the past fifty years though, since mans discovery and contact with Seishou, a large percentage of children have been born with ESP abilities. There is a school of thought that suggests that due to the age of the human race this is simply the next step in evolution. There is another, more widely accepted idea that exposure to Seishou awakens these powers."

"What do you think?"

"Personally, I think it is a little of both."

"Only a small amount of the human brain is used for the majority of our lives, It has always been thought that the dormant parts of our brain were the doorways to ESP."

"Seishou is a geo-magnetic energy source as best as we can understand, although it's name in the old tongue translates to Spirit and it seems that those with ESP abilities have their power in some way linked to it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, your ESP ability, Aenbiki as it is known, is the extrasensory perception of mechanical objects that emit or use this ENERGY. When you were in the Node room you were surrounded by defences that used the geo-magnetic energy and most of all the Artifact Node itself, which contained two Artifacts. The Seishou in the air would have been extremely high."

"But I've been in those rooms before, in our team's base."

"Yes, but in this situation you were very nervous and exited. You described feeling a stronger heartbeat and an adrenalin rush; I suspect this is what triggered your ability. No one is sure, but there are a lot of people that can access ESP now and use it in different ways."

"Really? Do you know of any?"

"Well, I know of a few. I worked with a few people that were able to improve their dodging of incoming shots and such by focusing their ESP on foresight when they were on a planet that was emitting enough Seishou. It was limited but it worked for them. I suspect that Crying, the Ranger you met on Garden used ESP to sense where the mines were and that is how he got through no-mans land." Headwire nodded with understanding

"Then there are those like me who can use ESP to see what their opponent will do during a fight, again a limited foresight."

"You have ESP? Wow, do you use it and when and how?" Headwire asked anxiously

"Well, I have learnt to control it through meditation over many years. I can now focus it when and where I choose. I have used it before in battles but it his very limited, I can see perhaps less then a second into my opponent's future and see, for example which way he chooses to dodge. It is not always correct and I can not always take advantage of it but it has helped me in the past."

"So could I learn to control my ability through meditation?"

"It is not a method accepted by people as a way to control your ability but myself and my old partner spent many years meditating in an effort to control our body and mind better. I do believe it is what allowed me to control my ESP and it can help you, yes. Regardless of any ESP ability you may have meditation is something I would recommend you practice as a way of improving your skills as a Ranger and also your martial arts ability. There is talk of a group of Mercenaries that recruit only those who

have strong ESP abilities and they dedicate their time to the understanding, controlling and increasing of these powers through meditation.”

“Is this why you always meditate but never train?”

“Yes. You will remember this from our training when you began. Being a Ranger relies not just on the physical abilities of a person, it relies most heavily, of all the classes, on mental clarity. The sniper rifle is a weapon designed to be fired from a firm standing stance at an unmoving or slow moving target. We use it whilst dodging from side to side at a target doing just the same. If you hesitate *or* rush for even a micro second your shot will miss and you will probably be in a re-spawn queue before you know it. The mind is your best weapon, train it, learn to control it through focus and you can achieve anything.”

“Like hit the four percent instant kill spot on a Ranger from one hundred yards away” Headwire implied knowingly.

“Exactly” replied Kaio with a smile.

In episode 19 of 8 WAYS TO LOSE...

Two months have passed and The Four have been travelling through space onboard their small but comfortable vessel. Now they decide to find work and perhaps an attacking position for Headwire.

“P.O.T are offering a one battle contract for their base on Ildryan-II, the Class-G planet in Sector IV. Their recruiting Mercs in a rush because the battle lines have been drawn.”..