

Tuesday  
August 22nd, 2028  
07:01 hours (PST)

The five of them stepped off the shuttle, and as the loading bay door closed, they realized the gravity of their situation. There were nothing but sand for as far as the eye could see, and a quick look up into the sky indicated that this planet had three suns.

“Well, that explains why it's so hot here,” Nathaniel said.

“Does everyone have their packs?” Serenity asked.

Nathaniel glanced around, visually confirming that everyone did in fact had a survival pack with them. The standard survival pack typically included a few bottles of water, tools necessary for building a fire, a signal flare, rations to last a few days if they find themselves stranded, a signal beacon and a long range communicator.

“Yes, sir,” he said, speaking for the group.

“Alright, let's get going,” she sighed, signaling to move forward.

They managed to take a few steps forward, but it was Asia who heard a clicking sound. She glanced around, trying to figure out where the sound came from, and more importantly, where she'd heard it before. Suddenly, it occurred to her. “Stop!” she screamed.

Everyone all at once stopped, turning to her. “What? What is it?”

She looked at the ground all around them, then at Garr, who was already having a hard time breathing in this atmosphere. “There are landmines. Garr, I think you stepped on one,” she said.

“What? Landmines? How do you know?”

“The ocular implant is picking up electromagnetic build up under the ground. They are thermal charges, probably activated by a pressure plate. Step on one of these and it will incinerate you,” she explained.

“But Garr is on one,” he pointed out.

“I'm detecting at least 300 of them between here and the station, we're going to have to navigate around them, which will take even more time,” she told him.

"That's fine, but what do we do about Garr *right now*? We can't have teammates getting incinerated on the first day," Nathaniel brought up.

"They seem to be pressure sensitive. We'll need to replace Garr with something of equal weight so he can escape," she said.

The five of them looked around, but again, there was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see.

"I don't suppose we can just pack a lot of sand onto it, could we?" Ella asked.

"That's not an option."

"So what do we do?"

"If we knock him away quick enough, maybe the blast won't impact him as much," Pascal suggested.

"As much? Garr want no impact at all," he mentioned.

It was Serenity who walked over to Garr, getting a good look at his foot. As the leader, they were expecting her to make a decision, but she wasn't prepared to have a teammate die on her first mission.

"What do you propose, Pascal?"

"If I get a running start and tackle him, I should be able to knock him away from the blast... for the most part," he said.

"Garr, I'll leave this up to you. What do you want to do?" she asked.

Garr looked at Pascal, then back at Serenity. "Garr is ready. Do it," he said.

Pascal took a deep breath, then a few steps back. He mentally prepared himself as he kneeled down into a stance to tackle him. "Everyone else stand back," he said.

Pascal ran towards Garr with all the speed he could muster, tackling him. The impact was enough to knock him away, but the landmine went off, catching Garr's right leg in the explosion. They both fell over, but as Garr tried to stand up, realize he couldn't. The others rushed over to them.

"Garr are you okay?" Asia asked.

“Garr no walk. Must leave Garr,” he said.

“No one is getting left today. No one,” Pascal said as he leaned over, picking Garr up across both his shoulders. “I’ll get you there, buddy.”

Nathaniel couldn’t help but be impressed. “Wow Pascal, you been working out and not telling us? Garr is like a full 200 lbs heavier than you. You really think you’re going to be able to carry him all the way to the station while avoiding landmines *and* trying not to dehydrate?”

“The gravity on Xybria is .008 higher than Earth. So, on planets where the gravity is comparable to Earth, I have slightly increased strength. I am happy to carry him, to lighten his burden,” he insisted.

“If you think you can handle it, let’s get going. Asia, you’re going to be our eyes out here. You lead the way. Everyone stay in Asia’s footprints and don’t stray from the path. We don’t need anyone else getting hurt here today,” Serenity said.

“Yes, sir,” Ella said, speaking for the group.

The four of them followed Asia as she continued to scan through the sand for any more potential landmines. The wind was blowing pretty strong, making it difficult to see through the storm. Asia placed her hand up over her eyes to shield them as much as she could.

“What station is this anyway?” Nathaniel asked, breaking the silence within the group.

“This is one of the first stations constructed after the SPD/Lightspeed Rescue merger in 2021. Its mainly for diplomatic missions and long range observation of other star systems,” Serenity told them.

“What do we know about the admiral we’re going to get?”

“Only that he is a former ranger and a military strategist. He was one of the key components in defeating the Mutorgs in 2002,” she said.

“Oh snap. You’re talking about Eric Myers, the Quantum Ranger,” Ella said.

“He worked with our mom on that mission. We’ve heard the story a million times,” Nathaniel added.

“So this will be a reunion of sorts for you. Everyone do your best to conserve your water. If you see a teammate is running low, offer some of your own. Either we all get through this, or none of us do,” Serenity insisted.

-O- -O- -O- -O-

Cadet Ford leaned back in his chair on the bridge, letting out a sigh as he watched the cadets continue on their way towards the base with the use of satellites in order of the planet. He was interrupted as a panel began to beep. He turned his attention to it, pressing the button as Commander Tate appeared on the viewscreen.

“Report?”

“The cadets are in route to the station on foot. The Anurian is injured, but nothing they can’t handle. They’re more than half way there,” he told him.

“What is your assessment so far?”

“They have a lot of spirit, I’ll give them that. They still have a ways to go if they want to be a team, but I think they’ll get there,” he said.

“Very good. Keep it up. Safe travels and I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Yes, sir. Very good, sir.”

The screen blinked off and resumed tracking the cadets as they walked.

-O- -O- -O- -O-

They were unsure how long they had been walking, but according to Asia they weren’t too far away from their destination. As they walked, Nathaniel found himself feeling guilty for feeling hot, tired or even dehydrated. He was only responsible for himself, but Pascal, who couldn’t have been any taller than 5’6” tall, had been carrying not only Garr on his back, but both of their survival packs. The typical back was usually about 10 pounds, which wasn’t too bad, but Pascal had not once complained about his conditions.

Nathaniel’s steps were wavering. The heat was beginning to get to him, and he had run out of water a long time ago. With no idea how long he would be walking, he began to wonder if he had what it took to be in SPD. *If this is what it takes, I don’t know if I’ll be able to do this. I’m going to end up flunking out of the academy of my first day. Mom is going to be like “it’s okay,*

*Nathaniel, you can always just be a teacher like me,*’, but that was far from the career path he wanted. It had been his dream to serve in SPD, to be a ranger like his parents before him, but...

Just before he could completely pass out from exhaustion, it was Serenity who took her entire bottle of water and poured it over his head. He opened his mouth, allowing some to drizzle in. It was enough to revitalize him for a moment.

“Thanks.”

“No man left behind, right?” she asked.

“Yes, sir,”

“Nate,” a voice called out, faintly.

They all turned around to see that Ella had collapsed in the sand at least twenty feet back. With no regard for the trail Asia made her with footprints, Nathaniel rushed over to his sister, helping her up.

“I can’t. I’m sorry,” she sighed.

“You have to. That’s an order,” he said. “Come on, El, get up.”

Before she could respond, there was enough gust of wind, enough to knock them over. It was Asia who turned around, back tracking her steps and walking over to them. She leaned down, picking Ella up over her shoulder.

“Come on, we’re already there and we’re pretty much clear of the mines. We can get there,” she insisted.

Everyone followed suit, putting a little extra pep in their step as they hurried towards the station.

“You okay to carry her like that?” Serenity asked.

“Yes, sir. I have cybernetic implants in over 40% of my body, mostly on the left side. It gives me enhanced strength. I can handle it,” she said.

“Good.”

In the distance, they could see the station over the horizon. It was, at least in Garr’s opinion, an underwhelming sight. Much smaller than he had originally envisioned, and obviously one of SPD’s less sophisticated stations. Still, shelter of any kind was a welcomed one.

“Alright team, we’re almost there. How is everyone?” Serenity asked.

“Fine, sir,” Pascal shot back, speaking for the group, but the tone in his voice made it clear that he was not fine. His strength was wavering. His water was gone. His back was sore, and he could barely keep his eyes open.

“Everyone give me your jackets,” she said.

Everyone had already removed their jackets and tied them around their waists to stay cool, but they all removed them, handing them to Serenity. She began to take the sleeves, tying them together.

She laid it on the ground, then walked over to Pascal, helping him lay Garr down across the jackets. “I’ll take the front, you take the back,” she said.

“Yes, sir.”

Now, with Garr being carried on a makeshift gurney, the pressure was taken off of Pascal... or at least a great deal of it. It was obvious that Serenity was struggling, but she was determined to get everyone there.

With it seemed as though none of them could go on any further, then realized there were only a few feet away from the station. With their last of their strength, they powered through, eventually making it to the station. As they stepped inside, the cool air from the station overtook them, and they all let out a sigh of relief.

Once the doors closed, a hologram of a robotic man appeared. “Welcome to Corysis station. Do you require assistance?” it asked.

“Yes, some water for my people. We’re here to escort Admiral Myers back to SPD headquarters,” Serenity said.

“Right away, cadet,” the hologram said, disappearing. Within a few moments, other officers came out, helping them up and presenting them with water.

“I’m a doctor, I need to take a look at that leg, cadet,” one of them said, walking over to Garr, who had been bleeding out the entire trip. The doctor gave the signal, and the other officers carried Garr away.

“Where are you taking him?”

“To the infirmary to get patched up,” another of the officers said. “Why did you talk through the desert? Why not take a shuttle? That desert is a death sentence.”

“Yeah, we noticed,” Serenity said.

The doors leading to the desert opened, and Cadet Ford stepped into the station. As the doors closed, they were able to get a glimpse of the shuttle, which Cadet Ford had conveniently landed just outside the station.

“I see you all made it. No one is winning any records for time here, but you made it in one piece. That’s more than I expected, actually,” he told them.

“You son of a…” it was Pascal who had enough, rushing towards Cadet Ford with purpose in his step.

“Stand down, cadet. That’s an…” Serenity tried to stop him, but Pascal snatched away from her, heading towards Cadet Ford and pushing him up against the wall. “You *knew* there were landmines, didn’t you? You *knew* Garr couldn’t survive in that heat, didn’t you? You knew there wasn’t enough water in the survival packs for us to make it here, didn’t you?” he snapped.

“You’re out of line, cadet.”

“No, you’re out of line. We already died out there so you could what? Sit on the bridge and drink water? I bet you watched us all the way here, too, didn’t you? You saw Garr almost lost a leg and did nothing. You watched Ella fall face first into the sand and did nothing. You said this was a team building exercise, but you’re no leader,” Pascal continued.

“Another word out of you and you may as well turn in your badge, cadet,” Cadet Ford warned.

That was enough to get Nathaniel involved. “This is funny to you, isn’t it? My sister could have died out there trying to follow your orders. If this is what SPD is about, you can keep it,” he snapped.

“And you all feel this way?” he asked.

“Yeah, we do. I may not be a cadet anymore, but once I report this to your superiors, you won’t be either,” Ella said, speaking for the group.

Cadet Ford nodded and smiled. “Very good, cadets. Very good. This was a team building exercise. It was designed to teach you to follow orders,” he paused. “But also, no one wants an officer who follows orders blindly. Yes, you could have been seriously hurt out there, but I kept a scanner lock on you the entire time. I wouldn’t have let anything happen. Commander Tate was right about you, you guys are the advanced team he claims you are,” he said.

“Wait… what?”

“You were hard on us on purpose. Not to torture us, but to get us to understand that not every order needs to be followed. You have to do what's right, even if that contradicts an order given by a superior,” Serenity said.

“Very good, cadet,” a voice said.

They all turned around as Admiral Myers walked into the room with his arms folded in front of him. At first glance, he appeared to be older than he actually was. It could have been the countless battles over the years, or maybe he was just tired, Ella speculated. It wasn't as though he was ever known for expressing emotions. The admiral was always more... business oriented. “It took me a long time to learn the value of teamwork, and how the team comes first. Even before orders. Never be afraid to question an order if he doesn't sound right,” he told them.

“Uncle Eric!” Nathaniel and Ella yelled, rushing over to him and wrapping their arms around him.

At first, he tried to resist and push them away, but eventually gave in and accepted the hug, but then quickly motioned for them to stand at attention.

“Good to see you too, kids. How's your mom?” he asked.

“Good,” they said in unison.

“And your brother?”

“Good.”

“You cadets worked hard out there today, and you stuck together no matter what. Those are the sorts of officers we want here in SPD, not glad handing yes men who follow orders regardless to the cost. I am proud of all of you today,” he said. “Which one of you is squad leader?”

“I am, sir,” Serenity said, stepping forward.

He extended his hand to her. “You did fine work today, Lieutenant Commander,” he said firmly.

“Sir?” she inquired, unsure if Commander Tate had briefed the admiral on her mission, or if she was being promoted. Either way, she obliged his handshake.

“You handled your team well. They follow you because they respect you, and that's important,” he turned to Asia. “Cadet James, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Asia said, standing up straight.



“You were the one who identified the landmines and possibly saved the life of every member of your team. Well done, Lieutenant,” he said, shaking her hand.

“Lieutenant? Gosh,” she blushed.

“Estella, Nathaniel, by the power vested in me by SPD, Commander Tate and Admiral Anubis Cruger, I promote you both to the rank of ensign with all the rights and privileges associated with that rank,” he told them.

“Thank you, sir,” they said in unison.

The admiral turned to Pascal. “Well aren’t you the MVP of this team, cadet?” he asked.

“Thank you, sir. I only wish to serve,” Pascal said proudly.

“Well you do, and you do it well. You are hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. Outstanding work today, Pascal,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,”

Finally, he turned to Cadet Ford. “And as for you, this was as much as test for you as it was for them. Every officer needs to know when to follow an order and when to question it. While you kept scanner locks on all of them, there were times when they were in serious trouble and you did nothing. As much as they needed to question orders, so did you,” he told him.

“Yes, sir,” he said in a disappointing tone. “Understood, sir.”

“Nonetheless, you have done good work for SPD, and I believe this team will benefit from your presence here. I am hereby promoting you to the rank of ensign,” the admiral announced.

“Thank you, sir, but with all due respect, I am a 4th year cadet. Should I not be in a command position? I’ve put in the time,” he mentioned.

“You have, and despite your superior training and time here, you failed to learn the lesson that these first year cadets figured out on their first day. You are an ensign. You can accept, or resign. Your choice.”

“I accept, sir,” he said plainly.

“Good. I’ll have a talk with your Anurian teammate and inform him of his promotion as well. Ensign Ford was right, only 1 in a thousand cadets were get to become rangers, because most

of them never learn this valuable lesson. The six of you are well on your way. Make me proud," he said.

"Yes, sir!" they all said in unison.

"I'll be on the shuttle. We leave in 20 minutes," he said, excusing himself from the room.

Ensign Ford walked over to Serenity with a humbled look on his face. "I hope there are no hard feelings... *sir*," he said. It was obviously difficult that was for him to say, but she accepted it.

"No hard feelings. Once the Admiral is safely on board, I will take the shuttle to our original landing coordinates, where we will wait for you there," Serenity said.

"But sir, it's over 2 miles away," he brought up.

"Do you think the enemy will give special consideration to you on the battlefield? Do you think the Troobian Empire cared if you didn't like hot weather? They attack, we respond. The rules do not change because they are inconvenient for you, ensign," she said.

He sighed. "Aye, sir,"

"Don't forget to grab a survival pack. And don't worry, we'll keep a scanner lock on you the whole time. You'll be fine. Dismissed," she said.

"Yes, sir," he said, saluting Serenity before exiting the room.

Once he was gone, the four of them gathered together in the middle of the room.

"We did it, guys. We're on our way," Asia said, extending a fist out in front of them.

It was Nathaniel who realized what she was doing, adding his fist as well. "D Squad, one step closer to being rangers," he said.

Serenity followed suit, adding her fist as well. "We've got this under control guys!"

Finally, it was Ella who completed the set by adding her fist. "Guys, what's an ensign?" she asked.