

## The Bond Episode Two

Professor Gordon Fay shook as he watched the dilapidated freighter launch. His fists were balled and he was gritting his teeth as he witnessed Charles Bryant embarking on yet another bounty hunting mission using the school's money.

“Professor Fay!”

Fay didn't even register the voice. He was still staring up into the sky, watching the freighter slowly disappear from view while thinking about how much he hated Charles Bryant.

“Professor Fay!”

This time it came from much closer. Reluctantly, Gordon looked away from the ship and turned to see his number one student, Robert Kent, running towards him. The two had met when Kent filed a complaint against Professor Bryant for kicking him out of his Bounty Hunting 101 class for “lacking the physical skills or discipline to be a Bounty Hunter”. Fay championed the complaint but Dean Washington swept the whole thing under the table, unwilling to let anything sully the good name of his cash cow, the Bounty Hunting Professor.

“What do you want, Kent?”

Fay stormed past him, angrily making his way back towards the University.

“I need to show you something,” Kent said, holding up his small vidscreen.

“Does it look to you like I'm in the mood to be bothered right now?” Fay asked.

“Trust me Professor, you're going to want to see this.”

Fay sighed heavily as he stopped walking. Kent could be a true annoyance at times but for him to be this persistent he must have something important.

“Fine, but make it quick.”

Kent smiled as he again raised his vidscreen. He pressed a button on it and a video clip was projected above it in the air. As Fay realized what he was seeing a slow smile spread across his lips.

“This is just the kind of thing I've been waiting for,” Fay said.

“I thought you'd be pleased,” Kent said.

Fay watched as the video taken outside of the university clearly showed Charles' altercation with the four thugs. He smiled even bigger when Sean Varis came on screen and also took part in the fighting.

“Bryant’s breaking at least four different regulations here,” Fay said. “And he even got a student involved. This is something that can’t be ignored.”

“I did good, right?” Kent asked.

Fay ignored the question as he reached over and snatched the small vidscreen away from his number one student. He began walking quickly and Kent had to jog to keep up.

“Where are we going Professor Fay?”

“To show the world the kind of man Professor Charles Bryant really is.”



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EPISODE TWO – “TO CATCH A TIGER”

Sean Varis grunted as he shoved the lever forward, trying his best to lock the thrusters into place. He was sitting on the bridge of the freighter, piloting the ship. As soon as he released the lever it began to slide backwards again and the ship began to slow.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Sean muttered.

He again pushed it forward and then jiggled it side to side violently. Finally there was a click and he tentatively released it, thankful to see it lock into place.

“Why exactly did we take this hunk of junk instead of your ship?” Sean asked.

Charles was sitting behind him, watching his every move. Sean used to be completely unnerved by the way his Professor would stare at him when they were

out on missions. He'd sit and observe everything, seemingly never missing even the tiniest of details. After spending so much time around Professor Bryant, Sean had eventually learned to block it out and just focus on doing the best he could. He had also learned that once they were on a mission Charles only answered questions and gave out information whenever he was good and ready.

"Take us to these coordinates," Charles said, handing up a slip of paper and completely ignoring his number one student's previous question.

Sean glanced at the coordinates and then looked out the viewport as the stars stretched before them endlessly in all direction. He always took a moment to appreciate the majesty of the cosmos when they first embarked on a mission. After taking it in for another few seconds he began punching the coordinates into the ancient navigation computer. It beeped and whirred as it processed them. A moment later a red light came on and a grinding sound came from the computer.

"This is just ridiculous," Sean said.

He punched in several commands and when that had no effect he tried resetting the entire navigation system. That wouldn't work either so finally Sean hit the computer with his palm. The red light went off and the beeping and whirring started again.

"There we go," Sean said.

When the beeping and whirring stopped the cracked starmap screen updated with their new course. At full speed the ion powered engines would have them there in under an hour. As Sean studied the map closely he saw their destination for the first time.

"That's pirate territory," he said.

Sean turned around in his chair to face Charles.

"Did you know that's pirate territory?" Sean asked.

For a moment he thought Charles wasn't going to answer, but then the Professor looked at him and spoke.

"To catch a tiger one must first become the prey."

Sean just stared at him, waiting for further explanation that wasn't going to come. Finally he shook his head and turned back around to monitor the half working instruments on the pilot console.

“When I was younger I took a family vacation to a preserve planet where you go on safaris and see all of the animals in their natural habitat,” Sean said.

“They’d let you get real close to all of the animals, but not the tigers. They kept them sectioned off and you had to watch from a hundred feet away.”

He paused for a moment, recalling the details in his mind.

“Even that felt like we were too close.”

Charles stood up and patted Sean on the shoulder.

“Keep her steady, Mr. Varis. Let me know if you see anything out of the ordinary.”

Sean nodded and Charles turned and left the bridge.



Penelope was sitting alone in a small common room in the middle of the ship. The craft was in very poor condition and she was sitting in the only chair in the room that still had any padding left. Her mind was troubled and she was staring at the floor, lost in thought. The sound of Charles’ heavy boots against the steel hallway floor pulled her back to reality and she looked up as he entered the room.

“Sean has us en route to our first stop, it shouldn’t be much longer before we arrive,” Charles said.

She looked up at him and nodded. It was clear she was upset, so after a moment of standing in the doorway Charles turned to walk away.

“Thank you,” Penelope said.

Charles turned back around.

“I never said thank you for taking the job,” Penelope said. “For helping me find my husband.”

It was hard for her to say the word husband and she had to take a deep breath to steady herself. Charles watched her closely but didn’t speak. Penelope shook her head and laughed bitterly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m a mess over this, obviously.”

Charles took a step into the room and nodded.

“It’s a difficult process,” he said.

“On one hand I hate my husband,” Penelope said. “I hope we find him and drag him back to face these charges and that they find him guilty and lock him away forever. But...”

She looked at the floor, unable to meet Charles’ gaze as she spoke the next part.

“On the other hand I still love him. I miss my husband.”

Charles stood and watched her for several long moments, his face an emotionless mask. Finally he spoke.

“I know what it’s like when you can’t let go of someone.”

She looked up at him. Even though she could read nothing from his expression, there had been something in his voice that had hinted at an intensity behind those words. Penelope was about to ask about it when an alarm rang out.

“Find a seat with a working harness and get yourself strapped in!” Charles yelled.

He turned and ran for the bridge. Sean heard him coming and was pointing at the viewport as Charles came onto the bridge.

“Five ships, medium sized, they look like pirates. I tried to zoom in to get a look at their markings but...”

“These old freighters weren’t equipped with viewport enhancement capabilities,” Charles said, interrupting.

Sean punched in several commands and then took a hold of the bulky steering yolk.

“Taking evasive action,” he said.

“Wait,” Charles said.

Sean turned around and looked at Charles.

“What do you mean wait? They’re almost within firing range Professor!”

Charles was staring past him, focusing all of his attention on the fast approaching ships.

“Just keep her steady,” Charles said.

Even though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing Sean did as Charles asked. They flew slow and straight, watching tensely as the five ships loomed larger and larger through the viewport. The one in the lead turned slightly and they could see the side of it.

“Wrong pirates,” Charles said suddenly. “Get to the firing station, Sean!”

Sean started unstrapping himself from the pilot’s seat.

“Wrong pirates?! Are there ever right pirates?”

As he removed the last strap he jumped up. Charles sat down and quickly began punching in commands on the console.

“Shoot to kill, not to disable,” Charles said.

Sean nodded and then ran from the bridge. The pirates opened fire, strafing the top of the ship. It shuddered and groaned, but appeared to be alright. Charles slammed the lever for the thrusters all the way forward, causing the ship to lurch ahead under the sudden increase of power to the engines. He then gripped the yoke and pulled back on it hard, then brought it down sharply, sending the ship into a sharp climb.

The firing station was on the far end of the ship and Charles knew he needed to buy a little time for Sean to get to it. The yoke was shaking in his hands, fighting to return to center and end his steep climb. He fought against it, keeping the ship arcing into what was becoming a giant loop.

Charles looked at the bottom corner of the viewport. It displayed images from behind the ship and he could see the five pirates scrambling to follow after him. The longer he could keep them focused on keeping up with his unorthodox evasions the longer he gave Sean to get the firing station operational.

Just as the pirates had recovered and were coming up quickly behind the freighter, Charles yanked up as hard as he could on the yoke, stopping the upward loop and going into a downward loop instead. After a moment he then twisted, sending the freighter into a downward corkscrew loop. The pirates were still back there, some of them close enough to fire, but they were getting very few direct hits.

Charles noticed a section of the console in front of him light up. It was the firing station coming online. He slowly returned the yoke to its middle position, allowing the freighter to move back into a straight flight path, giving Sean a more manageable angle to fire from.

“Alright kid, do your stuff,” Charles said.

Sean stood and looked at the disastrous room in front of him. He had been shocked that the power had even come online when he pressed the panel near the

door, but now that it had he hated what he was seeing. The firing station was nothing like the modern one in Charles' ship. Instead of that all immersive system, this was a rudimentary setup. There was a large metal chair in the middle of the room with two giant metal protrusions on each side. Wires were hanging down from the ceiling and half of the steel floor panels were missing, exposing circuitry and wires below.

He carefully made his way to the chair and then sat down in it, half expecting to be electrocuted to death when he did. The chair recognized his presence and booted up, sending sparks shooting from some of the exposed wiring. It leaned back quickly until he was lying flat, looking up at the ceiling. A section of the ceiling slid away, revealing the rear viewport. Sean could see the five pirate ships, coming up fast and firing their weapons.

He looked at the two metal protrusions, trying to figure out how they worked. When he saw the spaces for his arms he groaned. After taking a deep breath, Sean reached up into them. They powered on as he slid his arms down the hollow tubes. At the end of each there was a joystick and he grabbed them. He slowly moved his arms and the protrusions reluctantly moved with him, as did the chair. Sean experimented for a few moments, finding that if he moved so did the arms, and if he manipulated the joystick in a certain manner the chair would also rotate.

A crosshairs appeared on the viewscreen and Sean shook his head.

“Here goes nothing.”

He lined the crosshairs onto the closest pirate ship and squeezed both triggers. The cannon on the back of the ship fired, sending out two twisted chunks of metal. Sean released the triggers as the kickback from the gun sent his arms flailing wildly. Normally a firing station was equipped with stabilizers but that system was one of many not currently functioning on the freighter.

Sean fought to get the protrusions lined back up and then fired again, this time straining to keep the turret arms from kicking back. He watched as two chunks of metal shot out and hit the lead pirate ship, ripping it apart.

“Yeah!”

He had never fired this type of a turret before but knew what it was. They called them wreckage cannons because their ammunition was pieces of metal that didn't have to be in any particular shape or size. It was an ideal weapon for ships

that spent a lot of time between planets as it allowed them to use random pieces of wreckage they found to keep their munitions supply up.

The pirates were scattering now that they saw the freighter firing back. Sean tracked ahead of one of them and fired several times, sending out jagged chunks of steel into the path of the ship. The pirate twisted around and deftly avoided the first two but that took them right into the path of the next. It hit the ship right in the front, shredding it down the middle.

The three remaining pirate ships had peeled off and were regrouping. Sean knew they wouldn't make the mistake of attacking from the rear again. He swept the turret from side to side, testing its mobility. It moved much more slowly than he had hoped. He frowned, realizing that if the pirates began making quick strafing passes on the ship he wouldn't be able to track them fast enough to hit them.

Sean looked over at the panel on the wall, hoping it would display an ammo count. Seeing nothing there he decided to take a chance and move forward with his plan anyway. He swung the turret arms all the way to the left and began firing again and again. The protrusions bucked wildly, battering his arms as he fought to keep them steady. Sweat ran down his face as he continued squeezing the triggers, filling the space to the left of the ship with deadly debris.

Finally he stopped, pleased with what he had accomplished. It was simply too risky for the pirates to approach from that side now, so Sean swung the turret back to the right, waiting to see how they would react. The three ships split up, each of them taking a different approach. One was coming from above, one from the right, and another was dipping down to make an attack on the bottom of the freighter.

Sean knew that dealing with the pirate attacking from underneath was going to be a problem as the turret couldn't hit it there, but he focused on the pirate approaching from the right. He watched it closely, not wanting to fire too soon. He lined the crosshairs up ahead of it and began firing. The pirate reversed his thrusters and pulled up hard. It still clipped a piece of the steel and began flipping end over end. All the lights on the ship went dark as it cartwheeled away, disabled.

The freighter shook and Sean could tell it was being hammered from below. He tried to think of something to do, knowing that if the pirate was left unchecked he'd eventually be able to kill them. All of a sudden the entire freighter lurched

wildly. It twisted and a few seconds later was flying upside down. Sean smiled, realizing that Charles had done it in order to give him a clear shot on the pirate. How the Professor was able to pilot the clunky freighter so well was beyond him, but Sean just laughed and lined up the crosshairs.

The pirate hadn't been expecting the sudden maneuver. He was a sitting duck and Sean fired four times, watching as the pieces of metal tore through the medium sized pirate ship. Charles righted the freighter, but as soon as they were flying straight again Sean saw the final pirate ship coming right for his viewport. He squeezed the triggers but was too late as the pirate took aim at the turret and fired.

The firing station room went dark and sparks shot out from the exposed wiring in the ceiling and in the floor. The metal protrusions went completely rigid and Sean pulled his tired arms out of them. A fire had broken out along one of the circuitboards in the floor and Sean ran over to it. He removed his scarf and slapped at the flames until they were out. Once he was confident nothing else was going to catch fire he put his scarf back on and ran for the bridge.

"They got the turret," Sean said as he came onto the bridge. "We're sitting ducks professor."

"Giving up is what gets you killed in our profession, Mr. Varis," Charles scolded. "All hope is not lost until you take your final breath."

Charles manipulated the yoke slowly, sending the freighter in a slow arc. Sean watched as the pirate ship appeared directly ahead of them. Charles pushed the thruster level all the way forward, then sat back in his chair.

Sean waited for either Charles or the pirate to make an evasive move but soon it became clear that they were engaged in a game of chicken. Sean could feel his heart pounding in his chest and he sat down in the chair behind the pilot. He leaned so he could see out the viewport and gulped as he saw the pirate ship getting larger and larger in the middle of the screen.

"Who's going to flinch?" Sean asked.

"I have no intention of flinching, Mr. Varis, and I'm betting that he doesn't either."

Sean sat back and began strapping himself into the seat.

“I knew I should’ve majored in agriculture,” he muttered as he buckled himself in.

They were only seconds from impact when at last the pirate ship pulled up sharply. To Sean’s horror, Professor Bryant also pulled up sharply. He angled the freighter and hit the pirate ship on its underbelly, puncturing the hull easily. Their ship shook violently and Sean gripped the sides of his chair hard. The pirate ship broke to pieces as the freighter flew through it. A moment later Charles turned off the thrusters and they were floating peacefully in space.

There were several warning lights on the console but Charles attended to them easily, finding that none of them were major.

“You could’ve killed us,” Sean said, still shaken from the impact.

Charles turned towards him and spoke.

“Back when these old freighters were manufactured most trade was still done via space stations instead of planetside spaceports. Docking with stations over and over was rough on a ship, so they started installing thirty meter thick hybrid-titanium plating on the freighters.”

Charles was staring right at Sean now.

“Sometimes the only difference between defeat and victory is knowing a small fact such as that.”

Sean nodded, realizing once again that he should never doubt Professor Bryant.

“What are you going to do when we get back to the University?” Charles asked as he turned back around.

Sean sighed before answering.

“Write a paper about the different types of ships and their potential uses in bounty hunting?”

Charles smiled slightly, glad his young student couldn’t see it.

“Very good.”

They both heard Penelope approaching and turned to look at her. She was bracing herself against the steel door frame and looked like she might be sick.

“Did we almost get blown up?” she asked.

“Nope,” Sean answered. “But the Professor did ram a pirate ship.”

“Oh,” she said. “Okay.”

“It’s really nothing to worry about,” Sean said, trying to comfort her. “You see, old freighters like these were built with thirty meter thick hybrid-titanium plating. It was a safety measure to help them when they docked with space stations.”

He could feel Charles staring at him but Sean kept looking at Penelope, not wanting to meet his Professor’s gaze. An alarm started buzzing in the console and Sean turned around to see what it was.

“Incoming craft,” Charles said, punching some buttons on the navigation panel.

Sean leaned forward and looked out the viewport, trying to see who was approaching. He squinted, wishing desperately that the ship had some sort of magnification abilities. He saw a whole fleet of ships in the distance, all heading right for them. They varied in size, with some small fighter ships and some larger battle cruisers mixed in. They were all painted black and brandished all over them was a gray emblem. It depicted the upper body of a man dressed in olde style clothing, a sword in one hand and a pistol in the other, his face contorted in a scream of rage. Sean recognized it as the symbol of the feared pirate group known as the Gray Buccaneers.

“Pirates,” Sean said, pointing. “Lots and lots of pirates.”

As the pirate fleet grew closer Sean was growing anxious.

“You need to do something Professor Bryant,” he said.

“Stay calm.”

“Calm?! You can’t ram all of them, Professor!”

Charles turned towards him quickly.

“Control yourself,” he snapped.

Sean took a moment to compose himself, then responded.

“They’ll be in firing range any moment now and we’re defenseless. We need some sort of a plan.”

Charles sat back and watched the ships close in on them.

“This is the plan,” he said.

They sat and waited as one of the battle cruisers approached. It launched towing cables all over the freighter, then started pulling it in. The cruiser was five times larger than their ship, and within just a few minutes it had reeled in all of the cable. The freighter shook as it was brought up against the cruiser.

“They’ve docked us,” Penelope said.

Sean pulled his pistol and stood up. Charles was on his feet quickly and grabbed Sean’s arm and lowered it.

“We won’t be needing any weapons. Leave them in the secure compartment beneath the console.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Charles gave him a look that told Sean just how serious he was. Reluctantly Sean handed over all of his weapons and Charles locked them away along with his own.

“Now follow me,” Charles said.

He led them off of the bridge and to the area right outside the airlock. They could hear movement on the other side.

“Stay silent and don’t take any action unless I tell you to,” Charles said. “Is that understood?”

Sean nodded slowly. Charles got down on his knees and put his hands behind his head. He gestured for them to do the same and soon all three of them were kneeling in front of the airlock door. They waited in tense silence as the noise on the other side grew louder. Finally the door swung open. A rush of cold air swept over them and four pirates stepped through. The two in the lead were older, the rough sort of men who had spilled blood so many times they had lost count. Behind them were two younger pirates, hungry for action and holding their pistols at the ready. All four of them had a gray sash tied around their waste.

“We have no weapons and are surrendering peacefully,” Charles said. “We ask to speak to your leader.”

The oldest pirate stepped forward slowly, keeping his gun trained on Charles.

“Where’s the rest of your crew?” the old pirate asked. “Laying in wait ta’ ambush us?”

The other three pirates looked around nervously at this.

“We’re the only people on board and we are at your mercy. We ask only that we be allowed to speak to your leader.”

Charles noticed that two of the pirates had seen Penelope. They shared a lecherous glance with one another and then walked towards her.

“You’re a real looker,” one of them said.

The other pirate pulled out a curved dagger and held it out towards Penelope's face. She was shaking but didn't recoil. The man used the dagger to brush some of her hair out of her face.

"Beautiful," he said.

"You can't touch the lady until your leader has had a chance to consider her for himself," Charles said loudly.

The two of them turned towards him.

"Shut your mouth," one of them snapped. "You don't know anything about it."

"On the contrary," Charles continued, trying to keep the man engaged. "I know that if you show disrespect to your leader by touching this woman that today will be the day you die."

The pirate smiled at him, showing a mouth full of broken and missing teeth.

"Well I'm just gonna have ta test that theory of yours," he said.

The pirate got down on his knees and leaned towards Penelope.

"Just a little kiss," the pirate said.

His breath was sour and caused Penelope to gag.

"STOP!"

The command had come from the airlock and they all watched as a mountain of a man came stepping through.

"If you touch that woman I will slice off your head and use it as a decoration."

Sean couldn't believe what he was seeing. The man was easily six and a half feet tall and had to weigh at least three hundred and fifty pounds. Despite his girth, he didn't appear to be fat. He had long hair that was pulled into a braid and a massive, gnarly black beard that was the size of a small animal. His gray sash was worn across his chest and was adorned with precious gems and metals.

All of the pirates stood at attention as the man came closer.

"Whose ship is this?" the man asked.

His voice was a deep rumble that emanated somewhere at the back of a dark cave.

"Mine," Charles said.

He slowly stood up and then lowered his hands from the back of his head. The giant man walked over to him and stood just inches away. Professor Bryant was

an impressive physical specimen but the pirate dwarfed him. The two men stared at one another for many long, tense moments.

The pirate moved quickly, grabbing Charles and picking him up. At first Sean thought the Professor was being crushed to death, but then he heard the deep laughter.

“Charles Bryant, you old dog!” the pirate leader yelled as he continued to hold the Professor in a spirited embrace. “What in blazes are you doing in the middle of pirate territory?”

Charles patted the man on the back and smiled.

“Looking for you, Sam.”

END OF EPISODE TWO

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