

Wednesday
September 7th, 2028
13:01 hours (PST)

Ensign Estella Enrile had been by his bedside the entire time, not once moving. Not once even thinking of being anywhere else. *Whoever this man is, he risked everything to save us, how could I leave him*, she thought to herself.

He was clearly an older man without a single strand of hair on his head. He had a full beard, no doubt from spending so much time morphed and trapped within his armor. He was, at first glance, a slightly muscular man, fairly average in height, though to be fair she knew she would have to see him standing up to make that determination for sure.

Not that it mattered, he was a hero in her book. He had given everything he had in the service of others, and she determined to be at his side until he finally opened his eyes.

The doors to the infirmary hissed open, and it was Nathaniel who walked over to her in an all black suit. He typically didn't like dressing formally, but he knew that today he would have to make an exception.

"Come on, sis. Mom is here, they're about to start the memorial," he said, placing his hand on her shoulder.

Ella did not move.

"Memorial?" she inquired.

"You know... for... for the B-Squad," he stopped, realizing she was going to make him say it.

"For dad," he sighed.

"Memorials are for dead people. Dad is fine," she said coldly.

"El, it's been months now. Hes..." she interrupted him.

"Dad is fine," she repeated.

Normally, he accepted his sister's intuition at face value. She had a way of knowing things, of feeling things. It was her talent, her gift. But this time, he was afraid he couldn't accept it.

"El, he's gone," he insisted.

Ella snatched away from him. "Dad is fine. The B-Squad is fine. And this guy... whoever he is, is fine," she snapped.

He wanted to comfort her, to help her through this process, but it was clear that she wasn't ready to take the steps necessary to deal with the loss. It was a difficult position for him to be in. Normally, he and his sister did everything together, but this time, as much as he wanted her to be right, he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

"El, come on..."

"I won't go to a parade in dad's honor until he's back to celebrate with us. It's going to be great, you'll see..." at that moment, she simply broke down into tears. "You'll see! He'll be here," she cried out.

Nathaniel wrapped his arms around her, and she struggled to get away from him, struggled to get free. She knew that accepting his comfort would mean accepting her father was gone, and she couldn't do that. She fought herself away from him.

"I'm ashamed of you, Nate. How dare you! Dad would never give up on us. NEVER. But at the first sign of trouble you just bail? I hate you!" she snapped at him.

There was so much anger, so much pain in her voice. Nathaniel was doing everything in his power to be strong, to be the center that his family needed. After all, with his father... gone, he would be the man of the house. He would be the one they looked to for strength, and he was trying, he really was.

"Sis, please..."

"Would you give up on me? Would you leave me out there so you could go to some fancy parade to remember me? Or would you be out there looking for me?!" Ella scoffed at him.

"It's been months, El. We've done everything we..."

"No we haven't. Dad would expect more of us. You know that," she screamed at him, almost howling. It broke his heart to see his sister in so much pain. "I'm embarrassed to be related to you, Nathaniel. Do you think so little of our family that you would just give up like that?" before she even realized she was doing it, she swung at him as hard as she could, slapping him across the face.

It was enough to make blood trickle from the side of his mouth.

"You happy now?"

"I..." she stopped. "I HATE YOU. I HATE YOU. THIS IS YOUR FAULT," she screamed at the top of her lungs, eventually collapsing to the floor in tears.

Nathaniel, instead of picking her up, sat on the floor with her, embracing her. "Dad was a ranger," he stopped himself. "He *is* a ranger. If there is a way, he found it," he grabbed her by the shoulders, helping her up. "And we're going to find him," he assured her.

Ella wiped the tears away from her eyes, but they continued to fall quicker than she could wipe them. "Now you're talkin', Nate. What did you have in mind?"

"We'll go over the logs from the Omega Ship, see if there is anything we missed. That CaAn detention camp we were in, it's only a few light years away from J'Sarri space. If he's out there, we'll find him and bring him home!" Nathaniel promised.

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The two of them snuck into the shipyard, making their way towards the Astro Omega Ship. With most of SPD being excused from their daily work schedules to attend the memorial service for the B-Squad, it was easy for them to make their way onto the ship.

The doors to the bridge hissed open, where they found Serenity and Nik sitting in their seats.

"Going somewhere, ensigns?" Serenity asked them.

Estella wiped her face, trying to appear as professional as possible. "Sir, we were just..."

"Don't bother lying to us, ensign. We know what you're up to," Nik said.

"But..."

"But nothing. We're D-Squad. We're in this together," she said.

The doors to the lift hissed open again as Pascal and Garr stepped out, taking their positions.

"Course, sir?" Pascal asked.

Serenity looked at Nathaniel, waiting for his input. "We're headed back to J'Sarri space. We're going to find my dad," he said proudly.

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Lt. James sat in the infirmary... alone. The gentle hum of the machinery in the room was of very little comfort to her, but she knew that was her fault. So unwilling to simply deal with her problems, she decided to hide away in the infirmary... away from her daughter. Now, she was getting her wish.

The infirmary was empty. No one was in any need of medical attention, and that gave her a lot of free time to simply *be there*. She felt silly for wasting time with her daughter. Instead of seeing it as a curse, as some sort of impossible expectation to live up to, she should have been celebrating the fact that her daughter was alive and well. It was an opportunity she missed, but was determined not to make that mistake again.

She walked over to the companel, pushing a button.

"Infirmary to bridge," she said, waiting for a response.

"Yeah, mom?"

Asia turned around only to see Serenity step off the lift with a somber look on her face.

"I'm sorry," Asia sighed, rushing over to her. They wrapped their arms around one another, taking the time to embrace. She could feel her daughter's heartbeat against her own. In spite of everything that had happened, she knew that it wasn't too late for them to set aside whatever problems they had.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I threw all of this in your lap and expected you to be okay with it. It was wrong," Serenity said.

"You didn't have a choice."

"I had a choice in how I dealt with it. I was angry with you for not accepting me. I thought, *what could be so bad about me that she didn't want me*. I realize that was..." she was interrupted.

"I always wanted you. I got so caught up on not wanting to be told what to do that I didn't take a minute to realize that this is what I've always wanted," she took a step back. "Look at you, you're a woman. You're strong. Brave. Intelligent. You obviously got your good looks from me," they both giggled slightly. "I am very proud of you, Serenity," she sighed.

"Thanks mom," she cried.

"Now, what is this thing between you and Nathaniel?" Asia asked.

“Oh geez, really? This is what we’re doing?”

“I want to know what his intentions are with my daughter. Do I have to order him down here and give him the 3rd degree?” she joked.

Serenity shrugged her shoulders. “I... I don’t know what this is. I really don’t. Are we on a wild goose chase out here? Could the B-Squad really be out here somewhere?” she asked.

“If they are, we’ll find them,” she paused. “And don’t try to change the subject with me, young lady!”

Serenity rolled her eyes. “Two minutes in and you’re ready to try to play the mom card with me? Really? I need to be asking you what's up between you and Nik.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean?” she mocked. “Don’t play shy with me. He likes you. You like him,” she said.

Asia took a step back. “He seems nice, he really does, but I have a responsibility to history. We have to figure out what’s wrong with the Phantom Ranger, wake him up and I can get with the baby makin’. I know what my part is in history, and I’m willing,” she said.

“Mom? Really?” she put her hands on her hips. “Did it never occur to you that you’re suppose to be with Nik?”

“No, Micah said that...”

“She said that you were with the Phantom Ranger... one of them. Nik *is* The Phantom Ranger mom, is every way that matters. If you have feelings for him, don’t be afraid to explore them. History will take shape one way or another,” she said.

“You’re sure about this?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure about anything, but I know I want you to be happy. I know I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do, no matter the cost,” she said.

Asia smiled. “You’re a good girl,” she said.

“I learned it from watching you.”

Normally, Nathaniel was in engineering looking over systems when they were in mid flight, but today he was front and center on the bridge. In Serenity's absence, chain of command dictated that Nik would be sitting in the big chair, but Nik had graciously declined the position so that Nathaniel could take the lead.

"Anything on long range sensors, Pas?" he asked.

"No, sorry. I'll continue to do my sweep, but it's starting to..." he was interrupted as a light on his panel flashed, accompanied by beeping. "Wait a minute... I'm picking up a distress signal. Its weak, very faint," he said.

"Garr, can we boost that signal?" Nik asked.

"Garr try," he responded. "Try now!"

Pascal scanned a second time. "... I have picked up on a distress beacon. Its at least," he paused. "According to this, it is beyond the limits of explored space. Whoever sent this beacon is in uncharted waters. We have no idea what's out there," he said.

"Does it have an authentication signature on it?" Nathaniel asked.

"Checking..." there was a brief pause. "Confirmed," he spun around in his chair. "It has a SPD signature. Its one of ours," he said.

"EI, set a course at maximum transwarp!" he ordered.

"Already on it!" Ella said, plotting the course.

And in an instant, the Omega Ship took off.

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Serenity and Asia stepped onto the bridge. Nathaniel, on instinct, moved aside, allowing Serenity to sit in her chair.

"What do we have, Ella?" she asked.

“Sensors are picking up traces of the distress signal on the surface of the 5th planet, but we can’t seem to get through the layers of solid ice to get it,” she paused. “Its as if there is a shuttle down there... frozen,” she sighed.

“Alright, well let’s take a team down there and...” he was cut short.

“Hold on, chief. We’ve come all this way, we have to play this smart. Pascal, are you detecting any lifesigns down there?” Serenity asked.

“Checking,” he went over his instruments. “I... I think so, but they are faint. If I didn’t know any better I would say they were in a state of suspended animation,” he said.

“So they’re frozen?” she asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s what I said,” Ella blurted out.

“Can we drill them out with the onboard phase cannons?” she asked.

“No, the phase cannons are more blunt objects. We need more precision work done here,” Pascal brought up.

“What if we went down there with phase rifles and drilled directly into the ice?” Nik suggested.

“It’s possible, but surfaces temperatures aren’t optimal for life... at all. I estimate that even in the environmental suits, no one would survive down there for more than three minutes. Four at the most,” he said.

Nathaniel turned to Serenity. “Sir, request permission to...” he was immediately stopped.

“No, Nate. I can’t afford to risk my chief engineer out there like that,” she said.

“Is this because we’re a... a thing? You don’t want to lose your boyfriend?” he snapped.

Serenity stood up almost all at once. “You’re out of line, ensign,” she said.

“Am I? Your mom is right here with you. Shes fine. My father could be out there *dying* and you won’t let me go rescue him so you can have someone to make out with?” he almost all at once realized what he was saying, and stopped himself. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“You two are dating?” Nik asked in confusion.

"I'm sorry, chief. But my order stands. No one could survive in freezing temperatures like that," and then, almost all at once, everyone turned their attention to Garr.

"Garr do it," he said firmly.

"Even an Anurian won't last long in weather like this. He would have maybe 10 minutes at most," Pascal said.

"Garr. You have 6 minutes. No more, no less. After that, we're turning this ship around and we're heading back... empty handed or not," she said.

"You expect me to just leave my father out there like..."

"We don't even know if that *is* your father down there, Nate. And even if it is, he wouldn't want you to throw your life away on some suicide mission to save him," she turned to Garr. "Six minutes. No more, no less," she said.

"Garr understand."

Nik stood up. "I'm going with him. One of the perks to being immortal is even if I freeze to death, I'll be fine in a few hours," he turned to Nathaniel. "If your pop is down there, we'll bring him home," he promised.

"Thank you, sir."