

Friday
September 1st, 2028
00:27 hours (PST)

KJ found himself a little overwhelmed at the group of officers that were assembled before him. Normally, the conference room was dedicated to the highest ranking officers as they discussed strategy of political issues, but today, it was filled with the elite of the elite from Space Patrol Delta.

He stood in front of a long, rectangular table, doing his best to remain calm. At the center was Commander Tate, who had recently seen fit to give KJ the Shadow ranger morpher. It was an honor as not many people were trusted to wield the power of the shadow morpher, so he was determined to do his best. To the left of Commander Tate was Admiral Eric Myers, who KJ remembered seeing as a child as the Quantum Ranger as part of Bio-Lab's Silver Guardian team. Years later, Bio-Lab would merge with Lightspeed Rescue, and together they were integrated into SPD. His last run in with Admiral Myers left a bad taste in his mouth, and KJ was hoping to make a better impression this time around. To Admiral Myers' left was Admiral Wesley Collins, the original red Time Force ranger. It was Wesley surrendering his morpher to SPD that led to the reverse engineering of the SPD morphers, as well as weapons, tech and upgrades for existing systems. There were rumors that the technology came from the future, but KJ dismissed those rumors. *Time travel isn't real*, he scoffed to himself. Next to Admiral Myers was Dr. Kat Manx, probably the oldest employee in Space Patrol Delta. While he would never bring himself to ask her age, the rumor was that she was a few years shy of 145 years old. *Not that she looked like it*, he thought. At first glance she appeared to be in his mid to late 20s, but that probably had something to do with her being from another planet, he speculated.

Sitting to the right of Commander Tate was Admiral Anubis Cruger, or Doggie, as he was affectionately called by his peeps, not that KJ would dare call him that. Cruger was responsible for single handedly defeating Emperor Grumm a few years ago, and was currently working in the Theta Quadrant on the other side of the galaxy. Tales of his accomplishments were legendary, but now, standing there in front of him, KJ couldn't help but wonder how Cruger managed to fit his protruding dog-like snout in the Shadow Ranger helmet. To Cruger's right was Ethan James, who KJ had heard was a former ranger, though he wasn't sure which team he was a part of. During his four years in SPD academy, he'd seen Ethan create some of the most advanced systems in the quadrant. He was, putting it mildly, a genius. To Ethan's right was Dr. Rose Ortiz, who KJ remembered reading about in history class. She was the former pink Operation Overdrive Ranger, and probably one of the brightest minds in the galaxy. Along with Ethan James, the two of them kept SPD's systems up and running. And finally, at the end, to Rose' right, was Boom. Most officers coming into SPD was unaware of the bravery and selflessness Boom displayed during the Troobian war. Despite having no powers, no special abilities and no training, Boom lunged head first into battle against Grumm's army and not only

survived it, managed to play a part in defeating the invasion forces. While Boom was a bit unorthodox, there was no denying his passion.

“Computer, deactivate communications coming in and out of this room. Seal the doors. No one without level 9 access should be granted access. Authorization Tate gamma 37,” the commander announced.

“Authorization confirmed. Room sealed,” the computer announced.

“Thank you for joining us so early in the morning, ensign,” Admiral Cruger stated, starting the meeting off. “You may stand at ease.”

“Thank you, sir,” KJ responded, loosening up a bit, hoping that his nervousness wasn’t showing.

“What we’re about to tell you has never been told to anyone with less than level 9 clearance. I expect you will be discreet with this information as it is of the utmost importance,” the admiral stated.

“Of course, sir.”

“Three weeks ago, the B-Squad rangers were sent to Emberiian as part of a rescue effort to retrieve not only the Phantom Ranger, but to retrieve the lost red energem,” he paused. “Are you familiar with energems, ensign?” Admiral Myers asked.

“Only what I’ve read about them in history logs. They were entrusted to a race of beings called Keepers, only to be used when the planet was in great danger. There were ten of them total,” he elaborated.

“Very good, you know your history. There were ten energems total, which was given to the Phantom Ranger to be used as a power source for an experimental ranger armor technology. In addition to be a perpetual power source, once the energem bonds with the host DNA, the host essentially becomes immortal, unable to be destroyed as long as they are in possession of it. You can imagine why these gems must be protected at all costs,” Admiral Cruger mentioned.

“Yes, sir.”

It was Admiral Collins who picked up a small device, pressing a button, and a holographic image of the Phantom Ranger appeared in front of them. “What very few people know is that the Phantom Ranger has been in possession of his powers for a little over 30 years now. The energem keeps his young and strong, and he goes wherever he is needed, staying only long enough to complete his task before moving on. He normally checks in

every 2 to 3 months, if for nothing else to make sure he isn't needed on Earth, but his last transmission came from Emberian almost 6 months ago. We sent the B-Squad to investigate, but we haven't heard from this since their initial departure. We have concerns that they have been captured or killed."

"So you want me to retrace their steps and see if I can track them down?" KJ inquired.

"Your primary mission is to retrieve the energem. Everything else is secondary," Commander Tate told him.

"What about the B-Squad?"

"Everything else is secondary," he repeated.

Rose raised one finger slightly, getting KJ's attention. "Understand that the energem makes the user immortal. If it were to fall into the wrong hands, our enemies would be unstoppable. We cannot allow that to happen," she said.

"We are sending you to KO-35 to meet with one of our ambassadors. From there you will be provided an unmarked shuttle as something bearing the name SPD may be shot down and destroyed. The shuttle will be just big enough for one person, no sleeping quarters, no food replication systems and very limited weapons. It is meant for one way, long range travel," Ethan explained.

"One way, sir? How will I get back?"

There was an awkward moment of silence in the room as each of them looked at one another, then back at KJ.

"We have probes that will maintain a censor lock on you at all times. Assuming you find either the Phantom Ranger or the B-Squad, you will travel back with them. Realistically, the chances of surviving this journey round trip is about 50%," Rose told him.

"Actually, 47.39%," Ethan added.

"We cannot order you to accept this mission, ensign. If you feel as though it is too much, or you have any reason you do not wish to go, no one in this room will think less of you. However, we would ask that you keep this quiet. This is above top secret," Admiral Collins said.

KJ could think of plenty of reasons not to go, but somehow, standing in a room full of people who had given their lives to SPD and the betterment of all mankind, he couldn't find it in his heart to refuse.

"I accept, sir."

"Don't accept because you're trying to play the hero, kid. You might die. In fact, chances are you'll never even make it to J'Saari space. You'll die out there for nothing, and because its classified above top secret, no one would ever know what you did. You will have died for nothing," Admiral Myers told him.

"Or... I can find the B-Squad rangers and the Phantom Ranger, bring back the energem and save them all," he brought up.

"I appreciate your optimism, ensign. Very well. Dr. Manx will brief you on provisions that need to be taken," Admiral Cruger said.

Dr. Manx, with a small device in her hand, pressed a button. The image of the Phantom Ranger disappeared, and in his place was a holographic star chart.

"J'Saari space is filled with enestazine gas, it will wreak havoc on your ship's navigational sensors and your nervous system. Report to the infirmary for the necessary injections to prevent your internal organs from melting," she said.

"Melting?" he asked cautiously.

"Enestazine liquefies organic material in a matter of minutes, which is why that area of space is forbidden. Even your ship will begin to break down after 24 hours of exposure. It will start with a series of hull breaches until finally life support is compromised and you suffocate in the vacuum of space," Rose explained.

"Or freeze to death in -454 degree temperatures," Ethan included.

KJ took a deep breath. "I can do this," he said.

"In addition to the injections, you will be given my shadow morpher. You should remain morphed at all times. The protection from your suit will shield you from the effects of space, but only for a limited time. While the cold won't destroy you, the lack of oxygen will," Admiral Cruger informed him.

"I've also rigged the shuttle with enhanced shielding to help against the cold and the enestazine gas clouds. It should improve your chances by at least 4%," Boom added, injecting himself into the conversation.

"There is one more thing," the group turned their attention to Admiral Collins. "Long range scans have picked up an ion cloud just outside J'Saari space. Your shuttle has been equipped to detect and avoid these clouds. If you hit one, it will knock out propulsion. You will drift in space until you eventually starve to death, or until the shuttle runs out of energy and you eventually freeze to death without life support. This is a dangerous mission, ensign. Are you sure you're up for it?"

"Permission to speak freely?" he asked.

"By all means."

"I've been in SPD for a long time now, watching as everyone around me moved up and advanced through the system. Hell, Commander Tate was a cadet when I started here, and now he's sitting at the big table rubbing elbows with admirals, ambassadors and diplomatic leaders. My CO has only been in SPD a few weeks. Time after time I have been passed by because I'm told I have a bad attitude, but I have a bad attitude because I keep getting passed by. I can do this. I need to do this. All I've ever wanted was the chance to show SPD what I can do, and this is it," KJ explained to them.

"Succeeding in this mission doesn't guarantee you a promotion of any kind. No one will be singing your praises, ensign. You'll either die in space and no one will know what you did, or you will succeed in your mission and no one will know what you did. This isn't about making a name for yourself, or advancing your career," Commander Tate pointed out to him.

"I get that. Either way this goes, everyone in this room will know that when SPD called, KJ Ford stepped up. *I'll know* what happened. That's enough for me," he said.

"Very good, ensign. Get a good night's rest, then report to Dr. Mitchell in the infirmary at 0600 hours. Shuttle hits atmo at 0630 hours," Admiral Cruger said.

"Yes, sir," KJ said proudly, saluting them.

Ensign Ella Enrile laid in bed, staring at the ceiling, restless. It had been a long, trying day, but she simply couldn't bring herself to fall asleep. It didn't help that her roommate, DeVika, was an Ameanzian. Because of their increased lung capacity, it also meant that at night, DeVika snored intensely. The first few nights she found it charming, maybe even a little endearing, but now it was becoming a hassle.

Every now and then, Ella would climb out of bed and poke DeVika just enough to get her to roll over, or switch positions. The snoring would stop, but a few moments later it was back with a vengeance.

Fed up, Ella slid out of bed, wrapping her housecoat around herself and headed out the room. She wandered down the halls of SPD, eventually coming to the common area. Along the far way were old arcade games, and on the opposite side was a giant monitor. Sometimes officers in their off time would come together and watch sporting events, or keep up with the latest news in New Tech City. But, at that time of night, Ella wasn't expecting to see very many people.

She was surprised to see Pascal wide awake and in full uniform standing with his back to the door and his arms behind his back. He seemed to be staring out the window, looking down at the promenade below.

"Hey Pas, why are you up so late?" she asked, walking over to stand next to him.

He glanced back, getting a look at her, then smiled slightly as he turned back to the window. "I just couldn't sleep. I have a lot on my mind," he said.

Ella was known for sensing people's feelings, giving her a certain emphatic ability, but as she tried to get a feel for what was on Pascal's mind, she found that she couldn't. In every instance, she would hear something, or at the very least she could hear that the person was trying to withhold something from her, but with Pascal there was just... silence.

"I can't hear you," she sighed.

"I said I couldn't sleep. I just..." he was interrupted.

"No, I hear *that*. But I can't hear *you*. You know, on the inside. Normally I get a good read on everyone, but with you there's nothing," she pointed out.

Pascal pointed to the gem on his forehead. "Our people are partially telepathic. It could be giving you some interference."

"I guess I'll just have to find out what's wrong the hard way," she wrapped her arm around him. "What's wrong, Pascal?" Ella asked.

"I don't have much of a relationship with my parents. When I decided to stay at SPD when the Aunurians pulled out of the Interplanetary Treaty, my people welcomed the chance to return home, but I didn't. I wanted to serve," he said.

"Couldn't you have done that on Xybria?"

"Imagine a race of beings all wanting nothing more than to serve others. Everyone wants to serve, but no one wants to *be* served. To serve is to lighten the burden of others, but no one there every wanted anything done for them. Coming to Earth was the only logical conclusion," he said.

"Why do you want to serve anyway?"

"My people believe that if you lighten the burdens of others, you will be granted admission to the Elysium Fields when we die. There, no one has burdens. Everyone is free to be themselves. It is the highest honor given to an Xybrian," Pascal explained.

"That sounds a lot like Xybria to me. No one wants to burden anyone else. I mean, you spend your whole life helping people, but then you die and what? Do people help you? And if they do, why are they in Xybrian heaven?" she asked.

"Heaven?"

"It's what we call Elysium Fields on Earth. It's where everyone wants to go."

"How do you get there? What tasks must be done?" Pascal asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I dunno really. No one knows for sure if Heaven is even really or not. It's all a matter of faith, really. I mean, if you do good your whole life, there has to be *something* in it for you at the end, right?"

"No. Serving is its own reward. I am happy to serve, to lighten the burdens of my friends," he paused. "But I fear I may have caused my friend pain."

"What? Who?"

"Garr. His father has disowned him, much like mine disowned me when I decided to stay in SPD. It weighs heavy on me everyday, and if my friend feels half as much pain as I do over this, I'm afraid I have cursed him to feel burdened for the rest of his life," he told her.

"Well, if it makes you feel better, Aunurians only live about 15 Earth years. I think Garr is 6 or 7 now, so he won't have to live with it for long," she said, trying to cheer him up but immediately realized how terrible it sounded.

“Thank you for trying, Ella, but I will be fine. I have to talk to Garr, I have to make this right for him,” he said.

“Did it ever occur to you that this is where Garr wanted to be? You made a choice to stay here, so did he. His choice had nothing to do with you, it was *his* choice. And I get that your people want to help others, but you don’t get to assume responsibility for other people’s decisions and then feel guilty about it. That’s a quick way to get to...” she paused. “What’s the opposite of the Emerald Fields?” she asked.

“The *Elysium Fields*,” he corrected. “And there is no opposite. If you are not accepted to the afterlife, you simply cease to exist,” he said.

“Scary.”

“Very scary.”

“Well, I guess we better make the best of the time we have here. Because well... you never know,” Ella said.

Pascal smiled. “I suppose not.”

“I’m going back to bed, or at least I’m going to try. If DeVika is finished sawing down trees in there I might actually get some rest before my shift starts in the morning,” she said.

“Your roommate is cutting lumber in your room?”

Ella giggled. “Yes! Yes she is,” she said emphatically. She leaned upwards, kissing him on the cheek. “Goodnight, Pas,” she said, turning and walking out the room.