

Saturday
September 2nd, 2028
14:08 hours (PST)

The loading bay doors to the Astro Omega Ship slowly lowered, touching down on the ground as the team cautiously disembarked the ship, taking a moment to get a good look around at the surroundings.

The first noticeable difference was that there seemed to be a greenish tint in the air, as opposed to blue, but after taking only a few steps forward it became obvious that the gravity and atmosphere were different as well. Things seemed... heavier.

It was Lt. Jordan who took the lead with a small device in hand, gathering more information about the planet. "The air is breathable, there was no detectable toxins in the air. I believe we'll be able to survive here until the ship is complete with the self repair protocols and we can reboard," she informed them.

Serenity nodded slightly. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Pascal raised and lowered his feet several times, trying to get a feel for what the gravity was like. "This isn't much like home, the gravity is heavier," he pointed out.

"Lt. Commander," Asia called out to get her attention.

Serenity turned to her. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"I think the gravimetric distortion must have effected by biosynthetic implants. I can't move my left arm and I am not picking up anything with my ocular implant," she paused. "I'm blind in one eye."

Nathaniel rushed over to her with a scanning device, hovering it in front of her. "Yeah, your synaptic pathways are fried. I can fix it, but I need to get back on the ship to get tools," he said, turning towards the ship.

"Belay that, chief. I can't have you on the ship with a radiation leak," she turned to Asia. "Can you make it in this condition? Are you in any immediate danger?"

"No, it's just inconvenient. It can wait, sir, but I wanted to be upfront with you. I won't be much help on this mission."

"You'll do fine, Lt. James," Serenity assured her.

They all turned around behind them only to see Ella laying in the tall grass, flailing her arms and legs from side to side.

“What are you doing?”

“How often do you get to make snow angels in the grass on an alien planet?” she replied, continuing her motion.

Serenity stiffened up. “We need to stay focused, ensign. On your feet,” without a word, Ella was back to her feet and straightened her uniform. “If we have to be here, let’s make the best of it. Lt. James, since you want to be the explorer, how about you take a few samples of plant life to take back to SPD to study?” she suggested.

“Aye, sir.”

“I would advise against that,” Lt. Jordan said. “According to my scans, there is a storm headed this way, and from the looks of it we should probably find shelter of some kind and wait it out.”

“Sounds good,” they glanced around, eventually finding a something. “Looks like a small cave about half a kilometer away. I suggest we head there and wait this out,” she turned to Garr, who was still favoring his left leg. “You okay to walk, big man?”

Garr nodded slightly. “Garr good.”

“Alright then, let’s get moving. I don’t want to get caught out here in the rain,” Serenity said. “Does everyone has a phaser pistol? You never know what we might run into out here.”

“Yes, sir,” Asia said, speaking for the group as each of them checked the holsters on their belts, confirming they were armed.

There was a crack of lightning in the air, and after a small delay, it was accompanied by thunder. “This sounds like it’s going to be bad,” Lt. Jordan pointed out as they walked.

Nathaniel sped up, catching up with Micah so he could walk beside her. “Have you ever been off planet before?” he asked her.

“A few times, but never on a mission before. This is exciting to me. This is a new world. From a look at the scans it looks as though there is a colony of humanoid beings here, but nothing that was suggest that they have advanced to the point of transwarp travel,” she said.

“Imagine that; I bet they think they’re the only ones in the universe. With no way to travel to any other systems, but that would be the logical conclusion,” he added.

Serenity was only a few steps ahead of them leading the team towards the cave, but was close enough where she was able to overhear the conversations being had behind her. While she couldn't put her finger on it, she found that a wave of annoyance swept over her. *But why*, she thought. *What if Ella is right? What if I am interested in Nathaniel? What does that mean for my mission*, she thought to herself.

Her thoughts were enough to grab the attention of Ella, who prior to this was walking alongside Garr and Lt. James. She hurried ahead, walking side by side with Serenity. "Yeah, you are," she said.

"I *are* what?" she asked.

"Interested."

"In?" Serenity asked in an aggravated tone.

"You don't have to be shy with me, Serenity. I already know. Why can't you just admit it to yourself?" she asked her.

And then, it happened. Almost without thinking, without the time to reflect on her words, on reflex alone. "Because the mission is more important," she told her.

It amazed Serenity that she blurted it out like that. Even though Ella had no idea what mission she was referencing, the point was *she* knew. She'd been very careful since arriving in this time period to watch not only what she said, but who she said it to. Even the slightest change may have endangered the mission and put all of their lives at risk.

Still, there was no damage done, so Serenity dismissed the thought as they continued on.

"We're *on* the mission and everything is fine. Sure, I didn't plan on sitting in a cave all afternoon, but we'll be okay," Ella told her.

Serenity smiled. Ella's simplistic way of viewing the world was refreshing, almost appealing. Serenity missed the days when she was a wild eyed, eager cadet just ready to learn, to train and hopefully one day become a power ranger. It was odd to her that she hadn't felt that way in years, but from her perspective, the moments that led her from wild eyed and eager to focused on a singular task and somewhat distant hadn't even happened yet.

They arrived at the cave, and each of them headed inside. There was enough room for all of them to get inside, but there wasn't much headroom and as they settled in, they realized they were all very close to each other. No sooner than they all etched out an area to sit in, the storm began to pour down.

At a glance, the rain appeared to be a reddish color, but seemed to change color as it came into contact with the grass. There was also a noticeable odor in the air.

"Smells like..." Ella started.

"Caleb Two," she and Nathaniel said in unison, turning up their noses.

"Should we be concerned about the rain?" Serenity asked.

Lt. Jordan aimed her scanning device towards the mouth of the cave, taking a quick scan. "It seems harmless, but there is an... aroma," she pointed out.

"Garr like. Remind Garr of home," he blurted out.

"Makes sense. Caleb Two is within jumping distance from Aunuria," she told him.

She's right, it's a fact. Aunuria and Caleb Two is within shuttle distance from one another. Stands to reason Garr and his family had traveled there before, Serenity thought to herself, but couldn't understand why hearing it from Micah bothered her. Again, she shook it off, allowing the emotion to pass, especially before Ella picked up on it and wanted to talk to her about it.

"Chief, how confident are you that we'll be able to make it Temere space, get the part we need and get back on schedule?" Serenity asked, trying to stick to the mission.

"Getting the part should be easy, and with Micah's help I should be able to have everything repaired in an hour or so. And with the new coil upgrades she came up with, we'll be able to achieve maximum transwarp and it will seriously cut our travel time down," he explained to her.

She nodded. "Good, good."

"You flatter me, sir. I just wanted made suggestions, but I can't bring the upgrades online by myself," Lt. Jordan added.

Serenity sighed inwardly. Ella noticed it, but before she could say anything, there was another crack of lightning in the air, accompanied by even stronger thunder. It was enough to startle the group, and almost on instinct, Micah jumped, clutching Nathaniel's arm for safety.

"That's inappropriate, Lieutenant," Serenity snapped almost instantly.

"Sir?" she inquired with a confused tone.

"Commander Tate wanted you along on this mission because of your transwarp knowledge, fine. But you are *not* on this team, you are *not* D-Squad and you definitely should not be curled

up with my chief of engineering like you're a schoolgirl with a crush," she snapped, amazing herself at the rude and condescending tone in her voice. While she meant it, she didn't mean for it to sound the way it did.

Micah responded by letting go of Nathaniel's arm, sitting up straight. "Yes, sir. My apologies, sir," she said shyly.

It was Asia who finally spoke up, breaking the awkward silence that accompanied Serenity's outburst. "What wasn't necessary, Lt. Commander," she said.

"What?"

"Micah may not be D-Squad, but she's in SPD. We all are. She got scared and she reached out for someone, what's wrong with that? That lightning hit and I grabbed Garr. Do I have a school girl crush?" she asked her.

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?" Asia replied.

Then, it happened again. There was no time to think about it, no time to filter her words. It just came out. "Because she can't like him like that," she said in a jealous tone.

It was enough to get everyone's attention, and now, all eyes were on Serenity.

"What does it matter? As far as I'm concerned the mission is on hold until this weather clears up, the ship is ready to go and we can take off," she said.

"Sounds like you like him," Ella pointed out with the intention to break the tension between them.

"I do."

"You do?" Nathaniel asked, puzzled.

"Of course I do, but the mission has to come first," Serenity said.

"You keep saying that but we're just sitting here in this cave. What more of the mission can we do from here?" Asia asked.

"This isn't the mission I'm talking about," she blurted out. That was enough to concern Serenity, so much so that she stood up and headed towards the cave exit out of fear of accidentally saying something else.

"Whats going on with you, Re-Re?" Ella asked.

"I don't know. I have to go," she said, making her way towards the exit.

It was Garr who stood up, blocking the entrance.

"Not safe. Serenity stay," he informed her.

"That isn't up to you, Lieutenant," she pointed out. "Get out of my way."

"Is up to Garr. Garr head of security. It *is* up to Garr. No safe. Friend no go," he insisted.

Serenity turned around. "What is wrong with you people? Don't you realize what's at stake here? We don't have time for crushes and nonsensical ramblings about cookies. The mission is what matters," she snapped.

It was Nathaniel who took the scanning device from Lt. Jordan, going over the readings trying to find an explanation for what was happening.

"Ei, what did you say the atmosphere composition was on this planet?" he asked.

"74% nitrogen, 20% oxygen, 2% argon and the rest was something called sodium theo pins," she said, reasonably sure that she pronounced it wrong.

"Do you mean Sodium Thiopental?"

"Probably. I don't remember."

"Lt. Commander, I know what's going on," he said.

"What do you have, chief?"

"Sodium Thiopental is the key component in the most basic of truth serums. I think that breathing in the air has exposed us to the compound, and it is compelling us to tell the truth," he said.

"How do we find out for sure?"

"There is only one way to find out," Asia turned to Serenity. "Do you have a crush on Nathaniel?" she asked her.

"Yes," she blurted out, though it was obvious that she was trying not to.

Nathaniel stood up. "You do?"

Serenity sighed. "Of course I do, chief. You're smart and funny and cute, but I can't afford to get close to you like that. To anyone, really. The mission comes first," she said.

"What's so important about this mission?"

"It's not *this* mission. It's *my* mission."

"You're on a different mission that we are?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm here to save you. To save all of you," she said, still struggling to not say anything she didn't want to, but failing horribly.

"Save us from what?"

Finally, Serenity gave up, realizing there was nothing she could do to stop it. All she could hope for now was that the damage wouldn't have an impact on her mission. "Six months from now, Earth is engaged in a war and comes up on the losing end of it. SPD is all but destroyed, the human race is all but wiped out, and a handful of resistance fighters that were left were hunted down and killed by enemy troops. Commander Tate sent me back to prevent that war from happening, or at the very least prepare us so we could have a fighting chance," she explained.

"You're from the future? Where are we in the future? Am I a commander yet?" Nathaniel asked.

She shook her head. It hurt her to say it, but knew there was nothing she could do about it. "No, but close. Most of you are seriously injured or killed in battle. I have to stop that. I have to save you all," she said, unable to fight the tears as they rolled down her face.

The entire group remained silent for a moment, taking the time to process the statement.

"Garr dead?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Worse. You were changed."

"What Serenity mean? Changed? Change to what? Garr is not Garr?" Garr asked her.

"The enemy we are facing is unlike anything you've ever seen before. They are a nomadic species called The Vohrsoth. They are unthinking, unfeeling, unrelenting. You can't negotiate with them, they aren't interested in treaties or alliances. All they want are parts," she said.

"Parts?" Ella asked nervously. "Like transformer driver thingies?"

“No. People. They are warriors made of a mixture of other races they have conquered over the years. They can’t be killed, they can’t be stopped. If you cut off a head, they not only replace it with yours and keep moving, they’ll attach its other head to your lifeless body,” she snapped her fingers. “And just like that they have a new soldier for their army. They cannot be reasoned with, they cannot be stopped,” Serenity told them.

“Garr no want to be Vohrsoth.”

She turned to him. “I don’t want *any* of you to be. That’s why I seem so uptight. It’s not because I don’t like you guys. I do, I really do, but I need to keep you safe.”

“So what can we do?” Pascal asked.

“Nothing we can do, other than prepare ourselves and hope for the best. In order to have a shot at this, we need this team to be a team, and right now, we’re not.”

“Of course we are, we’re D-Squad,” Nathaniel said.

“We’re not a squad, we’re a group of friends and that’s nice, but we need to come together as a team if we’re going to have a chance. In order to do that, I have to keep you all alive...” she turned to Asia. “Especially you.”

“Why me? You don’t have a crush on me, too, do you?”

Nathaniel saw the serious look on Serenity’s face, moving aside so she could approach Asia with a tear in her eye. “Because, you’re my mother,” Serenity confessed.

An awkward hush fell over the group.

“Dun dun duuuuunnn,” Ella sang.