

LASTChancePUBLICATIONS

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written

by

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episode 20

In Episode 19...

"It's a pretty standard operation, but not your standard situation. A battle is already arranged as all four Arti's on this class-G planet have been recovered. Three to P.O.T, that's our contract and one, is with S.H.C.L."

There was no-one but landing crew to meet The Four when they landed in the spaceport on P.O.T's frontier mining base on Planet Ildryan-II. The men collected their things and were led down to the barracks by an orderly. The rooms they were given were a lot smaller than those they had enjoyed with O.S.N on their previous contract. It was two to a room with bunk-beds and a room that almost resembled a jail cell. Despite Headwire's incessant complaining and comments that he would rather sleep on their ship the orderly would only mumble about having too many Mercs in the base at the moment.

The men had only a few minutes to get acquainted with their new surroundings before they were led to the briefing room. In spite of their disappointing quarters The Four were impressed with the base as they were led swiftly through it to reach the Briefing room.

P.O.T had erected this base only within the last two years but it was clearly built to more expensive specifications than on-planet bases built by smaller, less financially resourceful Mining Corps. The men passed by a large Gym area, which for Silver was only surpassed when they walked above an enormous garage area. Silver began wishing that their time here might not end so quickly.

They finally reached the briefing room and were shown the door at which point the orderly hurried off, clearly too busy to open it for them. Chance took the handle and opened the door. Inside what was a large briefing room by any standards there were six other Mercs seated and a Mercenary General standing at the far end of the room in front of a hologram projection table. To his sides were numerous intelligence officers and other high ranking Mercenaries and advisors. As the door opened everyone turned to face them.

"Ah, Captain Chance. You have arrived at last, then our numbers are complete."

"Greetings, General Murdoc" Chance said as he led his men into the room and made his way to a row of chairs. Those that recognised The Four gave nods as greetings; among them was Pro-Pain, sitting towards the front with a large smile on his face.

"Right Gentlemen, let's get on with this shall we." Began Murdoc. He engaged the table in front of him and a 3D hologrammatic image of Ildryan-II's terrain shone into life. The two bases were built opposite each other into a large mountainous region which stretched onto a sand covered beach, ending in sea.

"This is the battlefield. Dubbed Sunset Beach by most of our boys. Below the base is a large cave in which lie one Deploy-point and one Generator. The close confines of this location will require Gunners and Techs. The cave provides easy access to each base so you will make it your priority Captains to have this location firmly secured from the enemy and attack from here."

"The second area of tactical importance is the ground level which is a largely open area, Rangers will be needed here. There are two Generators here but only one Deployment point, take it and you control the top. This Deploy is to be the first target of those taking this route."

"We have intelligence that the enemy force is made up of S.H.C.Ls' weaker permanent contract Mercs and given that we hold three Artifacts to their one we do not anticipate a difficult time of it out there. We have lost a large percentage of our regulars but have been fortunate enough to recruit some first class replacements, including Captain Chance and his team and I have little doubt that all of you will be able to operate smoothly together. "

The Briefing continued for thirty minutes more before General Murdoc concluded.

"Right any questions or other business?" Murdoc asked as he stepped back from the table. The only arm that raised belonged to Chance, Murdoc nodded for him to speak.

"General, do you know what exactly caused the illness which has incapacitated six of your Mercs?"

"I am advised that at this time we can not confirm, but we suspect food poisoning. All of those affected chose the same meal."

"Any idea why S.H.C.L would allow you time to replace them?" Chance continued

"Well, because they knew they could not win this battle regardless they were simply being sporting Captain Chance. Most decent of them to do so, don't you think."

"Yes indeed." He replied with a subtle degree of cynicism "Very decent."



After the briefing the Mercenaries went to the Mess Hall, of which there were only two in this on-planet base. One large one for the workers and one much smaller one for the Mercs.

The Four sat at a table designed for eight, it had one row of four chairs on one side and another row of four chairs opposite. Chance and Silver sat in the middle with Kaio one side and Headwire the other. Opposite them they were joined by Pro-Pain and two Mercs from P.O.T.

One was Mercenary Captain Hade, a Tech and the other was a defensive Gunner called Firkin. Chance and Silver knew these two quite well; they had served together on several contracts, some before they had signed permanent contracts with P.O.T and some since. Hade was a larger man than Chance, taller and broader and had short grey hair, his face showed his extra years. Firkin, unlike most Gunners was slight of frame although still considerably strong for his build. He had fair hair and a pleasant demeanour about him despite his years of service.

"So the famous Four" said Hade with a smile "How have you been gentlemen and what marvellous adventures have you been on since we last met"

"You talk like we're space cowboys. Just Merc work old buddy, you've probably done more interesting things than us. Although I can see how someone on a permanent contract would long to hear stories of the outside universe told by those carefree planet contractors like us." Chance responded with a cynicism just delicate enough to get some laughs.

"You are becoming the minority Chance, as you probably know. Corps that can afford it are starting to take on Mercs for the full length of time the law allows and then simply resigning them towards the end. It is a sensible thing in my mind, gives us rogues something like a career path can you believe."

"Yea, we've noticed less and less Planet contracts being offered these last few years" said Silver

"Well I hope you guys stay as, how did you say, space cowboys?" said firkin "Otherwise we might never see you again."

"Aww, doesn't that make it all worth while" joked Pro-Pain

As the men talked Headwire leant in towards Pro.

"Pro-Pain, where is the other attacker that POT hired for this battle?" asked Head.

Pro leant back and glanced around the Hall then he returned to his conversation with Headwire.

"He's over there with Bokis and Sake. Long black hair." Headwire followed Pro's gaze to three Mercs sitting a few tables away. Two sitting together were of a mid-twenties age both about the same medium build although one was slightly slimmer. Opposite them was a young man of slim build with fairly lengthy black hair.

"That's him? He looks even younger than *me!*" Headwire said in surprise

"Ha, yea but he's got a good rep apparently."

"Hmm, well I'll go find out right now." Headwire got up and was about to walk over to the table the three Mercs were sitting at when he saw the black haired man get up, excuse himself and leave the Mess Hall hurriedly. "Damn" He said as he sat back down.

The two men that had been sitting with him walked over and pulled up some chairs to join the other Mercs.

"Greetings Bokis" said Kaio as he saw him sit down The men all exchanged greetings then Pro-Pain called form across the table.

"So Bokis, you haven't forgotten to send your entry form off for The Quick and The Dead have you." All but Headwire gave a little chuckle.

The Quick and The Dead was a Mercenary duelling tournament that took place each year. It was run by a company of ex Mercs and sponsored by some of the wealthiest Mining Corporations. In short it comprised several knock out competitions namely 1v1 and 2v2 duelling and drew Mercenaries from all the frontier systems. The prize money was large and so was the exposure and fame for winning. Most Mercs were offered very lucrative permanent contracts by Corps if they won, not all Mercs accepted of course.

"I think they might forgive me if it's late" Bokis joked.

"Wait a minute, Bokis? *The* Bokis?" Headwire asked

"Yep" answered Sake for his team-mate "the current 1v1 Ranger Duelling Champion. The best of the best it has to be said."

"Give it a rest Sake" said an embarrassed Bokis

"Well it's the truth isn't it?" Replied Sake.

"Wow I'm pleased to meet ya in person; I've watched some of your matches recorded. Amazing accuracy and movement." Said Head clearly in awe.

"Cheers" said Bokis. He had won the 1v1 tourney twice in four years and many had tipped him to successfully defend his title last year if the entire Tournament hadn't been cancelled because of a terrorist threat to blow up the planet it was being hosted on. Organisers accepted the blame for choosing to host it on a planet that was involved in a deep-space war at the time.

"Your name is also familiar to me Headwire" Bokis said

"Really?" replied Headwire quite surprised.

"Yes, I heard about what you did on your last contract, for OSN."

"Oh." Headwire said concerned that Cage's derogatory account of events had spread this far out, but he was pleasantly surprised when Bokis continued.

"Ran into an old friend, Dante. He told me that you got an Arti out of a locked down Node room on your first attempt." Headwire could only smile from ear to ear with embarrassment and relief.

"The tournament is quite soon isn't it? I'd completely forgotten about it to be honest." Said Chance genuinely.

"Prelims start in about a month" said Sake

"Don't give us that Chancie I bet you polish your trophy every night" Pro laughed

"Chance and Silver, the deadliest Gunner and Tech combo the tourney has ever seen." Hade said with a smile across at the two Mercs. Chance and Silver had been entering the tournament's mixed class 2v2 tourney since it began, eight years ago. They had finished runners up in their first effort, four years ago, but managed to win it the next time round and successfully defend it the following year. Despite many lucrative contract offers Chance had never signed them up to anything permanent.

Just then one of P.O.T's intelligence officers entered the hall and approached Hade, who leant back on his chair whilst the young officer reported something to him. The Four watched as he nodded and leant back in to the table.

"SHCL have brought in some permanents." He said grimly. A general murmur kicked up around the table.

"So we'll be seeing Tyrant then" said Firkin

"And Rage" added Sake

"Slow and Asuka?" Pro-Pain ventured, hoping someone would say contrary

"No doubt." Confirmed Chance "Clearly they have changed their view on how important this planet is to them." S.H.C.Ls' Slow and Asuka were two defenders on permanent contract and were considered to be the best in the business by most Mercs. "Them giving you time to recruit doesn't seem so *"decent"* after all" Chance finished, recalling Murdoc's answer to his earlier question.

With his seat back against the wall and his arms behind his head Kaio said "Raises the question as to how exactly your men became sick". A sullen look appeared on the faces at the table.



There were four hours to go until the battle and Headwire had decided to go down to the on-site training facility to get some practice in before the rest of the Mercs. His footsteps rang out as he walked along the metal gangway through the Barracks and out past the Gym.

The base layout was a simple Octagon design at ground level with a large sky rise in the middle. This comprised the Barracks on lower ground then housed the numerous Miners and their families in the levels that rose up from there.

Head had been told by Captain Hade that he simply had to follow the corridors around until he saw the sign for the Training Facilities. Seemed simple when he set off and sure enough after ten or so minutes walking the sign came into view.

Headwire wasn't expecting any other Mercs to be training this early. The majority he had seen and spoken to, including his three partners, were all enjoying some R&R in the various areas designed for it in the base. So he was very surprised when he heard rifle fire coming from the target range as he entered the facility.

These facilities were surprising limited, Headwire thought as he looked around. There was a standard one v one duelling room and a larger room for any number of Mercs to train together and there was also a target practice zone. Unlike other bases Head had been in though, there was no Vehicle training, no tactics hall and no two v two duelling room. Not that he used those other rooms ever, he thought, but it was nice to have the option.

He proceeded to the target practice zone where he could still hear sniper rifle fire sounding at regular intervals. He entered the spectator area and looked through the window. He was looking down onto a large hall split into six lanes; each lane contained a series of hologramatic targets that would appear at differing intervals and locations throughout a session. The lanes were separated by transparent screens which allowed any Mercs using the lanes to see those training next to them.

In the middle lane Headwire could see the source of the rifle fire. A Ranger was dodging and firing at the various targets as they appeared. Although Head could not see who the Ranger was because of the fully enclosing suit he didn't need to. He knew there were only five Rangers in this base that weren't sick and he knew where Kaio, Bokis and Pro-Pain were at this time. The Ranger he saw currently was the young attacker P.O.T had recruited, the one that was going to be attacking during the coming battle instead of Headwire.

Headwire watched for a few minutes as the Ranger practiced. His movement was excellent but his accuracy was not too impressive he thought.

"I think I'll go and show him how it's done" Head said. He headed down to the training area, rushed through the armoury where he quickly fitted on his Ranger suit and entered the training zone. Choosing the lane to the left of the other Ranger, Headwire initiated the program. As an automated voice ran through the guidelines of what was to come Headwire watched the Ranger intently through the screen. Upon noticing him the other Ranger looked over and after a brief pause waved. Headwire waved back with a sarcastic grin on his face, hidden by his helmet.

The set up of the lanes also included a display board for each at the end and raised high enough that all of the lanes had a view of the others. The display board showed a running total of how many targets had been available, how many had been hit, how many missed and lastly it showed how long remained in the current round. Headwire decided to wait until he saw that the other Ranger began a new round before he commenced his. As such both Rangers began their round at the same time with a score of zero. These facts were not missed by the other Ranger.

"Round one" the automated voice announced over the suits internal Comms, each round was thirty seconds long. "Begin". Immediately both Rangers began dodging from left to right with their rifles aimed in front of them. Although dodging was not a pre-requisite for this training, no Ranger worth his suit would stand still and fire.

The hologramatic targets were set to display randomly and as such Headwire was the first to see one. He snapped off a shot, straight through its centre scoring a hit, swiftly followed by a second which appeared at the back of the lane

Two - Zero the scoreboard showed.

Then the other Ranger got his first target and scored a hit. Headwire scored a hit, then the Ranger, then the Ranger again. Then fortune went to the other Ranger, four targets appeared one after the other, some moving some stationary, the Ranger hit them all as he dodged from left to right.

Three - Seven read the display with twenty three seconds remaining.

Headwire started to get a bit nervous; he stared straight ahead with his finger tight on the trigger. A target appeared he shot and missed, sickness gripped him for a split second.

"Better step up to the challenge Head" he told himself as the Ranger scored another hit.

Then four targets appeared in Headwire's lane, simultaneously. One at the far back, one up close on the left and two moving from opposite sides quite fast towards each other. Headwire dodged right and hit the one at the back dead centre, he quickly snapped another shot off at the nearest target then dodged to his left and snapped two reflex shots off at the moving targets just before they overlapped.

Seven - Eight the score read with sixteen seconds remaining.

Headwire was just considering how he had closed the gap when another target appeared for him and he claimed it. At the same time as his opponent missed his first target of the round.

Eight - Eight with fourteen seconds remaining

The seconds ticked away as both Rangers dodged from left to right with no targets showing for either of them. Ten seconds remained and Headwire began to feel the tension build, there wouldn't be many targets left and he mustn't miss any that appeared.

Then a target appeared for him and his opponent, with two rifle blasts sounding the scores changed to nine all. Then in rapid succession both Rangers scored three more hits.

Twelve - Twelve read the scores with four seconds remaining.

Both Rangers dodged, painfully watching the clock tick by, surely the next target would win. Whilst they both looked ahead ready to snap a shot off at any time both Rangers also had one eye on their opponents lane to see if they would get a target.

4.....3.....2.. still no targets, perhaps this would end a draw Headwire began to think, it better not because he wasn't satisfied that he had proved to the other Ranger that he was better yet.

Then just as the clock displayed one second remaining both Rangers saw a target appear in their opponent's lane. They frantically snapped off their shots, but their distraction and haste cost them. Headwire's shot past just to the right of the target and missed, at the same time the other Ranger's shot missed his target by a fraction to the left.

Twelve - Twelve read the final score

Simultaneously both Rangers threw their helmets off and marched up to the screen between them. The other Ranger's long black hair and young face now visible.

"That was my round, I only missed coz your target appeared and put me off!" shouted Headwire

"Totetsumonai! It was my round, *your* target put *me* off!" shouted back the young Ranger, his belief and anger matching Headwire's

"Face it, I won. Even my dodging was better then yours, how long have you been a Ranger, a week?" said Headwire beginning to vent his bitterness at not having an opportunity to attack.

"You call that dodging! I've been a Ranger long enough to win loads of battles for my employers."

"With that kind of accuracy you shouldn't be fighting battles. You couldn't hit a moving target!"

"With that kind of dodging you couldn't even *be* a moving target!"

Both young men stared at each other hard for a few seconds with unrelenting anger.

"I challenge you to a duel!" they both shouted simultaneously, followed swiftly by "I accept!"

"Fine" said Headwire as the two men walked out of the training room together. "Be back here in one hour I wanna get an audience to watch me beat you."

"Ha, I'll be here in sixty minutes and the audience will watch *me* beat *you*." As they exited the zone both men were fuming and eager to shoot the other one. Headwire walked away from the Ranger and towards the facilities main door.

"You just remember the name Headwire." He called back "I'm gonna be the greatest attacker ever" The other Ranger looked even angrier then before.

"That's my goal! So you better remember the name....Kaio!" Headwire stopped in his tracks and turned back to face the Ranger.

"Your name is Kaio?"

"Yea, remember it"

"I can't forget it, my partner and mentor is called Kaio!"

"What! Kaio? The legendary attacking Ranger?"

"Um, no he's not legendary and he is a midfield Ranger. Why did you choose that name?"

"In my home planets system, when I was a child, there was a legendary Merc attacking duo, Two-furious. They were famous beyond compare. It became my dream to be as good and as famous as them, so I named myself after the best one, Kaio. He was a master of the fast attack and I have trained in this style since I began."

"It is also my dream to be as good and as famous as any of the legendary attackers." Replied Headwire before he was interrupted.

"Headwire, there you are, thought you'd probably be training." Came a voice from over by the training zone entrance. Headwire looked over to see his partner Kaio walking towards him.

"Totetsumonai!" the other Ranger shouted "It's him, the attacking legend I took my name from" and he ran over to meet Kaio.

"What!" shouted Headwire "This is just my mentor, Kaio. Hey Kaio, tell him your not an attacking legend from some group called Two-Furious." Kaio stopped in his tracks

"I haven't heard that name in years"

"What? It's true, it can't be. I've known you for over a year and neither you, Chance or Silver have ever mentioned it." Headwire looked disbelieving at Kaio.

"Kaio! I am honoured to meet you in person." The young Ranger bowed and didn't raise his head. "I have made it my dream to someday be a legendary attacker like you. I have trained since I was a small boy and learnt everything I could about your amazing feats." Kaio looked down at the Ranger and collected his thoughts quickly.

"Arigatou" Kaio said with a slight bow "you have shown me great respect. Now I must speak to my partner Headwire in private, please excuse us."

"Of course" was the reply from the Ranger as he screamed inside *that idiot is your partner!* His face betrayed nothing as he watched them leave.



The men walked in silence the whole way back to their room in the Barracks. When they reached it Headwire simply went to the bench and sat down, his eyes on the floor. Kaio stood at the door way.

"Head, I'm sorry that I have kept my past secret from you. I know we have been together for a long time and it would come as a great shock to you that I have never spoken about these things." Kaio sat down next to Headwire, his mind was busy trying to think of how best to explain these things. Despite all the times he had imagined talking about his past he was still unprepared for this event.

Headwire looked at him, it was clear he was feeling hurt by the obvious lack of trust that Kaio had shown him.

"My father didn't think I was worth knowing, left before I was born. Am I not worthy of knowing about your past Kaio?" he said full of hurt.

"It's not that Head." Kaio paused.

"Well why?" Headwire asked with a touch of anger

"Some events in my past are difficult for me to even think about, despite my years of meditation in an effort to remove myself from the emotions." Headwire's face changed from disappointment to surprise and almost relief when he realised Kaio's true reasons for his lack of openness. Headwire immediately saw the flaw in Kaio's methods; it had been his for a time when he grew up.

"Why would you want to remove yourself from them, they are your memories. They are what makes you you, Kaio. I know I haven't been around as long as you but when I need to achieve something my memories give me the strength. I don't hide from my past, I know it may not be as troubled as yours but it is *my* past."

"I think of when the kids at school would beat on me because I didn't have a father then I think of how little my father must have thought of me to leave me like he did. That makes me want to prove him wrong; prove him wrong no matter what it takes." Headwire was visibly gritting his teeth and clenching his fists. His eyes showed anger and determination not the sad resignation that one would expect to see with memories of pain and regret.

Kaio felt something in him change; the strength Headwire had summoned to even speak of those pains impressed him beyond words. If Headwire could do that perhaps Kaio could come to terms with his scars from the past.

"You are wise beyond your years young Headwire." Said Kaio, Headwire looked pleased with himself.

"I was the second member in a two man attacking team we called Seishou-rei, although people dubbed us with many other names." Kaio began slowly as memories came to him from a time he had spent so long trying to hide from.

Kaio stood next to a man of the same height; they were wearing Ranger suits and holding their helmets under their arms. Kaio was smiling, his long hair blowing in the wind, his face showing no hint of burden.

"My partner was called..." he paused, as a picture flashed across his minds eye, blood. Perhaps this was too much too soon, he shook his head and spoke his partners name for the first time in six years "Loki, he and I carried out many hundreds of Artifact attacks over our six year career. He was a master of the swift attack and I became a master of the Stealth attack."

"Wait a minute that stupid kid back there said that you were a master of speed attacks?" asked Headwire.

"He is incorrect, my Partner used speed I used stealth."

How funny Head thought, the kid has tried to be like his hero but trained in Volatile's style of attack. Head looked back at Kaio waiting for him to begin again.

Kaio saw the memory of a smoke filled node room with two confused defenders surrounded by blown turrets. Two Rangers darted through the node and out, not even spotted by the defenders.

"Together we were the most successful attacking partnership there was or has been, we never lost a battle."

"Not one?"

"Not one"

"I didn't even think you had seen an enemy node room. You never even hinted that you were an attacker and neither did Chance or Silver?"

"When I joined up with the guys I was lost and struggling to find meaning for my future and rest from my past. Although Chance and Silver knew who I was they never pressed me for details I wasn't willing to give. I respect them greatly for that and you should not resent them for it."

"How come this is so difficult for you to talk about, it seems amazing." Headwire asked. Kaio was silent for a long time and Head wondered if he shouldn't have pushed for that information.

Eventually Kaio began grimly "Towards the end of our career war broke out right across the system we were in, we were approached and tricked into signing a contract to conduct military actions against planetary installations. No re-spawns, my partner...died"

"I am sorry to hear that Kaio. Is that why you stopped being an attacker?"

"Attacking for me just kept the painful memories of my loss alive too much; I had to give up attacking."

Headwire saw that Kaio needed to talk about some of the better times...

"And what tactics did you use? What Corp's did you work for?" Head said getting excited.

"We worked for all the big ones, once our reputation got a round we would mostly be brought in directly for a battle then we would be on the move again. Never more than a few days on a planet. This was out in the Corsair system, that was my home, so I doubt you would have heard of many of the Corps or Merc' we worked with."

"As for tactics, well as I have said my partner used the swift attack and I the stealth." Headwire noted Kaio's choice to avoid using his partner's name again. "In a typical situation we would go in together, same entrances and my partner would point out where the defences were then..."

"How could he know?" Head interrupted

"The man I knew that possessed Aenbiki, was this man. I would devise a stealth strategy and he would follow my lead, although not a master of stealth he still excelled at it. When the time came the roles were reversed and he would lead the swift attack. We rarely left without an Artifact each when we were at our best. Of course defensive strategies have improved a lot since then." Kaio finished modestly."

They talked for almost an hour about Kaio's attacking past, Headwire drilling lots of stories of attacking runs out of him.

"Wow" said Headwire, his eyes alight. Then a smile crossed his lips "You were a master at stealth and you will teach me. Then I will become a master stealth attacker." Then Headwire realised the time.

"Kuso! My duel begins very soon. I've gotta go." Headwire got up and made for the door.

"Kid, you're ok now?" Kaio asked stopping Head at the door.

"Of course" He replied "I'm training with a legend, I'll surely become one now! You coming to watch me kick this guy's ass?"

"If you don't mind I would prefer to meditate in solitude for awhile, you should meditate before your duel." Kaio said, but Headwire was already out the door.



When Headwire returned to the training hall he saw all the other Mercs training, including his partners Chance and Silver. They were in the main hall fully suited up and fighting in what Headwire could see was an all against all fight. He rushed to get his suit on.

Chance ducked another shotgun blast from Hade and boost dodged to give himself some distance, as he did a sniper shot connected with his back. Dropping his health to one point.

"Too easy" laughed Pro-pain over the Comms

"In the back mate" joked Chance sarcastically as he turned to launch a gas grenade in the Ranger's direction.

Sake and Firkin were having a tough time getting the better of each other in the middle of the room. Firkin, in the gunner suit was launching rocket after rocket at the young Tech but having to settle for blast damage because Sake was dodging very well. Sake employed his Assault rifle from a distance then switched to shotgun and boost jumped towards his opponent who produced his Flame Thrower in response then the men would separate again. This pattern repeated itself for sometime until two sniper shots in very quick succession dropped them both.

"Forgive me friends" called Bokis over the Comms.

"Hey Silver, thought you could have all the fun without me huh?" joked Headwire as he boost dodged into the melee towards the Gunner, who turned to meet him.

"Oh the boy's here at last" replied Silver "welcome to the party, think fast!" Silver fired off two rockets at the Ranger who dodged high and fired a shot hitting his partner directly.

"Have that" said Headwire, but the smile was whipped from his face when he saw Silver's third rocket on a direct course with where he was landing. Headwire dropped in a blast of rocket explosion.

"You were saying" Silver laughed. Then he too dropped in an explosion.

"Couldn't resist old friend" Chance called over the Comms, his shotgun still smoking fiery napalm.

This battle carried on for some time. It was a common training practice before a battle and was a great way to warm up. The reactions needed to stay sharp because enemies were all around and it was also an accepted fact that it took some time to adjust the mind and body to the way weapons fired, suits responded and re-spawning took place, even for those Mercs with years in the business.

Headwire could see that his opponent, the young Ranger calling himself Kaio had not yet arrived. There was just over one hour to go before the battle and Headwire was starting to think that his opponent was regretting his acceptance of the challenge. Although Headwire was enjoying this Grande Melee with the Mercs he did prefer to warm up for a battle with a one on one duel with someone, at that very moment Bokis sniped him in the head for the fifth time in as many minutes.

"Hey! Bokis, wanna duel me one on one? I'd love to duel the current Quick and the Dead champ."

"Yes, Duelling zone one?"

"Affirmative" replied Headwire with a smile and a touch of nerves. Pretty much all of the Mercs in the hall called good luck to Headwire as he sprinted over to the zone.

The two Rangers stood in the teleport room, opposite their separate teleports.

"First to three?" asked Head

"Ok, 3, 2, 1..go" Bokis called and they both jumped through their teleporter.

The duellists materialised opposite each other and still moving from their jump through. Immediately Headwire was hit by a sniper shot.

"Kuso" he shouted in reflex along with entering Form one's basic dodging pattern, he returned fire but missed. Then a second sniper shot connected with him and he dropped.

"Wow, nice shot" he said, amazed he was down already

"Thanks" called Bokis.

The second and third rounds went the same way, although Bokis had decided to let Headwire dodged around a bit after jumping in, before he began sniping. The whole duel was over in less than a minute. Headwire was shocked that the difference was that great but pleased to know he had a much higher level to reach before he was that good.

"Thanks for your time" Head joked to Bokis as they left the room

"No problem" came the reply.

"Where are you going, we've got a duel haven't we" Head heard over the Comms as he saw the young Ranger from before walk through the duelling zone door.

"Ah, so you made it then. Was starting to think you had got scared." Head replied sarcastically.

The two Rangers took up the same positions as Head and Bokis had.

"First to three" Head repeated

"Yep"

"Hey Chance, count us in" Headwire asked of the Tech who was standing in the spectator window for the duel along with most of the other Mercs.

"Ready?" Chance asked

"Ready" both Rangers replied.

"5,4,3,2,1 Go!"

Both Rangers materialised in the duelling room. Headwire snapped off a shot straight away in the hope of repeating Bokis strike from earlier. The shot was not as accurate as it needed to be though for a Ranger dodging as fast as his opponent was.

Both duellists exchange rifle fire several times in a few seconds, neither scoring a hit. Headwire dodged past a shot and fired his own, trying to read his opponents movements but he was finding this difficult.

I can't aim quick enough to get a hit on him Headwire thought as he fired another miss.

From the spectator window the Mercs watched with interest.

"I don't think I've seen a Ranger dodge that fast ever before" Chance remarked "He is always moving, even between dodges."

"The point a Ranger is most vulnerable, between dodges." Bokis commented "As he lands a dodge his momentum brings him to a stop for a fraction of a second, sometimes less sometimes more depending on the skill of the Ranger. It is at that time that he presents the best target for his opponent's sniper rifle. It would seem that this Ranger has found a way to remove that moment from his movements." Bokis said as he watched the young Ranger dodge shot after shot from Headwire.

"How is that possible? Your momentum has to shift and this takes time" Sake asked

"It seems he is taking a small jump in-between dodges. His patterns resemble kaihi teki na ejiki but his is a hybrid Form of that which I have never before seen, very impressive."

Headwire was getting worried, he hadn't managed to hit his opponent once yet and he had expected the first round at least to be over by now. On the plus side though, he hadn't been hit either, in fact his shots had been a lot closer to hitting their mark than his opponents.

Perhaps this is why he was in the accuracy training zone Headwire thought.

As his initial nerves passed Head shifted from Form I's simple dodging pattern to the more advanced patterns of Kaijiki (Form III). He did not recognise his opponents dodging style at all.

"Well Headwire must be doing a good job of dodging too because he hasn't been hit either." Silver remarked

"His opponent's accuracy is poor" said Hade

"Most likely because he is putting all his effort into dodging. Although never staying still makes him a very difficult target it also means he never has a firm grounding for his shots. His strength is also his weakness." said Bokis.

Both Rangers continued to dodge around the arena firing sniper shots at each other. Then the moment came when they had completely run out of ammunition for their rifles.

This is a long duel, I rarely run out of rifle ammo thought Headwire as he drew his pistol.

The duel took on another look now as both Rangers had switched to pistols, there was a lot more firing taking place and occasionally some dodging towards an opponent as apposed to around, in an effort to score some close range damage. Despite this still neither duellist could score a hit.

Chance checked how much time had passed since this duel began, twelve minutes. Chance had to check twice.

"This duel has been going for almost fifteen minutes and no-one has scored a hit. Most three round duels are over by now." He commented.

The duellists were trying other methods now, switching to frag grenades and Form I's second variation they began trying to boost jump over their opponent and score a hit. This was possibly the least accurate method of attack in a duel but it offered the chance of some blast damage for those slow enough not to dodge out of the way and an increased element of luck for those not accurate enough with other weapons.

As such Headwire's opponent had the advantage here and Head knew it. Despite the muscle fatigue he was beginning to feel from this constant movement he stepped up his dodging efforts so as to avoid any damage. When both men had run out of grenades neither one had suffered any damage.

"Out of ammo again, are the Lances gonna have to come out?" Silver asked. The Shock Lance was frowned upon during a duel because its preliminary fire ricocheted off walls and other obstacles making it a weapon which required little accuracy but could just as easily cause damage to its wielder as its target.

Chance checked the time elapsed again, twenty two minutes, this was virtually unheard of, surely both men would be struggling to dodge with much strength now.

Both Rangers could still use their pistols, which had virtually unlimited ammo. Despite this they both produced their Shock Lances.

The duelling zone was filled with bouncing electrical bursts which flew around ricocheting off every wall, ceiling and floor and even the spectator window, the arena was filled with electric blue light. The duellists

were both dodging left and right and jumping over each other firing constant bursts of energy. When the last energy burst dissipated into the air neither duellist had suffered any damage.

Now both Rangers could feel a terrible burning in their leg muscles from dodging and in their arms from holding the weapons. Determination to beat their rival burnt stronger though for both and they pulled out their last remaining weapons the pistols.

"I can't believe this" said Chance to the agreement of all the spectators. Forty minutes had past and both duellists were visibly slowing down as a result though their accuracy was also suffering despite this the duel still continued at a very fast pace. The deterioration seemed to be in equal decline with it self and as such Headwire still could not hit the faster target and the young Ranger's poor accuracy prevented him from hitting his target.

"This needs to end soon, we have a battle to get to" said Chance

The duel did end when, as the time elapsed reached one hour both Rangers could barely move their bodies or hold their pistols up and they simultaneously they both fell to the ground exhausted.

**in episode 21 of
8 ways to lose...**

"10..9..8..7..." the new battle begins...