

Friday
September 1st, 2028
10:59 hours (PST)

Garr opened his eyes slowly. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the light, but when his vision came into focus, he saw Dr. Mitchell standing over him with a chart in her hand. Behind her was his father, Kull, who had his usual monotone look on his face.

“Welcome back, Lieutenant. You gave us quite a scare,” she said.

Garr tried to sit up, but found that he was extremely disoriented. “Garr no know what happen. Where is team? Is team okay?” he asked.

“Yes, your team is fine. You’ve been in the infirmary for the last week. You lost a lot of blood and it required a blood transfusion. We contacted your homeworld and made arrangements for...” she was interrupted as Kull nudged her aside.

“Garr warrior. On feet now, Garr!” he insisted.

“I advise against that, sir. In addition to severe disorientation, he also suffered a fracture in his left leg. He’ll have to wear a brace for a few weeks until it heals. Until then, he should...” she was interrupted again.

“On feet now, Garr!” he repeated.

Doing his best to follow his father’s orders, Garr turned slightly, planting his feet on the floor and attempting to stand up. As soon as he put his weight down, his knee buckled from under him, and Garr fell to the floor.

It was KJ who hurried over to him, helping Garr back to his feet. “I got’cha, big guy,” he said, assisting Garr on the side of the bed.

“Garr no weak. Garr warrior. On feet now, Garr,” Kull demanded.

“With all due respect, sir, he can’t. He’s injured and needs time to heal,” KJ told him, trying not to sound rude but hoping that the urgency in his voice was obvious.

“Warriors no rest. Warriors fight. Warriors survive. Garr is survivor. Up, Garr! Up!”

“No,” Garr shot back.

“Garr dare to disobey Kull?” he asked.

“Garr no can walk. Garr need to heal,” he told him.

“Heal is for weak. Garr no weak. Garr is no prey,” Kull said.

His statement brought back a memory for Garr. Until that moment he had been completely unaware of it, but seemed to recall Nathaniel sitting at his bedside talking to him. Garr recalled that Nathaniel gave him something, placing it in his hand. He immediately turned around looking for it.

“What is it?” Dr. Mitchell asked.

“Nathaniel give Garr gift. Where gift?” he replied.

It was KJ who reached in his pocket, pulling out the rosary and handing it to Garr. “Your father seems to think its weak for your friends to give you well wishes while you’re sick or hurt. He threw it away, but I found it for you, big guy,” he said.

Garr held it up, looking closely at it. It was simply a small wooden cross attached to a chain covered in brown beads. The design was simplistic, but it was the notion behind it that Garr appreciated.

“Nathaniel is friend,” he paused slightly, remembering that Nathaniel wasn’t the only person who came to see him. “Pascal is friend,” he turned to KJ. “KJ is friend,” he said proudly.

KJ wouldn’t never admit it, but the statement touched him slightly. He felt responsible for Garr’s condition, and was sure that Garr would hold him responsible, but instead, his actions were met with friendship and forgiveness. KJ cracked as big a smile as he possibly could without ruining the facade of being uncaring and unfeeling. “You too, big guy.”

“I’m going to have to ask everyone to clear out while Garr and his mother rest. It will be a few hours before they are able to...” she was quickly interrupted.

“Pascal? Pascal is Xybrian name,” he stood at attention, almost defensive. “Xybrian meat is here? Kull crush!” he snarled.

“We have an Xybrian officer here, yes,” KJ told him. Part of him was happy to be the one to tell him, knowing that it was upset him even further.

“Garr no serve with meat. Meat below Garr,” he snapped.

“Meat?” Dr. Mitchell asked.

"Anurians call Xybrian meat. Meat like cattle. Meat to slaughter. Pascal no meat. Pascal is friend," Garr insisted.

"Garr return home now. Garr no disgrace family serving with meat," Kull said.

Garr shook his head in disapproval. "Garr *is* home."

Kull reached out, grabbing Garr by the throat. "Garr dare question Kull?"

"Alright, that's enough," KJ said, forcing himself between the two of them, pushing Kull away. Garr struggled to regain his breath. "Doc said everyone out, so out!"

"Kull no stand for insult. Garr come home or else," he said.

KJ stood ready, as he preparing for a fight, but the doors to the infirmary slid open and Commander Tate walked in with four armed guards behind him.

"Stand down, ensign," he said.

KJ immediately stood down, placing his arms behind his back. "Sir!"

The commander approached Kull with his hands behind his back, and with a calm, relaxed expression on his face. KJ noted it was easy to be that calm when there were four guards all aiming phaser pistols at Kull, but it was still a sight to see nonetheless. "I understand that your people have a long standing problem with Xybrians, but this isn't Aunuria. This is Earth, and everyone here is treated equally. Moreover, Garr is an SPD officer and as you love to point out whatever you get a chance, Aunurians are not part of the treaty. Son or not, you have assaulted an officer *on my watch*, and unless you want to be thrown in the brig, you will return to your shuttle and wait for your... your mate to remove, where she will join you," he explained.

Kull, almost from out of nowhere, pulled a small dagger out of his waistline, preparing to charge after the commander, but two of the guards fired just enough to knock the dagger out his hand. Kull howled in pain.

"You want to add attempted murder to your rap sheet? Or do you want to leave peacefully?" the commander asked.

Kull turned to Garr. "Garr stay here?"

Garr nodded. "Garr is home. Garr with friends," he said.

"Then Kull have no son. Kull leave Garr to serve with meat. Garr dead to me," Kull groaned, then turned to leave.

The guards moved aside, allowing him to pass, but never lowering their weapons. The doors to the infirmary hissed open, but before Kull could exit, Pascal walked in.

“Lt. Pascal reporting as...” he paused, staring upwards at Kull. Garr was easily seven feet tall, but Kull made him look small by comparison.

“Come on in, Pascal. Your friend is awake and I’m sure he’d love to see you,” Commander Tate said, motioning for him to come closer.

“But sir, I...”

“It’s okay, Pascal,” he said.

“This no over. Kull be back. Kull get even,” he snarled, purposely shoving one of the guards aside as he left the infirmary.

“Ensign Conners, make sure the ambassador makes it back to his shuttle without incident,” the commander ordered.

“Aye, sir,” one of the guards said, following Kull down the corridor.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, sir. I thought I...” he was interrupted.

“Yes, tensions are high between our peoples, but I had no right to keep you away from your teammate,” he paused. “Your friend.”

“Thank you, sir,” Pascal said.

“This is all very nice, but my patients need to rest. Everyone out,” Dr. Mitchell insisted.

“You heard the doctor, everyone out,” the commander said, then turned to walk away.

Pascal hurried over to Garr, extending his hand to him. “I’m happy to see you doing better, buddy,” he said warmly.

“Garr happy too... buddy,” Garr said, shaking his hand.

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Ella and Serenity stepped onto the promenade, looking for a decent place to eat. They’d had a long, trying day, and were both looking forward to unwinding.

“What are you in the mood for?” Serenity asked.

“Food.”

“What kind of food?”

“The eatin’ kind,” Ella said cheerfully.

“Fine, tacos it is,” she said as the two of them headed towards the restaurant. The two of them found an empty place to sit, and within seconds, a waitress walked over to them. At first glance, she appeared to be human, but had a light blue tint to her skin.

“What can I get you, officers?” she asked.

“Tacos!” Ella said eagerly.

The waitress couldn’t help but chuckle, but wrote the order down, then turned to Serenity. “And you, Lt. Commander?”

“I’ll have what she’s having, and two Pantheran ales,” she ordered.

“Right away,” she said cheerfully, walking away.

“Isn’t that just milk?”

“What?”

“Pantheran ale. It’s from kitty’s planet, right? Wouldn’t that just be milk? Do they serve it in a little saucer too?” Ella asked.

“If KJ heard you call him kitty again, he’d have a fit. And no, it’s not milk. It has more of a kick to it. I use to drink them all the time during the…” she paused, realizing she was about to say too much, but also hoped that Ella didn’t notice. “Finals. I could pull an all nighter to study, and the ale kept me awake,” she said.

“You know I’m not letting you off the hook just yet,” Ella planted her elbows on the table, locking her fingers together and placed her chin on top of her hands. “When are you going to talk to Nathaniel?”

“About what?”

“You know *about what*. You like him,” Ella said.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Nope."

Serenity sighed. "Look... he's a nice guy, but we have a job to do here. I have a job to do, and the last thing I need is to complicate the issue but trying to date someone under my command. It's all just too complicated," she explained.

"So you *do* wanna date him?"

"I didn't..." she paused. "I mean..." she tried to choose her words carefully. "Just shut up, Estella," she sighed.

"You can't run from this, Re-Re. Fate has a way of working things out. It's gonna happen," she said.

"Well as it just so happens, I don't believe in fate," Serenity told her.

"That's okay, it believes in you. The more you try to fight it, the more determined fate is to have its way. You guys are going to make such a cute couple," she said cheerfully.

"Who's going to make a great couple?" Nathaniel asked as he and Asia walked over to them, sitting down. Asia sat next to Serenity as Nathaniel sat with his sister.

"Yeah... who?" Ella added, trying to force the issue.

"How did your mission go?" Serenity asked, immediately changing the subject.

"We think we've narrowed down the problem. It will take a few days, but we should have the Omega ship up and running in no time. How about you guys?" he asked.

"I slid down a tube today!" Ella blurted out.

Serenity chuckled. "We rescued two Xybrian scientists who were being forced to work on a teleportation system for the Aunurians. We took care of it, and Commander Tate has made arrangements for the scientists to be transported back to Xybria," she said.

"How far is Xybria from here?" Nathaniel asked.

"Far enough that the next available transport is three weeks away," Serenity said.

"And what about the Aunurians?" Asia asked.

“Their government is denying any knowledge of them, but chances are we haven’t heard the last of them or whoever they were working for,” she paused. “How is Garr? Did the procedure go well?”

“I haven’t seen him yet. Doc isn’t letting anyone in there, but I hear he’s fine. He should be fit for duty in a day or two,” Nathaniel said.

“Good.”

Just then, the waitress returned with Ella and Serenity’s food, presenting it to them. She then turned to Asia and Nathaniel.

“Would the two of you like to order?” she asked.

“Tacos!” Nathaniel said eagerly.

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KJ took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself to head into Commander Tate’s office. He was sure that he was going to be in some sort of trouble for putting his hands on an ambassador. *It’ll probably be the end of my career*, he thought to himself. Ready to get it over with, KJ pressed the chime on the door.

“Come in,” a voice said from other side of the door.

The doors slid open, and KJ stepped in to see Commander Tate sitting behind his desk reading over reports.

“Ensign Ford reporting as ordered, sir,” he said, standing at attention.

“At ease,” the commander didn’t even look up, but KJ stood up, loosening up a bit.

“It’s been quite a day, hasn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Garr’s parents have disembarked and are in route to their homeworld, but I’m sure neither of them are happy about Garr’s decision to stay and serve alongside Pascal,” he said.

“I imagine not, sir.”

Commander Tate looked up. "You put your hands on an ambassador and Citadel member today, ensign. What do you have to say for yourself?" he asked.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Denied," the commander said dryly.

"Sir..." he tried to collect his thoughts. "He was assaulting an officer, I took action. I accept whatever consequence that action comes with, sir," KJ said.

The commander stood up, walking from behind his desk, moving around in front of it and sitting on the edge. "Commander Myers informs me that he had a talk much like this one with you on Corysis station, something about glad handing yes men," he brought up.

"Yes, sir."

"You did well today, ensign. It would have been easy for you to follow protocol and just allow Kull to further injure Garr, but you stepped up. Your duty got in the way of doing the right thing, and you set it aside to help a friend. I'm proud of you," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

"Make no mistake, ensign. You're rough around the edges, and frankly I would have thought that four years at the academy would have gotten you out of that, but it didn't. But less than two weeks with this team and I already see improvement. It seems all you needed were a few friends."

"Perhaps, sir," KJ said.

"You were right. Making you an ensign, putting you under the command of first year officers was a disrespectful act, but it wasn't personal. You need to learn how to accept orders before you can give them, and you need to know the difference between your orders and the right thing. When they come into conflict, and I assure you they will, I need officers who will make the right call, not just hide behind the excuse of following orders," he explained.

"I understand, sir. And I will endeavor to do my best, sir."

"I'm sure you will, which is why I'm sending you on a very important mission," he told him.

"Sir?"

Commander Tate walked back behind his desk, reaching in a drawer and pulling out a device. "Do you know what this is, ensign?" he asked.

"It's a judgment scanner, sir."

He shook his head. "No, this use to belong to Admiral Cruger when he was in command of this station. He has been the only one to use it, and now I am giving it to you. This is the Shadow Ranger morpher," the commander explained.

"You're making me the Shadow Ranger, sir?" KJ asked eagerly.

"I'm giving it to you on a temporary basis in order to complete a mission. This is off the records, no official logs for this. No communications to SPD headquarters. As far as anyone is concerned, this mission never happened. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sending you in an unmarked shuttle craft to the planet Emberiiian, in the Dolarious belt," he said.

"Sir? Emberiiian is deep in J'Saari space, beyond the Theta quadrant. That territory is forbidden," he brought up.

He nodded. "So you understand why I need you to be... discreet."

"Yes, sir. What are my orders, sir?"

"You're going in to retrieve the Phantom Ranger," Commander Tate told him.