

In Episode 21...

The young Arti runner Kaio Jr. steals the Artifact but its not going to be easy for him.

"Hade, they have cut me off, proceeding high, I repeat proceeding high."

"Negative Junior, the enemy controls high, you will not make it."
replied Hade

"No choice Capt." Kaio Jr. said as he re-entered the node room. Amid the turret fire he jumped up to the metal walkway that had the teleports on it, destroyed a mine and jumped through....

Back at the base Hade was trying to organize a way to back up Kaio Jr., if they got this Arti home it was victory for them. Unfortunately they still could not get out of their base.

Bokis took out Tyrant with a second well placed shot then he and Kaio dispatched Rage. Even then the remaining enemy Rangers and Techs had managed to push right up to the front of the base.

The two enemy Techs did their best to engage all three green Rangers as their attackers tried simply to jump and dodge through the lines towards the node room. This they managed to do and they both sprinted for the teleports.

Headwire dodged away from his enemy Tech and fired a rifle shot at one of the attackers and he dropped.

"One in!" Head shout as the other Ranger disappeared through the teleport. Headwire was then engulfed in close range shotgun fire and taken down.

The attacking Ranger materialised through the teleport at the exact time that Firkin was placing another mine over it and he snapped off a rifle shot as a reaction. The shot hit Firkin square in the head from close range and he dropped straight away.

"One in, I'm down!" he shouted.

Sake hurried to the node but only managed to get a shotgun blast off at long range before the attacker was through and back out the teleports.

"They've got one; he's out through the Teles! Repeat, he's out through the Teles, going high!" Sake reported urgently.

"Wish we had the energy for force-walls" he said to himself.



Back at S.H.C.L's base, Kaio Jr. appeared in the entrance hanger, alone. He immediately looked over the vehicle bay.

"No Raptor" he said "Proceeding on foot"

He sprinted and dodge jumped his way to the beach, ahead he could see the enemy generator and further up ahead he saw the Juggernaut, still occupied and no doubt waiting for him. Then he saw two Rangers appear from behind the deploy point bunker and begin to head towards him.

"Under fire" he called as two sniper shots came in. He immediately began his unique hybrid dodging pattern whilst still heading towards the Rangers. He pushed hard from left to right as quickly and powerfully as he could whilst jumping or ducking in between dodges. The speed he did this with made it seem as though he was on springs.

He dodge boosted between and past the two Rangers as they desperately tried to hit the blur he had become. Even close range pistol fire was ineffective and he boosted past them without taking any fire, past them and towards the Juggernaut.



S.H.C.Ls' Arti runner exited the base with the Artifact and sprinted out towards the beach. Kaio was the only Ranger not waiting to re-spawn when the Ranger appeared and he broke from his combat with a Tech and

gave chase. The Ranger was quick and good at dodging but Kaio was able to read his movements well and he caught him with two well placed sniper shots to return the Arti, any thoughts he had of pushing forward to back up his young namesake were dashed when two Rangers and one Tech re-spawned from the Deploy-point and headed towards him followed quickly by a warning from Hade that the remaining Tech in their hanger was beginning to set up turrets by the ammo re-supply.



The turret of the Juggernaut swivelled to face Kaio Jr. as he sprinted towards it, as it fired he threw himself to the left, quick enough to clear even the shells blast radius. He dodged right to left as the Tech inside reloaded the cannon. He had no choice but to get close to the turret to get past and at this range it was going to be easy for him to find death. The turret fired again but to the amazement of its Gunner and the two Rangers that still perused him Kaio Jr. was quick enough to dodge completely away from its blast once again.

He was getting tired now, the length of the duel with Headwire taking its toll on him and he was forced to swing out wide from his base to avoid anymore fire from the Juggernaut. This allowed the two Rangers behind him to boost jump ahead and land between him and his base. They didn't fire, as they dodged lightly from side to side whilst Kaio Jr. did the same.

"Excellent movement Ranger" The taller of the two said over the all-channels Comm. system so Kaio Jr. could hear.

"Ya, amazing" The other Ranger stated "I haven't seen anyone dodge a close range Jugg shot before."

"You have no name on your suit, you are a planet contractor." The taller once said "My name is Tyrant and this is Rage. What is yours?"

Kaio Jr. thought about making a brake to get past them now, but his legs were aching badly and the chat allowed him a much needed rest.

"Kaio" he replied

"Of The Four? You do not move or sound like him"

"That's coz I'm not him" *someday* he said to himself

"Of course. Well greetings Kaio, not of The Four. Now we must finish you." Ended Tyrant threateningly

Kaio Jr. smiled under his helmet. "If you can hit me" he replied and he launched into his dodging pattern again as they picked up theirs. Two sniper shots missed him and he returned fire looking for an opening to get past them. His legs burned and he grunted with every dodge, in pain and effort. Despite these efforts he slowed down a slight amount and this was all that Rangers with the skill of these two needed. A sniper shot from each of them connected with him and he dropped to the floor.



"Artifact returned" the automated voice announced over the Comms

"Damn" said Chance as he heard it and saw Kaio Jr. re-spawn at the cave Deploy.

"Right, me and Silver are going in with you guys. Should be able to take down some defences while you two grab the Arti. There's no likelihood of them coming down here.

"Affirmative" All three Mercs with him replied.



Kaio Junior's death was not entirely wasted, his efforts had pulled Tyrant and Rage away from the middle Deploy and the front of P.O.T's base and now the four Mercs up top managed to gain some ground.

Hade had finally managed to keep the Raptor alive long enough to set it up in his base and begin firing the turret at the Juggernaut. Bokis, Headwire and Kaio were sniping the re-spawning Techs and Rangers with ruthless efficiency and they now had only the mass of defensive turrets to take care of.

The Juggernaut's Gunner was accurate enough to get a dead on shot at Hade's Raptor despite the distance and it blew up instantly. Not before it had taken the Juggernaut down to minimal health though and Headwire was quick to send one of his EM burst towards it whilst the three Rangers cleared out the turrets with their Shock Lances.

The last turret blew up along with the Juggernaut but all of this had bought S.H.C.Ls' elite Rangers, Tyrant and Rage enough time to cover the ground back to the Deploy.

"Engage both the contractors I want Bokis to myself" Tyrant called to his partner over the Comms.

"Affirmative" replied Rage and he boosted over Bokis and drew fire from Kaio and Headwire.

"We meet again, Bokisssss" Tyrant said with venom over Comms to his opponent as he dodged and fired a sniper shot at him.

"Yes, Tyrant." Bokis said as he dodged the shot and returned fire, narrowly missing his opponent.

"You remember we met three years ago in The Quick and The Dead Semi Final?" Another sniper shot was sent towards Bokis.

"I remember" Bokis replied, dodging and again narrowly missing his opponent with a return shot.

"You beat me that day and went on to win the final. Your accuracy and speed shamed me in front of many spectators. I have not forgotten it; I have improved ten times since then. You will not beat me this time, Bokisssss" He spat the words as a challenge to his opponent. "I have studied your style; at first I thought you didn't have a weakness. But then I discovered it!" He shouted as he leapt in towards him drawing his pistol. Bokis tried to dodge back but Tyrant had expected this and extended his jump to bring him right in with his opponent.

"Your weakness is close range combat Bokis! You rely too heavily on your rifle." Tyrant fired two blasts with his pistol into Bokis stomach dropping his health to fifty percent. Bokis struggled to increase the distance but Tyrant ruthlessly perused him, close enough to dodge and duck away from any sniper shots that came in. Bokis drew his pistol but kept his rifle in his right hand letting it drop to his side.

He returned fire with his pistol as he desperately tried to avoid those incoming from Tyrant, but Bokis's shots were little threat to his opponent. Another pistol shot hit Bokis in the chest, now his health was at a critical level.

"Ha, you have trained so much with your rifle it has become your only weapon Bokis! You are weak." Tyrant surged forward for the kill.

Bokis snapped off a series of pistol shots at his onrushing opponent

"Pistol shots won't kill me before I kill you Bokiss!"

"No" Bokis replied as one connected with Tyrants leg "But they will allow my rifle to stop you" he threw himself to his side and Bokis brought his right arm up, with the rifle still in his hand, as he landed. Tyrant stopped as he felt the barrel of a sniper rifle pressing against his stomach, then Bokis pulled the trigger and Tyrant dropped to the floor and dematerialized.

"Nice Shot" called Headwire as he and Kaio finally got the better of Rage and turned to see the Bokis' finishing shot. Then with a whooshing noise the Techs and attacking Rangers returned from deployment and the three green Rangers were back doing battle.



Silver and Chance reached the split corridor on the ground level of S.H.C.Ls base again, behind them Pro and Kaio Jr. waited for the signal to attack. The four of them had tried three times unsuccessfully to breach the defences.

"Same as before" Chance said "Silver you go left and engage the Gunner I'll go right and take down the force wall and maybe the Tech as soon as either side gets an opening you attackers do your thing." The three others signalled their understanding and Chance and Silver set off.

Silver turned round the corner to see a very different opponent then he was expecting. Ahead of him, at the end of the corridor the Tech Asuka was putting up a force-wall across the door and the mines had not been replaced.

"Hey Chance, I think your gone run into..."

"....Tell me about it!" Chance cried as he ducked a rocket from the Slow.

"Kuso. Usually I wouldn't mind fighting a Gunner but in a closed space like this I'm not gonna last two seconds." Chance thought. *"Gotta keep moving and get in closer with my Shotgun".* Although the thought of getting into Flame Thrower range wasn't the most attractive idea, but he new if he stayed at a distance the blasts from the rockets would be enough to finish him.

He leapt to the side as another Rocket came down the corridor at him. He pulled out his shotgun and sprinted forward, as the rocket impacted with the wall of the corridor reducing his health considerably. Chance fired off explosive shells in the hope of setting his opponent on fire, he managed it and Slow began to fire his rockets wildly as his vision was reduced.

His vision affected by the flames in front of his visor Slow produced his Flamer with the desire to fill the corridor with Napalm. Chance had little choice and he gritted his teeth and threw himself towards the Gunner with his shotgun blasting. He crashed into Slow and they both fell to the ground on fire. Neither man released the trigger of their weapons and the shotgun ripped into Slows suit as Chance's burnt up. Both men's health reached zero at the same time and the firing stopped.

On the other side Silver managed to get the better of Asuka and the Tech lay dematerialising on the floor.

"Junior get over here we're going in" called Silver as he stepped through the archway into the node room. Kaio Jr. raced past him.

"Wait!" shouted Silver but it was too late and Kaio Jr. set off a trip wire which blew both Mercs up.

Pro-Pain was still alive and when he saw that both Chance and Slow were down he wasted no time in sprinting down the corridor. He reached the end and quickly assessed the defences.

"Not enough" he said with a smile. With immense speed Pro exploded the trip wires and force-walls with his Shock Lance and was in and out with an Artifact before the turrets had even fired a shot.

"Got one" he called

"Low" Hade

As he left the Archway a rocket narrowly missed his head and exploded into the wall at the far end. Slow had re-spawned and cut off his retreat. Pro doubled back towards the other archway. His suit exploded into flames as Asuka fired his Shotgun at him. The shot was from distance had done little damage but did enough to convince Pro to find another route out.

"Going high" he said. He jumped up to the metal grate, cleared a land mine with his pistol and jumped through the teleports.

"Pro we cant back you up if you go high, they own High, you'll never make it." Hade warned over the Comms. Pro-Pain ignored this and looked for a vehicle in S.H.C.Ls vehicle bay, none.

"Pro-Pain" Kaio called "Tyrant and Rage have just been taken out; they may spawn at the base."

"Affirmative" Pro replied at the same time as the Deploy-point, which was only ten metres from him whirred into life and Slow appeared through the doors to the node from.

"*Time to go*" Pro thought and he set off into a sprint away from the base. Behind him Slow began to lock on with his missile launcher and Tyrant and Rage deployed. Pro-Pain was already half way out of the hanger when they began sniping at him but he launched smoke grenades to keep the Rangers off of him. Seeing this the two of them gave chase on foot.

Pro's HUD warned him that four missiles had locked on and been released but that didn't worry him. He sprinted and dodged along the beach towards the forward Deploy and the Juggernaut. He fired a smoke grenade towards it to buy himself some time as he pulled out wide to his right.

Sniper shots continued to come at him from the Rangers chasing him, he looked back to see that they were losing ground. He also saw the four small missiles leaving smoke trails behind them as they raced towards him. He dodged and sprinted to the side of the Jugg.

He increased his speed and jumped towards the tank, up and over it dropping over the other side of the bunker and away. Tech and turret fire came in at him but he was too fast to hit directly and he only took slight damage.

"His speed is too much" Rage said to his partner we cannot catch him. Both the Rangers pulled up even before they had reached the Juggernaut and took aim at the fleeing attacker.

Sniper fire came in at Pro and he dodged frantically from side to side while trying to keep his pace up. He looked over his shoulder and saw the missiles were still on his tail and they were gaining. He decided he couldn't afford to lose pace by dodging and he just ran as fast as he could towards his base. A sniper shot hit him and dropped his health to one point before he was safely out of Tyrants and Rage's view.

Pro was nearing the front of the base and could see that his team-mates were finishing off the two enemy attackers and a Tech.

"Front of base, I need back up!" Pro said and immediately the three green Rangers boosted out towards him. Kaio launched smoke to cover Pro's route and Bokis and Headwire sniped any Techs that had been giving chase. Pro flew past Headwire and into the hanger

"What the...?" Headwire ducked as four missiles followed Pro's path.

"Doors working?" Pro asked as he sprinted towards them, knowing that if the enemy had hacked them the missiles on his tail would reach him long before the doors were recovered.

"Affirmative" Sake replied to Pros relief and he jumped up the steps and threw himself at them. The automatic doors opened and he turned to see them close and hear the explosions of the missiles impacting.

"Phew" breathed Pro as he stumbled wearily through the Node and registered the last Artifact.



The victorious Mercs sat around in the mess hall enjoying some well earned R&R. The debriefing finished and S.H.C.L were already well on their way Ildryan II's geo-magnetic energy continued to be drawn to P.O.T's Artifact Node. Captain Hade, with his best English was in the process of finishing an impromptu speech thanking everyone for their efforts.

"...not a text book effort but a dog like and determined one. I wanna like to thank our recruits for this battle, Captain Chance and his Four, always reliable and invaluable on the field, Kaio Jr. who has a good future to look forward to I'm sure and lastly a toast to Pro-Pain, who proving once again he is the fastest Arti Runner in the business. To Pro-Pain!"

"To Pro-Pain!" went up the cheer around the table, followed by a shout of "Speech!" by Sake, causing the slightly embarrassed Pro-Pain to stand and clear his throat before the expectant crowd. After pondering for a moment he uttered "Let's drink!" to the laughter of the men.

"Capt, Pro outran those missiles, the same missiles that caught our Raptor on Garden. Does that mean he can outrun a Raptor?" Headwire asked leaning into Chance.

"No" Chance laughed "That Raptor was badly damaged before the missiles were released..."

"...And if Chance was driving" Pro interjected "It wouldn't have got out of second gear" he laughed.

The men sat and chatted together for some time, about the battle, past experiences and new ones to come.

"Head" Chance said across the table "on Kaio's recommendation I have decided to enter you for The Quick and The Dead."

"Really?" asked Headwire excited.

"Yes, the preliminaries are in one month, Kaio will look after your training."

"Ha!" Said Headwire turning to Kaio Jr. "What do you think of that?" The young Arti Runner replied with a grin

"Actually Bokis has agreed to sponsor my entry and train me"

"What!" exclaimed Headwire with astonishment and looked across the table at Bokis

"Well, I'll offer some guidance to improve his accuracy; it is Hade who is sponsoring his initial application. He has potential though and I'm sure his hybrid dodging style will cause some upsets at the tourney." Said Bokis

Chance began again "With Hade's consent Murdoc has agreed to let us train here."

The two young Rangers glared at each other across the table, "I will finish further than you!" they shouted in unison.

"Well this will certainly make the tournament more interesting" Silver said with a smile....

THE END

In **PART II** of **8 WAYS TO LOSE**

The Quick and the **Dead**

Mercs from across all systems arrive to compete for money and fame in this highly regarded duelling tournament.

The Four meet many new Mercs and old friends including those from such Mining Corps as 12m and tH.

Will Chance and Silver successfully defend their 2v2 title, how will Headwire and the young Kaio Jr. do in their first official competition?

Part II introduces lots of familiar names and clans for those gamers that were playing XMP during its golden age, and attempts to recreate the fun and excitement of the popular duelling tournament which took the game beyond its initial boundaries.

8 WAYS TO LOSE PART II - The Quick and the **Dead**

coming soon...