

Wednesday
September 7th, 2028
13:52 hours (PST)

Lt. Garr and Lt. Commander Nik Martin stood in the shuttle bay, putting the finishing touches on their environmental suits to prepare for the mission. The suits themselves were bulky, but were designed to protect them extreme weather conditions, and it was the only way either of them would be able to survive in that climate. It was even more uncomfortable for Nik, as he had morphed into the Phantom Ranger under his suit.

Asia walked over to the two of them, handing them both phase rifles, then checked their suits to ensure they were properly sealed. She connected harnesses to the back of their suits, making sure they were latched tightly, then confirmed that the other end was tightly in place as well.

“You guys are good to go. I will be monitoring your vitals from here. Anything more than six months and you risk over exposure. You’ll freeze to death and there won’t be anything I can do,” she explained to them. “These things are programmed to haul you back up here automatically. So whatever you’re doing to do, you better get down there and do it fast.”

“Understood, doc,” Nik said.

Garr nodded, at least as much as he could. “Garr understand.”

Asia walked over to the control panel in the shuttle bay, pressing a button and opening, and the shuttle bay doors opened to the outside. The emergency force field immediately snapped into place, protecting Asia from not only being sucked out, but from the freezing cold. Even with the protection in place, the temperature in the shuttle bay dropped at least 20 degrees.

Nik and Garr turned to one another, nodding, then headed for the exit, jumping out. The reinforced steel cables jerked forward, but held.

The two of them lowered down to the surface of the planet, where was no more than 20 feet down. The cables ensured they didn’t fall too fast, and they landed safely to the ground. Garr turned his attention to the scanning device on the forearm of his suit, scanning.

“This say signal almost mile down... here,” he said, pointing to a spot.

Nik looked at his device, confirming. “Alright, big man. Let’s set out these beams to low yield and concentrate our phaser fire in these two spots, then the opposite two. From there we can tunnel around those locations, giving us a clear path all the way down,” he ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

The two of them adjusted the settings on their rifles, aimed and fired, burrowing down through the ice. The surface began to tremble.

“Hold!” Nik called out, holding up his arm.

Garr stopped firing.

“I think we’re good here,” Nik leaned down, jumping up and down on the area they’d drilled in, and the ice gave way, allowing them both to fall deeper into tunnel they created.

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“They’re in,” Ella said, monitoring their progress on the sensors on the bridge.

Serenity sat in her chair nervously, and Nathaniel sat in the chair to the right, both of them on pins and needles.

“Keep a lock on them, ensign. We don’t want to lose our people down there,” Serenity said. Not as if Ella wasn’t going to do that anyway, but she wanted to be sure they were taking every precaution.

“Aye, sir.”

“Pascal. As soon as they are back on board, I want you to reverse course and get us out of here as quickly as possible,” she said.

“Understood.”

Serenity reached over for Nathaniel’s hand, and he quickly obliged her. Both of their hands were clammy as they waited, hoping for the best.

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The two of them landed on what appeared to be the top of the shuttle craft. Both of them placed their rifles on their backs, then turned to their scanning devices again.

“It seems that all systems were disengaged to divert power to their distress signal,” he paused. “Only minimum life support is functioning. From the looks of it, based on when the distress signal began to transmit, this shuttle has been down here for almost a month,” Nik explained.

Garr checked his scanner. "One life sign. Weak."

Nik pressed a button on his suit. "Martin to Omega Ship. We're going to need a power transfer down here. The system is running on minimum energy," he said.

"Understood Lt. Commander. We're transferring power remotely... now," Pascal announced over the com system.

"Power restored," Garr said.

"That's good. Cut it," Nik ordered.

"Power transfer stopped."

"Is there any way we can erect a force field around this area? If anyone is in there, without an environmental suit, opening this shuttle up will kill them in seconds," he said.

"Stand by."

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"What can we do for them, Pas?" Nathaniel asked.

"There is no way to erect a force field around that area, not without emitters in place on the surface, and those will not survive in these weather conditions. Even if they could, it would take much too long to setup and configure. We can't extend the shields around them as it would disconnect the harnesses almost instantly," he said.

"What about a tractor beam?" Ella inquired. "Now that they're at the shuttle, shouldn't we be able to lock onto it with a beam and pull it out of there?"

Serenity turned to Nathaniel, who was already going over calculations in his head. He paused for a moment, then pressed the button in the arm rest.

"Lt. Commander, if you can widen the hole you created, we can lock on to the shuttle with a tractor beam and pull it back up. Is there any way you can increase the size of it by... lets say, 25 meters?" he asked.

"We can, but it will take almost three full minutes to do. We're running on borrowed time here." Nik answered.

“Do what you can in two minutes, and try to get to as close as 25 meters as you can. We’ll pull you back up, and once you’re back on board we can lock onto the shuttle,” he said.

“*Understood.*”

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Lt. Commander Martin and Garr set their rifles to a wider band and increased the intensity, then began to do their best to widen the hole. Almost half way through, Garr’s rifle began to lose power, and within seconds powered down completely.

“Rifle frozen,” Garr announced.

A chunk of ice above them gave way, falling and colliding with Lt. Commander Martin’s helmet.

“*Warning. Containment seal broken. Full breach imminent,*” the suit’s onboard system announced.

“Omega Ship, I have a broken seal down here. I estimate 1 minute to full exposure and Garr’s rifle is frozen solid. I’m sending him back to the ship and I’ll do what I can alone,” he announced.

“No. Garr no leave.”

“That’s an order. Lt. James, pull him up... now!” he ordered.

“Garr head of security. Garr won’t...” he was interrupted as his harness began to retract, pulling him back up to the ship.

“*You have 45 seconds to do what you can, Lt. Commander. Then you’re coming back up. No exceptions,*” Serenity order.

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There was no response.

“Lt. Commander, respond!” she called out again, but was met with silence.

“Nate, you have the bridge. I’m going down to the shuttle bay,” Serenity said, standing up and rushing to the lift.

The doors to the shuttle bay slid open, and Serenity hurried over to Asia, who was disconnecting Garr from his harness.

"We've lost communications with Nik down on the surface. How long before his harness brings him back up?" she asked.

"Any second now," Asia responded.

At that exact moment, the harness connected to Lt. Commander Martin began to retract, but when the end made it back to the ship, he was not connected to it. Serenity stared down at the cable, discovering that it had been burned... but phaser fire.

"That stubborn son of a..."

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"It's been six minutes and 30 seconds," Pascal reported. "They are out of time."

Nathaniel leaned forward, taking a second to think. "How wide is the opening, Pas?" he asked.

"It is approximately 30 meters. To get a lock on the shuttle with the tractor beam and successfully pull it up, it needs to be at least 3 more meters wide," he said.

"Are they still drilling?"

"Yes, but they are out of time."

He paused. "Ei, when the hole is exactly 31 and a half meters wide, lock on the shuttle with the tractor beam and pull it up," he said.

"That's not big enough."

"It'll be a rough ride, but it'll have to be enough," he said.

"Aye, sir," Ella said, making the calculations.

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"Warning. Full suit containment breach. Oxygen compromised," the suit announced.

Nik continued to fire, trying to widen the hole as much as he could, but much like Garr's rifle had done earlier, his was beginning to freeze under the weather conditions. The crack in his helmet had gotten bigger, and he was feeling the full effects of the cold.

Eventually, his rifle gave out completely, but by that point, Lt. Commander Martin had collapsed on the roof of the shuttle, barely conscious.

"Now... do it now," he managed to say.

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"Tractor beam engaged," Ella announced, going over the readings. "We've got it, Nate. The shuttle will take some minor hull damage, but it will be on the ship in exactly 40 seconds," she told him.

Nathaniel pressed the button on his armrest. "Bridge to shuttle bay. Is Nik on board?" he asked.

"That's a negative, chief. The Lt. Commander is not on board. He cut his cable intentionally," Asia responded.

"That stubborn son of a..."

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The tractor beam pulled the shuttle into the shuttle bay, landing it gently next to the others. While it was still covered with ice, Lt. Commander Martin was seen clutching to the top of the shuttle, almost frozen in place.

Serenity rushed over to him, but Asia grabbed her arm.

"You can't touch it. It'll rip the flesh right off on your bones. It's been in below zero weather much too long," she said.

"So what can we do?"

Asia hurried over to the panel. "Everyone out of the shuttle bay. I'm going to increase the temperature in here by 50 percent and see if it helps," she said.

Garr, who had finally removed his suit, completely ignored her orders, rushing over to the shuttle, reaching up and pulling Lt. Commander Martin down. He hit the floor with a thud, burning Garr's hands in the process.

"Friend safe," Garr announced, disregarding the pain as he disconnected Nik's helmet, tossing it aside.

"Get both of them down to the infirmary. I'll do what I can to thaw this shuttle out," Serenity ordered.

"Aye, sir," Asia answered.

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Lt. Commander Martin opened his eyes slowly, discovering that he was not in the med bay of the ship, but instead was in the infirmary back at SPD headquarters. He was no longer in the Phantom Ranger armor, and had been hooked to machines.

He turned slightly to see Garr sitting on a bed next to him with his hands bandaged up.

"Wh... what happened?" he mumbled.

"What happened is you disobeyed a direct order from your superior officer, put your own life at risk to secure a shuttlecraft, and as a result Garr has severe frostbite in both of his hands trying to save you. And I'm told he has a serious case of hypothermia, which is unusual for a cold blooded species, as you can imagine," Commander Tate said, walking into the room.

"I accept whatever consequences you see fit, sir. I did what I had to do to save the B-Squad," he said unapologetically.

"I would have done the same thing in your place. Well done, both of you," he said.

Nik sighed with relief.

"B-Squad, are they..."

"We managed to get the shuttle open, but there was only one member of B-Squad inside the shuttle. Max Cooper, the former blue Wild Force ranger. He had long since frozen to death, but we did find both Bridge and Z's morphers on board," he said.

"Any sign of them?"

“None. We’re trying to get the onboard computers online to see if we can download their logs and make any sense of it, but they are extremely damaged from the cold. As best we can tell, they were attacked by something. Their hull had a minor breach, and they crashed on that planet. It will be a while before we can determine what are on the hard drives,” he said.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“You have no need to be, Lt. Commander. You did what you could.”

“How long will I be stuck in here?”

“Just until doc says you’re free to go. Shouldn’t be long, but we want to make sure there was no permanent damage done,” he said.

“Understood.”

“There was, however, something else of interest on board that shuttle. Once you’re back on your feet and ready for duty, we’ll discuss it. But for now, there’s someone who wants to see you,” he said, stepping aside as Lt. James stepped in.

“You had us worried for a minute, Lt. Commander,” she said shyly.

“There was no real threat to my life. Immortality has its benefits,” he said.

“Immortal or not, you can still be hurt. Any longer down there and you would have gotten severe brain damage. You’d be an immortal vegetable,” she pointed out.

“Point taken.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re alright. There’s a lot to fill you in on, when you’re ready,” she said.

“Well then, I’ll hurry up and get better.”

“You better,” Asia said with a smile, walking out the room.

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Nathaniel stood in front of the controls on the Astro Omega Ship’s bridge, going over calculations. They’d be able to retrieve information on the hard drives from the shuttle they recovered, but the hard drives were badly damaged and the information was garbled at best. If

there were any clues as to where Bridge and Z were, it would be on those hard drives, and he was determined to find it.

The doors to the bridge slid open, allowing Ella to step in, walking over to him.

“Can we talk?” she asked softly.

“What is it, EI?” he replied, never taking his eyes off the screen.

“I’m sorry about the way I treated you, the things I said. I was hurting and I didn’t want to accept that dad was gone,” she told him.

“I know,” he stopped for a moment, looking at her. “If anything, I’m sorry. I was ready to count him out, to let them bury an empty casket and move on. I gave up on dad, but you didn’t. And now, I am going to figure out what’s on these drives and figure out what happened to him,” he insisted.

“I... I don’t hate you,” she sighed.

He wrapped his arms around her. “I know you don’t.”

“I shouldn’t have said that to you. You were hurting, too. You deserved better,” she said.

“If you want to make it up to me, help me figure this out. Dad wasn’t on board that shuttle, but his morpher was. The key to this is in the logs of on this drive, and I’m going to find it,” Nathaniel said with a determined tone.

Estella nodded, standing in front of a panel next to him.

“Where do we start?”

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Commander Tate and Serenity stood in front of the containment cell in the lower levels of SPD, each of them staring into the small cell with their arms behind their backs. It reminded her of the holding cells back at the CaAn detention center, but were much more pleasant. While it was meant to contain, it was done so in the most humane way possible. There was a small cot to sleep on, access to water and a limited food replication system.

They both stared inside with plain looks on their faces.

“Is it what I think it is?” he asked her.

She nodded, though he didn't turn his head to see it. "Yes, sir. It's a Vorhsoth, but not like one I've ever seen before," she said.

The creature laid motionless on the floor of the cell behind a force field. It had a dark greenish color skin that seemed to be more like armor, but *organic* armor. Underneath the flesh was a bit darker, and there were spikes protruding from from it's shoulders. It had no discernible eyes, ears or nose, but its mouth seemed to encompass most of its jaw on either side.

"What do you mean?"

"The Vorhsoth are a nomadic race. They don't reproduce by any *traditional* means. They recruit the victims they kill, infecting them. *Becoming* them. But this one... it seems to be... a child," she noted.

"What do you recommend we do with it?"

"We're going to dissect it, figure out how it functions so we can find a way to kill them all. We're going to stop this war before it even begins," Serenity said coldly.