

Friday  
September 1st, 2028  
08:47 hours (PST)

Serenity and Ella parked their hover cycles, and then proceeded on foot into the warehouse district. It was one of the abandoned areas of the city where most of automotive companies once assembled vehicles, but that was years ago. All that remained now were long since abandoned buildings, but much of the outdated equipment was left behind.

“Why is this place still standing?” Ella asked as they walked, amazed at the clutter and disarray of the buildings. “New Tech City is one of the most advanced cities in the country, so why is all this still here?”

“I think it has something to do with land rights, I don’t know. Sooner or later all of this will get cleared out and they’ll build something new. Every major city in the country has at least one place like this somewhere,” Serenity said.

“At least it's not a rock quarry.”

“Ensign?” she asked in confused.

“You know, rock quarries. If you watch the news, the power rangers are always fighting some monster in a rock quarry. Its rarely ever in the city,” she mentioned.

“That's because they try to lure the monster away from the civilian population,” she said.

“Make sense.”

“Are you picking anything up?” Serenity asked, staring down at a small scanning device in her hand.

“No, nothing yet, but this is the right place. We’ll find it,” she said cheerfully, scanning the area with her own device as well.

They walked through the ruins of the area, looking for something, anything. As they walked, Serenity couldn’t help but feel a bit anxious. As they searched, she recalled that, in the future, most of the city looked exactly like this. Partially standing buildings, debris scattered everywhere. The only difference was that the ground wasn’t littered with the bodies of fallen officers who had given their lives in the war. It was enough to make her feel uneasy, but she also knew that she was there to change that from ever happening. If her mission was a success, everyone would survive, everyone would be safe.

He would be safe.

“You like him, don’t you?” Ella asked, breaking the silence.

“What? Who?”

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“Serenity. You like her, I can tell,” Asia told him as they made their way towards the Astro Omega Ship.

Nathaniel sighed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“Yes, you do. When she walks in a room your heart rate goes up, you get an adrenaline rush and you excrete pheromones. Just admit it, you like her,” she said.

He stopped. “What? You can see my pheromones?”

She pointed at her robotic eye. “You’d be surprised at what this bad boy can see. Your blood rate goes up, and sweat and some whatever reason you bite the inside of your jaw nervously,” she paused. “You ever think of just telling her how you feel?” Asia asked.

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“Feel? I don’t feel any way, Ensign. It’s inappropriate of you to even say something like that. Can we just focus on...”

“You can’t lie to me. I know what you’re feeling. I can sense you,” Ella said.

“Trust me, you have *no* idea what I’m feeling.”

“I know more than you think. I know you have a lot on your mind. I know you don’t sleep well at night, if at all, and if you do you’re having nightmares. I know when Commander Tate mentioned the Omega Ship you got anxious,” she paused. “And I know you have the hots for Nathaniel,” she said.

Serenity stopped. “Ella, please. We have a mission to get to here. This is going to have to wait,” she insisted.

“You should tell him.”

“There is nothing to tell, ensign. I am a Lt. Commander, your brother is an ensign under my command. It would be inappropriate,” she said.

“So you admit it?”

“Ella, I am ordering you to stop. We have work to do,” Serenity said with a tone of frustration in her voice.

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“You and I both know this work isn’t going anywhere. How long are you going to torture yourself by keeping this to yourself? She likes you, too, you know?” Asia mentioned.

Nathaniel stopped. “Wait... what?”

“Yeah, its obvious. I get that she's your superior officer and all that, but she's not that much older than you,” she said.

“Asia. I’m five,” he pointed out.

“Don’t argue semantics with me. Thats technical and you know it. Girls like Serenity don’t come around often. You’d better make your move before someone else does,” she said.

“What is that suppose to mean?”

“It means Serenity is pretty, smart, determined, focused, and man that girl fills out a uniform, doesn’t she? If you don’t, there are plenty of people who will, and you’ll get stuck in the friendzone forever,” Asia pointed out.

Nathaniel didn’t even look up. Instead, he continued to go over the information on the screens in front of him. “I am not in the friendzone, and there is nothing to tell because I don’t feel anyway. We work together. I respect her. That’s all. Besides, even if...” he paused. “Wait, what is this?” he asked, pointing at something on the screen.

“What?”

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"That!" Serenity repeated, staring down at her device. "I'm picking up some faint traces of electron energy coming from the northwest area. We should check it out," she said.

Setting aside their personal conversation, Ella followed Serenity towards the source of the energy reading. A few moments later, they found themselves in front of the only building that was still standing, and Ella found it a little suspicious that all the windows appeared to be blacked out from the inside.

She reached for her phaser pistol on her hip. "Let's move," she said.

"Whoa, hold on there, Rambo. We can't just charge in there. This is a reconnaissance mission, remember. We're here to observe and report. We do not engage," Serenity pointed out.

"How do we even know what to observe or report if we don't go in there and..." she was interrupted.

"I didn't say we weren't going in, but we have to be smart about it. The power emissions coming from this place are bigger than we originally thought. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that..." she paused, looking at the readings again. "This looks like residual transportation energy," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"The readings suggest that a massive teleportation energy is in there. Someone or something is trying to open a huge portal. A portal big enough to..." her sentence trailed off. "... to bring a ship through," she said.

"So let's bust in there and put a stop to it," Ella said.

"We can't just charge in, we have to play this right. Let's head to the roof, see if there is a skylight of some kind. Maybe we can get a better look of what's going on in there so we can report back to the commander," she said.

Ella nodded, putting her pistol away, following Serenity. The two of them carefully scaled the side of the building, using whatever they could hold on to. They eventually reached the top, only to discover there was no skylight.

"Alright, now what?"

Serenity motioned towards a giant fan about 50 feet away. "That's part of the ventilation system. I bet we can pry that off, then climb inside," Serenity suggested.

Ella frowned. "You want *me* to go in *there*?"

Ignoring her statement completely, Serenity hurried over to the fan, getting a firm grip and pulled it away, revealing an opening. She peeked in. "Looks like it's a 30 foot drop to the floor. If we hold onto the sides and shimmy down, we should be able to land with no problem," she said.

"Shimmy?"

Serenity climbed inside the long, metal tube, placing her hands and feet on either side, lowering herself down slowly. Once she was no longer able to use her feet, she simply retracted her hands, falling to the floor, but landing on her feet.

She quickly dusted herself off, only to find herself on an abandoned floor. There was machinery still in place, but it was all old, covered in dust and spiderwebs. Towards the end of the room, there was a giant hole in the floor. Before she could make her way to it, Ella came crashing down through the tube, hitting the floor with a thud.

"I said to shimmy," Serenity reminded her, helping Ella back to her feet.

"I tried, but..."

"Shhhhh," she ordered, listening carefully. "I think I hear something."

The two of them walked towards the hole in the floor, peeking in. There was a lot of machinery, but it all seemed to be fully operational, connected to a generator of some kind. They both laid on their stomachs, staring down.

There were two Xybrian men in lab coats, both appeared to be working on an equation of some kind on a white board. There was a slight hum, indicating that machinery was in fact operating, but they were unable to see anything.

"Alright, I've seen enough. Lets check in with the commander and let him know what's happening," Serenity said.

As the two of them turned to get up and back to their feet, they were confronted by two Anurian officers, each of them with rifles in hand.

"You no move! You prisoner," one of them groaned.

Ella and Serenity both put their hands in the arm to comply with the guards. The second guard walked behind them, grabbing Ella by the wrists and forcing her arms behind her back. Serenity looked at her, giving her a slight nod. Ella cracked a half smile, then dropped to her knees, then crawled backwards between the guards legs. It was enough to make him lose his grip. Before

he knew it, Ella was behind him, giving him a leg sweep that knocked him off his feet. As he fell to the floor, it was Serenity who charged at the second guard with a spin kick, taking him down. He fell, and she grabbed his rifle, aiming it at him.

“You wanna tell me whats going on down there and why you are in Terran space without authorization?” she asked him.

“Zek no answer to you. Zek is warrior. Zek is...” he was interrupted as Serenity turned the rifle around, hitting him in the side of the head with the butt of the gun.

“Zek unconscious,” Serenity finished.

The second guard grabbed Ella’s ankle, but before he could do anything, Serenity fired the rifle at him.

“You... you killed that guy,” Ella sighed.

“Don’t be so dramatic, he’s stunned. He’ll be fine in a few hours.”

They headed to the staircase that presumably the guards entered from, making their way down to the first floor. The entire floor was full of machinery and equipment, and tables covered in papers and devices.

“SPD!” Serenity called out, immediately getting the attention of the two Xybrian men who were working on the whiteboard. They turned around, seeing the rifle pointed at them, and immediately held their arms up.

“Don’t shoot! We were brought here against our will by those... those brutes,” one of the men said.

His statement was enough to get Serenity to lower her weapon. “What are they doing here?” she asked.

“We were forced to work on this device for them. It is some sort of teleportation system, but we purposely made errors so that it wouldn’t work,” he said.

“And I added an algorithm that would allow SPD to pick up an electron build up and locate us,” the other added.

“Pretty clever,” Ella said.

“Any idea where the portal led?”

“No. There were no coordinates set, but it was designed for long range travel, further than any other system we’ve ever seen before,” he told her.

“Well it’s a good thing we were in the neighborhood,” Ella said cheerfully.

“Ensign, gather up all the notes and computer equipment you can find. We’ll take this back to headquarters and let Dr. Manx take a look at it,” she ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

“No, this cannot be allowed to fall into the wrong hands. If this were to work, anyone possessing this technology would be able to teleport a ship anywhere almost instantly. It is a gross violation of the Interplanetary treaty and needs to be destroyed immediately,” the scientist said.

Ella paused, waiting for her commanding officer to give the word. Serenity stopped, remembering that during the wars, troops seemed to come from out of nowhere, overwhelming any resistance they had. For months they wondered how they were overtaken so easily, but it stood to reason that the technology developed to teleport started here. Realizing that this could be one part of what could eventually prevent the war, she nodded.

“Destroy it. All of it.”

“There is a thoron implosion device on the table there. We can set it for 30 seconds and leave it here. It will destroy this entire building and everything inside within seconds,” the other scientist told them.

“Alright, sounds good. Set the device for one minute and then let’s get moving,” she said.

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“What do these guys eat for breakfast? Bricks?” Ella complained as she drug one of the Aunurian guards out of the building. Serenity had the other over her shoulder, moving them away from the building. The scientists hurried out as well, and as soon as Serenity dropped the guard to the ground, the building behind them began to hum. The hum intensified, and suddenly there was a flash of light. They all covered their eyes to shield them from the light, but when they looked up, the entire building was gone.

“So much for observe and report,” Ella sighed, sitting down on the ground staring at a crater where the entire building use to be. “He told us to just look around, now we have to explain to him how we lost an entire building.”

“It had to be done. It was for the greater good. I’ll deal with whatever consequences come from this,” Serenity assured her, then turned to the two scientists. “I will contact someone from your home world and have them arrange transport for you to return.”

“Thank you. We are grateful for your assistance,” he responded.

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“I’ve gone through every line of code. Every routine, every subroutine, every critical system and even the secondary processors. I can’t figure out why this is even here,” Nathaniel sighed, staring at the screen.

For Asia, all the information may as well have been in another language. None of it made any sense to her at all. “What else can we do?”

“Nothing. I don’t know anything else *to* do. I’ve gone through it four times. This one line of code here isn’t directly connected to anything at all, yet its holding everything up,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s like a boot on those old cars they had back in the 70s and 80s. All the pieces are here, the car will start, but this line of code is the boot. Its stopping the ship from actually moving. Sure, you can step on the gas and hard as you can, and you may get a few feet, but as long as this boot is here the drive will never hit maximum transwarp,” Nathaniel explained.

Asia bit her bottom lip slightly. “I’m no genius or anything, but why not just erase the line of code?” she suggested.

Nathaniel turned around, looking at her with an almost offended look on his face. “You don’t think that was the first thing I tried? I’ve removed the line, but when I do, it not only comes back, it duplicates itself. It’s a trojan,” he said.

“A condom?”

Nathaniel’s face went completely blank. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that. It’s a trojan in the sense that the code has snuck something into the system that shouldn’t be here. The more I try to remove it, it replicates itself. It’s like it wants to be found, then it forces you to make it spread.”

“Sooooo... not a condom? Alright,” she nodded. “How about we turn the whole thing off?”



“Why would we do that?”

“Well it can’t make more of itself if it doesn’t have any power to do it. Then when you power it off, you can go in and just remove the part of the ship’s system that has the code in it and replace it with something else,” Asia suggested.

Nathaniel resisted the urge to roll his eyes at her. “It’s not a PC. You can’t just turn it off and on and the problem is better,” he paused. “But if we were to power down every nonessential system on the ship; life support, weapons, targeting, propulsion, everything... but leave this one system operational, the code couldn’t affect the other systems. With nowhere for the virus to go, we could isolate it in one system of the computer, then replace that system with a new pulse drive and that should do the trick,” he turned to Asia. “You *are* a genius,” he said.

Asia blushed.

“It’s going to take some time. You may as well get comfortable. We’re going to be here for a while,” Nathaniel sighed.