

Monday
September 5th, 2028
11:00 hours (PST)

The alarm continued to blare to an almost deafening tone, and the eight of them stood in between the lift and what appeared to be the entire CaAn fleet, each of them with a rifle pointed at them. Little red dots swarmed around, indicating where the rifle blast would impact each of them.

Serenity nodded. "It was an honor to have served with all of you," she said proudly.

Just then, the doors to the lift opened, and it was as if a force of nature rushed out, passing each of them by and going after the CaAn fleet. One by one, the red dots that had once surrounded the team faded away, and CaAn soldiers fell to the floor left and right. There were an explosion of some kind from a panel, and smoke filled the passageway, and it was the smoke that, for a brief moment, allowed him to be visible.

"It's him! It's the Phantom Ranger," Pascal said.

Through the smoke and confusion, all the CaAn soldiers began to fall. Once they were all down and unconscious, the Phantom Ranger seemed to materialize out of thin air.

"Thank you for the assist, my friends," he said. The tone in his voice was a bit robotic, but Ella speculated that it had something more to do with the helmet and the equipment itself, not just his voice.

"So um, yeah. We're here to rescue you," Asia said.

"Do you have a vessel here?" he asked.

"Yes. The Astro Omega Ship, but we don't know where they've taken it," Serenity mentioned.

"It's probably on the lower levels near the station exit. You get down there and get the engines running, I'll cover you," he said.

"Just you?" Ella asked.

"Don't worry little lady, it'll be enough," he said, pressing a button on his forearm, disappearing into a shimmer of light. The only reason they were able to make out he was still there was due to all the smoke in the passageway.

One by one, they climbed inside the lift, and it began to lower.

“Nik? Nik can you walk?” Serenity asked.

Lt. Commander Martin was beginning to come to over Pascal’s shoulder, doing his best to shake off the disorientation.

“I’m fine. I’ll live. Where are we?”

“I’m not sure if this is the frying pan or the fire,” Nathaniel pointed out.

The doors to the lift hissed open, and they were met by another legion of CaAn soldiers waiting for them.

“Get the Phantom out of here. That’s all that matters,” Nik said, rushing head first into the onslaught of CaAn soldiers. He was immediately overwhelmed, but it was the distraction they needed to make it across the room and over to the Omega Ship.

They each hurried up the loading bay door, but it was Garr who stopped.

“We no leave. Garr help friend,” he said, and with no regard for any order Serenity may or may not have issued, he hobbled as quickly as he could back into the fight, working his way towards Lt. Commander Martin.

“We have to get out of here. If we don’t leave now, we’ll all be trapped here,” Asia pointed out.

Everyone knew Asia was right, but they didn’t want to be the one to admit it. They were hopelessly outnumbered, and the CaAn forces were only going to regroup and get stronger the longer they waited.

It was Serenity who turned to her team. “Asia, get everyone to the bridge and punch it the second you can. I’m going to stay here as long as I can,” she said.

“But sir,”

“That’s an order, mom. Get out of here,” she insisted.

Asia nodded, motioning for the others to follow.

Within moments, the Astro Omega Ship’s engines whirled on, and it began to lift off the ground.

“The loading bay doors to this place aren’t opening,” Pascal mentioned, going over the instruments on his station.

It was Asia who sat down in the commander’s chair. “We’re going to have to make an opening. EI, give it everything we have,” she ordered.

“We don’t know if impact that will have on...” she was cut short.

“Do it,” Asia insisted.

Ella spun around in her chair. “But sir, our people are...” she was interrupted again.

“Do it!” she ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

Ella turned back to her console, targeting the doors and firing the phase cannons directly at it. It was enough to blast a hole in the side of the building, and Pascal saw his opening, navigating the ship through the opening.

“Yes, we can’t leave atmo until the doors on the Omega Ship are closed. If we do, we’ll risk being sucked out into space,” he told her.

“Close the doors,” Asia sighed.

“But sir, Serenity is still...”

“That was an order, Pascal,” she demanded.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

Pascal sealed the bay doors, and once they were completely sealed, took the ship out of the atmosphere and into space. Once they were cleared, he let out a sigh, turning around and looking at Asia, who had a devastated look on her face.

I wasted so much time, she thought to herself. *What a rare treat it was to be able to see my grown up daughter in action, and I wasted that time. And for what?* She asked herself. In the end, it simply didn’t seem worth it. Serenity had done nothing wrong. It was no one’s fault. All of this was *her*, and she knew it.

If I could do it all over again; if I had another chance, I would have... her thoughts were broken as the doors to the lift on the bridge opened up, and Serenity stepped out. Her uniform was in

ruins, and there was a serious gash on her forehead. Her right arm was clearly out of its socket, and she was in pain...

... but she was alive.

Asia was overjoyed. There were no words to describe it, but she also knew that it wasn't the time for words. The celebration would have to wait. "Glad you could make it to the party, Lt. Commander," she said, refusing to look back.

"You know me. I like to make an entrance."

"Do we have everyone on board?" she asked.

"Yes, but..." she allowed her sentence to trail off.

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Asia hurried into the infirmary, where most of her crew were seriously injured. Lt. Commander Martin was lying on an examining table on his stomach with a severe phase wound in his back. Serenity had some cuts and bruises as well, but she motioned for Asia to tend to Nik first.

"He took a phase shot in the back for him. That man risked his life to save me," Serenity said with a tear in her eye.

"I won't let his sacrifice be for nothing. I promise," she said, taking a moment to look over the wound.

The more she examined it, the more she knew there was nothing she was going to be able to do for him. "Re-Re," she called out. "The lower half of his spine has been completely destroyed. There is nothing I can..."

"NO! You have to do something for him. ANYTHING," Serenity insisted.

"I'm on a field medic. He would require some major reconstructive surgery, and even then, I don't think..."

It was at that moment that the Phantom Ranger rematerialized in front of them. It was clear that he was injured, but surely not as bad as everyone else seemed to be.

"What can be done for him?" he asked, turning to Nik.

"I... I can make him as comfortable as possible in his final minutes," Asia sighed, tears rolling down her face.

Serenity dropped to her knees. The same man she had been at odds with has risked his life; no, given his life to save her, and to see him in that condition tore through her soul with a pain she had never known before. She wanted nothing more than to help him, to ease his suffering. *It should have been me*, she thought to herself.

The Phantom Ranger reached into the armor on his chest, revealing the red energem. "This gem has sustained my life for decades, and now, if it will accept him, will sustain his," he said.

He placed the gem on the back of Lt. Commander Martin, and in that moment, the Phantom Ranger armor seemed to simply fade away, leaving only a man behind. He collapsed from the overwhelming feeling of no longer being in the armor, falling to the floor.

They stared down at the gem, hoping it would do something; anything. But it simply sat there, motionless. Unresponsive.

"I cost this man his life," Serenity cried. "*I did this.*"

"No, you did what you could," Asia said, doing her best to reassure her.

"I failed, mom. I failed at everything. I thought I knew what I was doing, but I clearly didn't. I made a mess of the timeline. The human race is going to..." she stopped, and as they stood there embracing one another, they realized the energem had begun to glow. Just the armor had faded away from the Phantom Ranger, he began to form itself around Lt. Commander Martin. The light grew so bright that they had to shield their eyes, but when it subsided, The Phantom Ranger was standing in front of them.

"I feel... incredible," he said, hearing the robotic tone in his voice for the first time.

"Nik?" Asia asked, staring at him.

He reached up to either side of his helmet, unfastening the latches, then removing it. "In the flesh, beautiful," he said with a smile.

Asia hurried over to him, wrapping her arms around him. "You saved my daughter's life. I owe you," she said as tears rolled down her face.

"You're going to have to fill me in on what's going on here, but in the meantime... you're welcome, I guess," he said.

Normally, Serenity would have heard that statement and been convinced there was some sort of snide, condescending tone to it, but for the first time she heard it for what it was. There was an honesty, a sincerity.

While she couldn't explain it, or even began to understand how she knew it, but in that moment, she knew that this man was her father. That this was the one who would eventually become her father. But instead of telling Asia, potentially driving a rift between them even further, she kept it to herself.

"I... I'm glad you're alright," she sighed.

"The energem is *healing* me. I can feel it; it's pulsating through my body. I can feel it everywhere. I can feel it..." he stopped, staring down at the man who had worn the armor previously. "Come on, let's get him some help," Nik sighed.

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Lt. Commanders Serenity and Nik Martin stood in front of Commander's Tate desk as he had his back to them, looking out at the grounds of SPD.

"The two of you did amazing work out there. Well done," he said.

"All the credit should go to Nik, it was him who..." she was interrupted.

"No, it was Serenity, sir. She was the one who ordered..." he was cut short.

"You two can congratulate one another later. The fact is, the red energem is safe and the Phantom Ranger has been returned to us," he paused. "No word on B-Squad?" he asked.

"No, sir. KJ was held in that detention center longer than we were. If the B-Squad were there, he would have known," Serenity said.

Commander Tate sighed, turning around slowly. There was a slight tear in his eye, but he wiped it away before anyone could notice.

Or at least he *thought* no one noticed.

"I have no choice but to deem the B-Squad lost in the line of duty. A memorial service will be held for them on the grounds. Nothing less than a full heroes parade. They deserved it," he said, his voice trembling slightly.

“The twins will no doubt like to say a few words,” Nik mentioned.

It amazed Serenity that she hadn't thought of that sooner. Bridge Carson was Ella and Nathaniel's father. It was one thing for him to be lost and just *out there*, but to have him declared deceased was going to devastate them.

“Oh my God, I haven't even...” she stopped, not allowing that thought to follow itself through to conclusion. “It will be a wonderful memorial,” she sighed.

“Nik, I assume that you can't relinquish the energem,” he mentioned.

“No, sir. Dr. Mitchell had a look, did some scans. If we remove the gem, it will leave me completely paralyzed,” he told him.

“I see,” he took a deep breath. “And the previous occupant?” he inquired.

“He's in the infirmary. It looks as though he will make a complete recovery, at least physically,” Nik said.

“What do you mean?”

“Dr. Mitchell says his injuries are healing nicely, but there is nothing to explain why he in some sort of... a coma-like state,” he paused. “That man gave up immortality for me. I am forever grateful,” Nik sighed.

“We always knew the energems weren't 100% scientific. There is something more to them, something we couldn't explain,” he paused. “We're going to need a mystic,” the commander said

“Sir?” she inquired.

“How is KJ? Will he recover from his injuries?” the commander asked, completely changing the subject.

“Other than a few bumps and bruises, and his ego being a bit damaged from a girl running to his rescue, he's fine,” Serenity said.

The commander sat down at his desk, turning to a small monitor. “Lt. Commander Martin, I understand you took great pride as the leader of C-Squad, but I think we can agree that your services would be much more beneficial somewhere else,” he brought up.

Nik glanced over at Serenity.

“Yes, sir. I do.”

“I know you’re use to being in command. Are you going to have a problem as Serenity’s right hand?” he asked him.

“No, sir.”

“Even as the Phantom Ranger?” he asked.

“Sir, am I being allowed to... to *keep* these powers?” he replied.

“Is that a yes or a no, Lt. Commander?”

He shook his head almost immediately. “I will follow anyone you see fit to lead, and I trust this young lady with my life,” he insisted.

“Good answer, Nik. As of right now, I am assigning you both the Astro Omega Ship on a full time basis. While we will hold a service for the B-Squad, I want you out there on the hunt for them. If you find them in one piece, or you only find bodies, don’t stop until you find me *something*,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

“Dismissed,” Commander Tate said with all the composure he could muster. He knew that if he waited any longer, he would be an emotional mess, and he couldn’t afford to show that type of weakness in front of those under his command.

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KJ laid back on the examining table, almost furious with himself for how things happened. He had been entrusted to a mission of the utmost importance. He was given the Shadow morpher, yet when he was finally given the chance to show what he could do, he had to be saved by the rest of his team.

Maybe they’re all right about me. Maybe I should be an ensign, he thought to himself.

All he’d ever wanted was the chance to prove himself, to show what he could do, but now he knew. *I can’t do much*, he sighed inwardly.

The doors to the infirmary slid apart, and it was Admiral Cruger who stepped in with his hands behind his back. KJ attempted to sit up, to stand at attention, but the admiral motioned for him to stop.

“As you were, ensign,” KJ, realizing he wasn’t in a position to put up much of a struggle, allowed himself to simply collapse onto the table. “You did an incredible job out there, ensign. No one could be prouder of you,” he said.

“But sir, I failed. I didn’t find the B-Squad, and...”

“The mission was to ensure that the red energem was brought back to SPD, and from I’ve been told from your teammates, you were instrumental in that happening. When SPD needed you, you stepped up, and that is nothing I will not soon forget,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” he reached over to a small shelf, picking up the Shadow morpher. “I believe this is yours, sir,” KJ said, presenting it to him.

“You must be mistaken, ensign. That is yours,” the admiral said, and before KJ could respond, he turned and walked away.