

The mood was tense on the bridge as Charles slowed the ship to a stop. They had already returned Sam to the Buccaneer fleet and then Charles had brought himself, Sean and Penelope back to the place where they had first met up with the Gray Buccaneers. Outside the viewport they could see the old freighter that they had originally been in. Sean's spirits rose as he looked out at it.

"Does this mean?" he asked.

After a long moment Charles stood up and looked at him.

"You and Penelope get on the freighter and take it back to Academia 7," Charles said. "There's an old military base on the outskirts of town that I've made into a small hideaway. Not even the university knows about it. Once you're on board the freighter I'll send over the location. Take Penelope there and lay low until I contact you."

Charles leaned down and punched in the commands to dock with the freighter. The ships collided together hard, the docking systems totally shot on their commandeered bandit ship after their getaway just a few hours before. The clamps on the freighter engaged and the ships were connected together.

Sean gathered some things and then the three of them walked silently towards the airlock. When they reached it Sean pulled it open. Penelope paused before going through.

"Thank you, Professor Bryant," she said.

Charles just nodded. She turned and disappeared into the freighter.

"I think you're doing the right thing, Professor," Sean said.

"The right thing shouldn't land you on the wrong side of the law," Charles responded.

His stern comeback hung in the air. A moment later Charles looked up and stared his student in the eye.

"But the galaxy isn't always black and white, is it?" he said.

Sean offered a weak smile.

"Apparently not, sir."

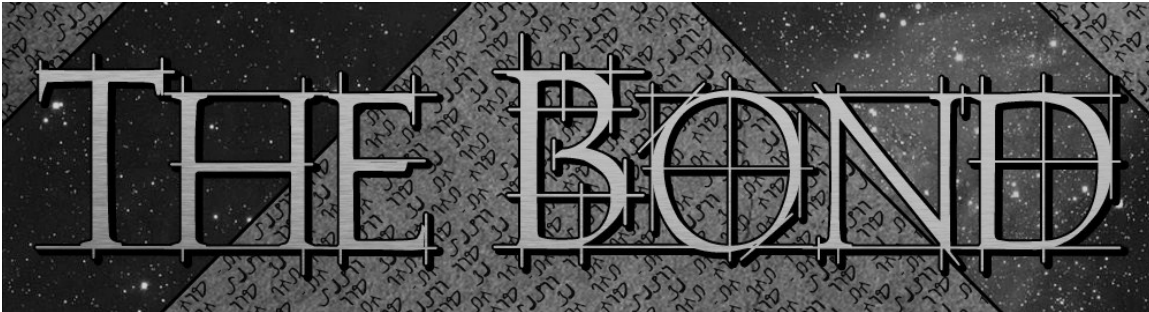
"Stay out of sight, don't take any chances," Charles said. "Just keep her safe until I contact you."

"You can count on me," Sean said.

Sean took a step onto the freighter and Charles closed the airlock behind him. Once it was sealed he returned to the bridge and watched out the viewport as the freighter sputtered to life and then flew away in the direction of Academia 7. Even after the freighter had flown so far that it disappeared from sight Charles still didn't start his own ship. He sat alone in the captain's chair, staring out at the blackness of space. It looked infinite, unending. Somewhere out there Isaac Falkinburg lived on, unscathed by his run-in with Charles, unpunished for what he had done to Charles' wife. The idea of it crushed Charles, made him wish he could sit there in space and just drift.

He sighed heavily and sat up in the chair, unsure of how long he had been sitting there brooding. As much as he didn't want to, he had business back home to attend to. Penelope was a criminal now, and since he had let her go so was he.

Charles pushed the lever in front of him forward, kicking the engines on. His mind was already working on the beginnings of a plan and for a moment he was glad for the big problems laid out before him. At least it gave him something to focus on, something to keep his mind from fixating completely on Isaac Falkinburg. It was only a small amount of relief, the briefest glimmer of peace, but at least it was something.



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EPISODE FIVE – “THE WRONG SIDE OF THINGS”

A chime rang out as Charles opened the door and stepped inside. A glowing sign lit up the room, spinning around with the business name, Jerry the Bondsman. His friend never had been very creative.

There was usually a secretary out front to greet customers but the desk stood empty.

“Be with you in one moment!” Jerry called out from his office in the back.

Charles stood, waiting for his friend to appear. A moment later Jerry came around the corner.

“Charles! I’ve been expecting you.”

“We need to talk,” Charles said.

Jerry nodded. He moved to the door and locked it, then flicked off the sign. He led Charles into his office and motioned towards one of the comfortable chairs. Charles plopped down into it, then rested his head in his hands. Jerry watched him closely as he took a seat behind his desk.

“What’s wrong?” Jerry asked. “What happened?”

“Isaac Falkinburg got away,” Charles said. “I tracked him to an abandoned space station, but he got away. I had a shot on him, but one of his underlings jumped in the way and took the bullet.”

It was clear from his tone of voice just how devastated Charles was over this.

“How’d you reach the station?” Jerry asked. “It sounded like Falkinburg had a whole fleet of ships with him.”

“I enlisted the aid of the Gray Buccaneers.”

“Sam’s Buccaneers?” Jerry asked.

Charles nodded. Jerry laughed and slapped his desk.

“I haven’t seen old Sam since he stole that Mancho Corporation super luxury yacht prototype. Do you remember that ship?”

“I do,” Charles answered.

“I’ve never seen a ship so decadent. You had to own a whole planet before they’d even consider letting you lease a cabin on that thing,” Jerry said with a smile. “I wonder what Sam ended up doing with it.”

Charles smiled slightly.

“He wrecked it,” he said.

“You’re kidding me.”

Charles shook his head.

“Nope. Someone bet him that he couldn’t make the canyon run on Tyvul 4 in it,” Charles said.

Jerry let out another laugh.

“He didn’t!”

Charles smiled wider.

“He sure didn’t,” he said. “He didn’t even make it halfway through before he clipped the canyon wall and sent the cruiser nose first into the river below. He’s lucky he survived the wreck!”

The bondsman howled with laughter and Charles smiled, enjoying thinking about the times he shared with Sam and Jerry. Even though it had been a bad period in his life, the two men had been the only thing that kept him from plunging fully into the darkness. Without them, he knew that he would’ve lost all connection with his old self, with any of the goodness inside of him.

Charles watched Jerry as the man continued to laugh. Once the greatest hand to hand combatant Charles had ever known, Jerry had let himself go after starting his business. Too much time spent behind the desk had made him pudgy and slow, but he was still a great friend.

After the laughter stopped Charles leaned forward in his chair.

“What can you tell me about the Four Horsemen?” he asked.

Jerry shook his head.

“Not much, I’m afraid. A lot of big talk, some devoted followers, hushed whispers that they’re going to make a big impact soon. You know how it is, we’ve heard the same thing countless times about countless organizations. But, and this is just a hunch by the way, I have a feeling that the Four Horsemen might be for real,” Jerry answered. “Why? Does Isaac Falkinburg have something to do with them?”

“Isaac Falkinburg is one of them. They call him the Conqueror, or the White Horse.”

Jerry let out a low whistle.

“Well damn,” he said.

The two sat in silence for a moment then Charles stood up.

“I need to get back to the University. I’m going to see what I can dig up on the Four Horsemen.”

Jerry nodded and the two men shook hands. As Charles reached the door his friend called out to him.

“Why were you so upset when you first came in here?”

Charles paused but didn’t turn around.

“It’s the girl, isn’t it?” Jerry asked. “You didn’t turn in Penelope Falkinburg, did you?”

Charles turned around to face his friend.

“I couldn’t do it, Jerry. She’s innocent in all of this, I couldn’t let her take the fall for Isaac. That list of charges he faces, one of them is related to the attack on the cruiser, the attack that killed my wife.”

Charles paused for a moment so he could keep his emotions in check.

“I couldn’t let anyone else be tried for that crime. Isaac Falkinburg alone will answer for it.”

Jerry nodded slowly.

“When the law shows up asking about Penelope I’ll buy you as much time as I can,” Jerry said. “But everyone saw that video of you saving her on the University steps, they know you took the job. They’re going to figure out pretty quick that you’re hiding her.”

“I understand,” Charles said. “Thank you Jerry. I’m sorry to put you on the wrong side of things.”

Jerry laughed.

“It won’t be the first time we’ve been on the wrong side of things,” he said.



Charles walked quickly down the hall of the University, hopeful that he wouldn’t run into anyone. He paused at an intersection and peered around the corner. Seeing no one, he turned and continued down the hall to his office. He breathed a sigh of relief as he pushed the door open, thankful to be back in his office where he could relax and do research in peace.

“Welcome home Professor Bryant.”

In one swift motion Charles pulled his knife and brought it up in front of him, ready to throw it. He stalled just long enough to identify who had spoken. Professor Gordon Fay was sitting behind Charles' desk, resting his feet on it.

"I hope you don't mind my waiting," Fay said. "I heard you were back on campus and wanted to speak with you."

Charles relaxed and put his knife away. He closed the door behind him and then stepped inside. He wasn't in the mood to deal with Fay right now and gave the man a nasty look.

"What do you want, Gordon?"

Fay smiled.

"I want you fired from the University and then tried for the crimes that you've committed."

Charles paused for a moment, trying to think if there was any way that Fay could know that he hadn't turned in Penelope.

"You're a brute," Fay continued. "Your disregard for rules and laws would've gotten anyone else fired and jailed, but not you. Not with your earning potential, not with the Dean in your pocket."

Growing angry, Fay stood up and pointed at Charles.

"Dean Washington may not care about anything other than money, but I assure you that I do," Fay said. "I don't care that the media thinks you're some sort of a hero, I'm going to see to it that your true nature is exposed."

This was the last thing that Charles wanted to be dealing with. He was tired and troubled, making it all the more difficult to keep a grip on his temper. Staring into the outraged face of Gordon Fay just made it worse, so Charles turned to walk into the side room of the office. All professors were given an office that came equipped with a small personal side room. Made up of a shower and a small bed, these gave the professors a small level of comfort any time they were stuck on campus.

Fay moved quickly and got in front of Charles, blocking him from entering the side room.

"I'm not done talking to you yet," Fay said angrily.

Charles pulled his knife again. Fay's eyes went wide.

"You... you wouldn't..."

Charles grabbed Fay by the shoulder and dove to the side, pulling him down. A scattergun blast rang out from the darkened corner of the side room. It sounded like an animal's roar and the bullets barely missed Charles and Fay as they hit the floor.

Recovering quickly, Charles got to his hands and knees. He pointed at his desk.

"Get under there," he whispered.

Fay just stared at him dumbly, his eyes as wide as possible. Charles shoved him hard, sending him rolling towards the desk.

"Stay under there," Charles said.

Charles got back to his feet and inched along the wall towards the open door to the side room. He took a deep breath as he reached the opening, then leaned out. The gun fired again and Charles jerked back as fast as he could. Bullets tore into the door frame where his head had been just a second before.

Wasting no time, Charles rushed into the side room. He dove and went into a forward roll as the assassin fired again. Some of the bullets grazed Charles' back, stinging him with pain. He sprung out of the roll and slammed into the unknown assailant hard, shoving the individual back into the wall.

Charles moved to disarm the man, knowing it was going to leave him open to counterattack. He used both hands, simultaneously stabbing the assassin's wrist with his knife and hitting the gun with his other hand. The scattergun fell onto the floor but the assassin rushed forward. The person was of an average build but very strong and they moved fast, driving Charles backwards. The two came barreling out of the side room, Charles barely maintaining his balance. The assassin slammed him back first into the desk and the two of them flipped over it.

Fay recoiled further under the desk as the two men landed in the floor right next to him. Charles' knife hit and tumbled towards Fay, sliding to a stop right in front of his face. He slowly reached out, his hand trembling, and picked up the weapon. He held it delicately between his thumb and index finger.

The assassin looked over and saw Fay. He smiled and crawled towards him. The man snatched the knife from Fay's hand.

"Thanks teach," the man said with a wicked smile.

Fay tried to scoot further away but was pressed against the desk, as far underneath it as he could possibly go. The assassin thrust the knife, aiming for Fay's neck. At the last second Charles' hand shot out and caught the assassin's wrist, halting the blade just inches from Fay's neck.

The two men struggled mightily, their arms quaking as they matched strength. Fay could only watch, his face pale, knowing that his life was hanging in the balance. Charles slid in behind the assassin and wrapped his arm around the man's neck, wrenching back on it as hard as he could.

The assassin's strength was fading and his arm shook violently as he tried one last push to get the blade into Fay's neck. Charles ripped backwards as hard as he could, twisting the man's arm enough that the blade pointed at his own chest. In one violent motion Charles yanked, causing the man to plunge the blade into himself. The assassin's eyes went wide as the knife sunk deep into him. Charles twisted it, keeping the pressure on until he was sure the man was dead. He released the body and it fell forward onto Fay.

Fay saw the blood pouring out of the man, much of it landing on him, and his eyes rolled back in his head and he fainted.



“All I've got are a bunch of weapons,” Sean called out. “You?”

“Just emergency rations over here,” Penelope answered.

Sean clicked his tongue and turned back around. They were in a reinforced basement at the abandoned military base. Laying low had proven to be rather boring and Sean shrugged as he walked back to the table.

“I guess it's another game of cards then,” he said, looking down at the deck of cards they had been using.

Penelope returned to the table and sat across from Sean. He dealt each of them ten cards and she sighed as she looked at them. Finally she sat them on the table.

“I really don't want to play cards anymore,” she said.

Sean threw his cards down.

“Thank goodness,” he said with a relieved smile. “I hate playing cards.”

Penelope laughed.

“Me too.”

Once the laughter faded they sat, still stuck with nothing to do. Penelope leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table.

“So what do you study at the University?” Penelope asked.

“Bounty Hunting, primarily.”

“That’s really what you want to do with your life?”

Sean nodded.

“Ever since I was little,” he answered. “Some guys do it because they like the action, but that’s not why I like it. There’s a lot of injustice in this galaxy, and guys like Charles Bryant work to change that. I know one or two people can’t change much, but if I can right just a few wrongs before I die, I figure that’s a pretty good way to spend a life.”

Penelope stared at him. She hadn’t realized the young man took his work so seriously.

“What about friends? What do you do for fun?”

Sean looked down embarrassedly.

“I guess I’d have to say that Professor Bryant is my only real friend,” he said. “Being his number one student means that you’re either in class, training, or out on a mission. It doesn’t leave time for much else.”

He felt foolish and tried to further explain himself.

“Plus you’re in the media’s eye at all times. Professor Bryant is such a well known figure, the news would love to find a juicy story to embarrass him. His number one student out partying or caught in compromising situations probably wouldn’t go over too well with the Professor.”

Penelope chuckled.

“No, I expect not.”

He felt better now that she had laughed and he smiled too.

“Does your family live here on Academia 7?” Penelope asked.

Sean’s mood darkened and he shook his head.

“No. They’ve got a place on the other side of the galaxy, which suits me just fine. They’ve got places on a lot of worlds, actually. My father’s very wealthy,” Sean said, pausing for a moment. “But no, no place here or anywhere near here.”

“Oh,” she said.

Wanting to put an end to the tension he had created Sean cleared his throat and spoke.

“What about your family?”

“I’m an only child and my parents are both dead,” Penelope answered.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

She shook her head.

“You don’t have to be. I miss them. My dad was hoping for a boy, so his way of coping with me was to just ignore the fact that I was female.”

Penelope paused and chuckled as she lost herself in the memories.

“He taught me how to hunt, how to protect myself, how to survive in a tough galaxy,” she continued. “I hated him for it at the time but as I became an adult I realized just how valuable those lessons were.”

She took a moment to reflect, then kept talking.

“They died in a cruiser accident six years ago. It was actually at their funeral that I met Isaac.”

“Really?”

“He did business with my father. He was very attentive to me. I was all alone and he made it feel like I still had connections, that there was still something worth living for.”

Penelope smiled.

“I know it must sound mad, talking about him this way after all we’ve learned, but I truly did love him. That’s what made it so hard to accept everything that happened, those charges that were brought against him.”

“Some people are masters at disguising their true nature,” Sean offered.

Penelope shook her head.

“No, I was just a fool. I was blinded by fear, the thought of him going away and me being all alone again. Deep down something was off with those charges and how he reacted, I sensed it, but I just ignored my instincts. Exactly what my dad taught me not to do. So I signed on as the bond and well, you know how that turned out.”

She stared down at the table, the events of the past few days coming back fresh into her mind. Sean reached across and placed his hand on hers. A loud beeping came from his belt and he reached for it.

“My communicator,” he explained.

He pulled the small device out and pressed it.

“Are you two okay?” Charles asked through the communicator.

“We’re fine, just laying low like you said,” Sean answered.

“The Four Horsemen have sent assassins here after us,” Charles said. “I just dispatched one here at the University but there’s going to be more.”

Penelope looked at Sean worriedly.

“What do you want us to do, Professor?” Sean asked.

“Head over to Jerry Rapada’s house. He’s going to get you and Penelope out of the city while I figure things out.”

“Are you sure that’s the best plan?” Sean asked.

“For now it’s the only plan we’ve got. Travel smart, stay out of sight, and I’ll be in touch soon.”

The communicator went silent and Sean and Penelope shared an intense look.

“Let’s get ready to move,” Sean said.



Charles finished drying himself and then tossed the towel into the floor. He quickly dressed into fresh clothes, then exited the side room. He walked to his desk and knelt down behind it. Fay was still lying beneath it, unconscious. Charles lightly slapped the man across the face. Fay’s eyelids fluttered and a moment later he woke.

“What happened?” Fay asked.

Charles offered his hand and Fay reluctantly took it. Charles pulled him to his feet. Fay leaned heavily against the desk. He rubbed his forehead, then looked around the office. When he saw the body of the assassin lying in the floor he jumped.

“What have you done?!” he yelled.

“I stopped him from killing us, that’s what I’ve done.”

Fay shoved Charles hard, a look of pure hatred in his eyes.

“I never asked you to kill on my behalf!” he shouted. “Don’t you dare put that on me!”

Charles opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You're a highly trained professional, surely you could've just subdued the man," Fay ranted. "But no, in the lawless world of Charles Bryant it's kill or be killed, isn't that right?"

Charles was dangerously close to losing control of his temper. He moved forward suddenly, causing Fay to jump back and slam into the desk. Fay moved around the desk quickly, backing towards the door.

"I saved your life!" Charles yelled.

Fay let out a sinister chuckle.

"All you did was prove your true nature," he said. "You're a killer Charles, through and through."

Fay paused long enough to throw open the door to the office.

"And I'm going to do whatever it takes to have you punished!"

With that he took off out of the room and sprinted down the hallway. Charles stepped out into the hall only to find a mass of students gathered around, staring at him. Dean Washington came pushing his way through the crowd, but smiled when he saw Charles.

"Charles, my boy, what's got Fay so riled up?"

Charles shook his head.

"I saved his life and somehow it just made him hate me even more."

Dean Washington put his arm around Charles and led him back into the office.

"Don't worry about that now, Gordon's just an emotional creature, that's all."

The Dean paused as he saw the dead body.

"Oh my," he said, covering his mouth with his hand. "Yes, well, the authorities should be here any minute to help you sort this out."

"You called the cops?" Charles asked.

The Dean looked surprised.

"I heard gunfire in my school, of course I called the cops. Should I not have done that?"

Charles gave his best disarming smile.

"No, no, of course that's the right thing to do. I was about to do it myself."

His mind was racing. Charles knew that the authorities may already be onto him for not turning in Penelope. The University wasn't the place to get himself cornered and he quickly started gathering up some things.

“Didn't you say in your second book that you should always leave the scene of a crime undisturbed so the police can properly investigate?” Dean Washington asked.

Charles stopped and turned towards the man, trying hard to hide his annoyance.

“Yes, of course Dean, very good,” Charles said.

He moved past the Dean and stepped into the hallway, hoping that he could slip off before the man noticed. Charles moved towards the crowd of students but Dean Washington caught his arm from behind.

“You aren't leaving are you Charles?” Dean Washington asked. “The police will need to speak to you of course.”

Charles looked back at the office, then to the Dean.

“Just a quick errand I need to run,” Charles said.

“Do you think that's wise? Leaving before they arrive?”

Charles gently pulled his arm away and smiled.

“I'll only be a moment. It's a very important task.”

Before the Dean could respond Charles rushed into the throng of students. He pushed his way through them and then started sprinting once he was past. He took the first turn he came to and then slammed hard into a door, flinging it open. He rushed outside but slowed as he heard his communicator beeping. Charles pulled it from his belt and activated it.

“Charles, where are you?”

It was Jerry Rapada.

“Leaving the University. What's wrong?”

“There are men here trying to break into my house,” Jerry said. “I need your help Charles!”

The communicator cut off suddenly. Charles cursed under his breath. He pressed a button to connect with Sean, wanting to warn him away from going to Jerry's, but there was no answer. He pressed it again, but again there was no answer.

Charles replaced the communicator and ran across the campus as fast as he could. He veered into the student parking area and approached a sleek looking hover-bike. These high end vehicles were available only to the wealthiest of people, but they were notoriously easy to steal if one knew what they were doing. Charles tore off the panel on the side of the bike and began pulling out wires. He then replaced them in a different order and soon the bike roared to life. He threw his leg across it and wrenched back on the handle, causing it to jerk to life.

Charles made a mental note of the serial number on the bike so he could reimburse the owner at a later date, but right now felt no remorse for boosting it. Jerry was in danger, and soon Sean and Penelope would be walking right into it as well.

END OF EPISODE 5

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