

Excerpt # 5

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:32 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:56

Chapter 100: The Chain

Chris strode down the hallway toward the May's enlisted bunks. His information was as fresh as his shirt, and he hoped it would bring Rachael out of the funk she was in. She was offered a room in the main living quarters that Uncle Pat built next to the bridge, but she asked if she could come down here. Chris theorized she was extracting some security from the Spartan, bunker-like atmosphere. Or, perhaps she just wanted to hide. It wasn't an uncommon emotion among those who watched two goons walk away from a hanger while they were still burning. He was a bit rattled himself.

She had the lights turned down in the hallways on this level. This said volumes for her current frame of mind. "Lights up" he said periodically, bringing a sense of daytime to the floor once again.

He stopped before opening her door, knocked twice, and activated the release. "Rachael, it's me," he called out, hoping to reduce his chances of being shot. "Are you decent?"

"No, but I'm dressed."

He walked in the bunk room, and said "Lights up." The lights came on and he saw Rachael shading her eyes, standing up from a bottom bunk. She had on a white t-shirt and some navy jogging pants. She didn't look exactly ready for action, but he figured that might be a plus since they were still in a holding pattern.

"Dice and Easy have reported in from New Ecuador," Chris explained. "Apparently for the last several months, Mayhem has been renting freighters, loading them with stimulants, narcotics, and tobacco, and flying them into the Junkyard. The ships return from the Junkyard empty on autopilot."

"You've lost me. That's a one way trip. How is she doing this over and over again?" Rachael asked. "She's been renting other freighters on New Siberia, loading them with guns and ammo from the weapons factories, and running them to New Ecuador. She reappears on New Ecuador the next day."

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“You can’t pull off those runs that fast—not the way you’re saying it.”

Chris leaned on one of the bunks. “That’s what has Scotch confused, but he guarantees she’s back in two days tops. She’s coming from the right direction for that run, and the guns check out as coming from New Siberia.” He watched Rachael trying to figure out the puzzle, and though he had more pieces, he wanted to give her a chance to put what she had together.

Still she shook her head. “What was she flying?” she asked. “Here’s where it gets interesting,” Chris answered. “She’s been flying big ships; large cargo haulers with heavy armor and heavier guns. The last ship she rented was a ship called the One-Eyed Jack which is back at New Ecuador with battle damage. An identical ship, with the same name, was discovered in the scanner registries of the Asguard ships in dock here. The histories showed it appearing on their screens from directly behind the Devil’s skull, empty and unmanned.”

Rachael turned her back on him, and walked away for a minute, seemingly lost in thought.

He continued. “Dice, Easy and Scotch are going to arrange for a tour of the ship, and see what they can find out. If they can get to the main computers...”

“Wait a minute,” she said turning around. “You’re telling me that my sister has been magically moving between two star systems, and her ships are materializing from solid rock and flying themselves home.”

“I expect we’ll find out some pretty complicated things are going on. And I think our chances of finding your sister are very good at this point,” he replied.

She shook her head again, and turned her back on him. “We won’t walk out of here alive let alone see her...what has she gotten into?”

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Chris heard something new in her voice—despair. “Rachael, we’re really moving forward. We’ve got leads now. There’s no reason to...”

Rachael whirled around and took a knife out of her pocket. The black handle was folded closed around the blade. “Do you know what this is?” She asked.

“Philippine bailsong style knife, approximately 6 inches in length; also know as a ‘butterfly knife.’ It’s illegal to carry in many places, but manipulating it is considered a performance art in others. From the style of the handle, I can tell that one is shield boosted.”

She snapped it open, and sure enough, an orange glow suffused the blade. “Now watch closely,” she said, and snapped her wrist forward an inch. The orange light momentarily extended for a few inches past the end of the blade, while needles of light of varying length shot out at right angles to the blade. It was obvious that the knife was designed for fatal strikes.

“I get it. You finally have an adversary you can’t drop in a blink. I’d think you’d be excited for the challenge.”

“Don’t mock me, Bellweather,” she snarled. “I do a lot of stuff that would be dangerous for anyone else, but there’s never a question of failure in my mind. Now I can’t see a way to win.”

“How do you know victory will involve killing?” Chris replied. “How do you know what we’ll need to do?”

She cocked her head to one side and looked at him. “We’ve been hiding in a gunship inside a locked hanger since they attacked. How long will it be after we set foot outside before...” Again she turned her back on him. This time she hung her head. “I shouldn’t have brought anyone in on this. Now you’re all going to get wiped out.”

“Hey, Asguard contacted us directly. If you hadn’t come to us we would have walked into the

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trap blind. We owe you to some extent,” Chris said, trying to calm her. “You don’t have to go anywhere. You can stay here while we figure everything out. Honestly, my gut instinct is we haven’t been guided to this point to be destroyed. We’re involved for a purpose.”

“Purpose!” She screamed. She whirled around, knife in hand. “Don’t start with me about purpose, Preacher. I gave up on purpose the day my parents sealed me in a tomb while they roasted alive. What was the purpose of that, huh Preacher? The only guidance from above that I ever experienced was guided missiles.” She hurled the knife across the room--away from him thankfully. She stood there shaking with rage, staring at him.

Chris squelched his own anger, trying to find the right response. *Has she forgotten that my own parents were killed by nuclear fire? Perhaps I should remind her of...*

That was it.

“Follow me for a minute,” he said leaving the barracks, and into an office next door. He opened a desk, and took out what looked like a small, curved piece of aluminum, as thick as his pinky. As she walked into the room, he stuck the computer interface to his forehead. A city appeared on the wall. It looked like Inner Harbor, but bigger. The domes were all huge hangers under construction, with some sort of huge building to one side. Cranes and heavy equipment were working everywhere.

“This was the construction site for a new resort being built by Stellar Luxury Cruise Lines.” Chris explained. “They’d been running tours to Janus-5 for decades, but none of the docks could handle their new super-liners. These giant hangers would handle the ships, and these structures over here would act as luxury hotels and casinos. They were going to have a contest among the denizens of Inner Harbor to name the city, and everyone was very excited.”

“Uncle Pat was offered a job managing the maintenance on the big ships, but he turned it down. He’d just been promoted to his current position, and he said it just didn’t feel right.”

He watched her face change from anger to shock as the picture behind him shifted. “This is the

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site a week after four 30 megaton fusion bombs were detonated simultaneously at the corners of the work site. Over thirty thousand workers died.”

Anger returned to her face. “Why would anyone do that?” she choked. She blanched as the scene behind him changed again. “As retaliation for this attack,” he replied. Behind him was the smoldering wreckage of Rocktown. “Which was of course retaliation for attacks on Stellar shipping,” he continued. The scene changed again, showing the twisted wreckage of a cruise liner; shot to pieces for refusing to surrender to pirates.

“Do you see the pattern?” He asked, in a controlled tone. “Bad things happen because people do bad things. And then other people do bad things. And the chain of hate and violence goes unbroken. Innocents are killed in the name of the innocents who were killed. Some would say my Uncle didn’t take the job there because he was guided not to. Even if he wasn’t at the site, he’d be unemployed. Stellar abandoned Janus-5 after this.”

She was staring at him, searching for an argument. “Let’s take another example.” The scene shifted behind him again, to a planet surrounded by dense, almost black clouds. She held her breath—unable to speak. He continued. “The entire population of Juno-4 was wiped out by the Stuttgart Mining Corporation, when the workers of the planet formed a union and Stuttgart’s forces there mutinied. However, a small cache of children managed to survive the bombing. Some called it a miracle—until they became one of the deadliest groups of assassins known to mankind.”

She walked up and slapped him across the face. He could have blocked it, but he expected it and let her vent. His expression didn’t change, and he didn’t slow down. “You were there, Rachael. Did it not take some tremendous ‘luck’ to survive? What guided you through that hell and out the other side? Haven’t you ever had bursts of intuition that saved your skin? Had others that you ignored and paid for?”

She went to punch him this time, and this time he blocked it, grabbing her fist and holding it fast. “You want to believe in nothing; that’s your business. But don’t tell me it’s because you see evil. You’re part of the chain of violence. In ways big and small everyone is. We’re all free to be part of that chain. We’re also free to break it.” He let go of her hand, pulled the interface from his head and tossed it on the desk. “I’m not perfect, Rachael, but I’m trying to break what links I can.”

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She turned and started to walk away from him. “Chris,” she said, just as she reached the door. Her voice was calm, but she wasn’t looking at him.

“Yes,” he prompted.

“Who blew up the resort?” Had she turned to face him, she would have known the answer. The heartbreak in his eyes would have told the story.

“No one was ever charged—there wasn’t any evidence.”

“That’s not what I asked you, but I think I know the answer.”

With that, she walked away, leaving Chris to wonder if he had won or lost.