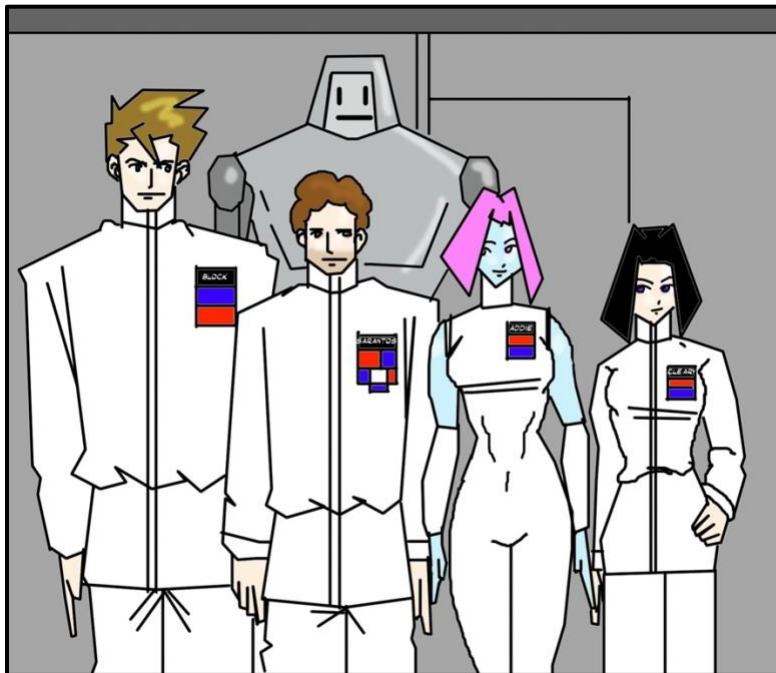


## *Chapter 11*

### *“Friendless”*

Sarantos changed his mind and decided to stay with the Chicago. He was the Captain and he should stay with his ship. Sarantos felt better than he had in a long time. He was in charge and captaining his ship the way he always wanted. He wanted to see himself through his crew’s eyes though. Were they happy with his decision? Everyone was facing a new adventure. Yet, he couldn’t ask for finer people to be a part of it with him. Addie, John, Cleary, Sonny, Brel, and even Block - he grew to like the guy after all and was glad they’d gotten to know each other.



He’d always been transparent with his crew. Sarantos never wore a mask, so they all knew what they were getting into with him. They never took advantage of his free spirit and allowed him to own his own soul. That was vital in any friendship.

Each person owns their own soul. This unknown situation they were about to embark on could mean they would have

to sell it, but he hoped not.

Time and tide wait for no one. Being a Captain, he had to step up to the plate and take charge, but in the back of his mind, he routinely worried he’d made the wrong decision to send the entire ship towards the space station that loomed in front of them now like a dark spirit waiting to chew them up and swallow them into the unknown.

He had no choice. Everyone made regular demands on him. So he drank, ate, and stood up to the challenge. He chose to travel to this base and meet it head on. Sometimes for a Captain, it was better to never complain and never explain. No more hiding in the shadows, because they were now lost inside the biggest shadow ever imagined. When he made the decision, none of his crew balked; they nodded politely and completed their procedures for this new mission.

“Captain, Brel just docked his ship,” said Chief Gregg Petty, as his eyes scanned the screen in front of him.

Sarantos looked at Addie. She was beautiful but he could not afford the distraction. He wanted to protect her. He wanted to protect them all. Her eyes focused straight ahead observing Brel. The man was fearless, willing to risk himself for the whole ship. Sarantos was sure that he’d get along with all Bladians. They were a unique race.

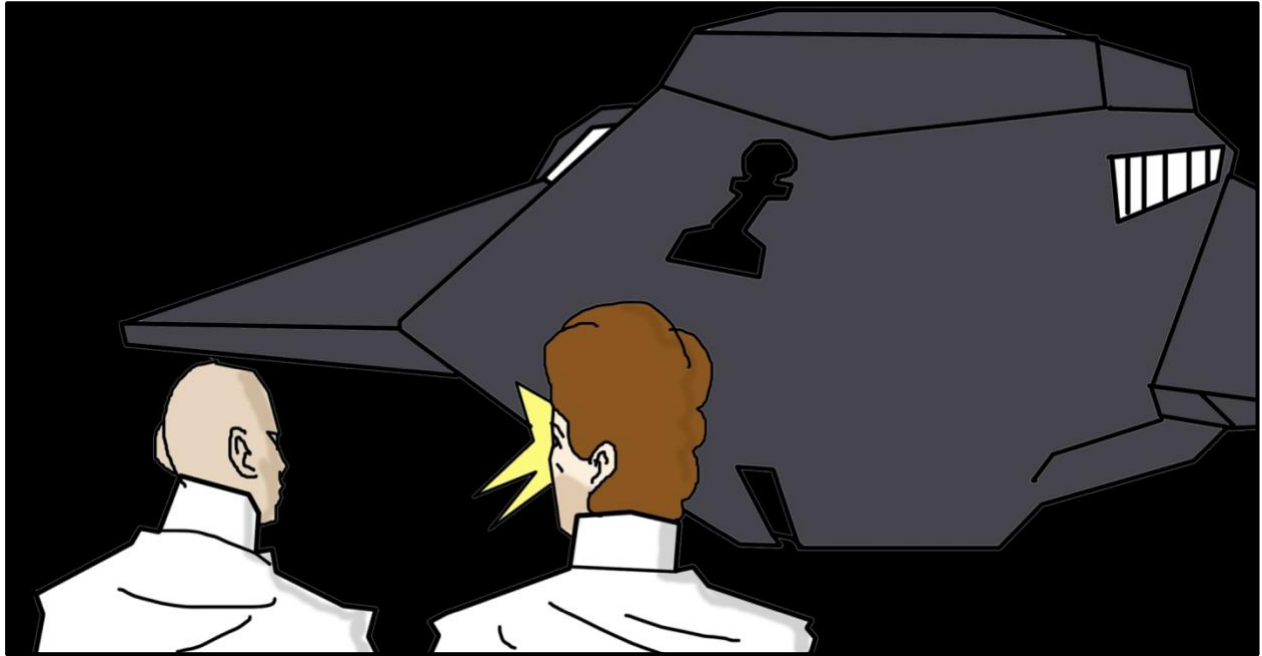
“Lieutenant, how close do we need to get for Chief Brel to use his telepathy to communicate with us? It might help us find out what’s going on,” said Sarantos.

“Oh, Captain we would need to get a lot closer than we currently are, but I’ll let you know once he can contact me. We don’t want to use IC. It could put him at risk of being discovered. Not that they probably haven’t noticed his ship, but if he feels he can use the IC, I’m sure he will,” said Addie bluntly while never pulling her eyes off the screen.

There were several starships docked in the bay. He didn’t recognize any of them.

“Matt, do you or Chief Storm recognize any of those symbols on the ships or the design of the ships,” asked Sarantos. He was glad Chief Storm had joined them on their mission. His knowledge of languages and culture might prove helpful. Storm

was a loner, and he hadn't seen him much during this trip. As far as he knew, Storm never had a problem during this blackout, unlike some other crew members.



Matt said, “You know Captain, I’m not sure but that ship with the emblem of what looks like a checkmark might belong to a race I ran across many years ago, a race known as the Franks. They are explorers and adventurers, not overly friendly, unless they want information about an expedition they’re on. Their ships are extensive. They grow their own food with replicators, always carry extra fuel, and stock up on all supplies because they don’t know when they will return or what they’ll run into. They’re very self-sufficient, you can tell by the size of that baby.”

The ship was enormous. Three levels were noticeable from their view. As they crept closer, the Franks’ ship increased in size.

Sarantos looked at Storm. “Sorry, Captain, I recognize nothing, although I’ve heard of the Franks. Their language is rather harsh, and barbaric. I can help protect us if we run into trouble. They’re not well known throughout the quadrant but are recognized because of their studies into the unknown. I imagine that’s why they are here,” said Storm.

“That’s good then. At least we have some ideas about what we could be facing. Let’s hope they’re willing to share what they’ve learned with us,” said the Captain as his brow wrinkled.

“Captain, I think the other one looks specialized and military, which is a concern. I think it’s highly unlikely the Franks will share any information with us, unless we have something they want,” said Matt, as he walked closer to the screen.

“John, how’s everything in Engineering, all well?”

“Yes, Captain, so far. Out.”

He needed to leave John in Engineering in case they had a situation arise and needed to get out of here immediately.

“Captain.” Addie’s voice was so soft he wasn’t sure he heard her, until he looked at her face. She was listening to someone.

“Lieutenant? Everything okay? Is that Brel?”

“Yes, Captain. He’s in and has gone to silent mode.”

Sarantos looked around at his crew. He wasn’t about to leave Brel on his own.

Sarantos said, “Okay people let’s get this ship docked, now. We need to board that station.”

The ship came around and smoothly docked into an open port. He hoped they were doing the right thing. This is the game of life. There is a 99 percent chance you will get hurt.

An old fear suddenly came back to haunt him. It was intensely maddening. What if he let them all down? He was a loner when he was younger. As a kid he thought he was a joke, forgotten, and left out of other kids' lives; left behind and erased... usually friendless. He didn't want to feel that way again. He'd put so much effort into his classes and this ship and made some great friends during and after college. The fear was senseless but overwhelmingly persistent. Going back to being friendless wasn't an option though. He wanted to do what was appropriate and suitable for his friends, his crew. This thought became an obsession.

“Captain, who's going onto the station?”

“Good question, Lieutenant. Any suggestions? You're Head of Security. I strongly value your opinion in this situation,” said the Captain.

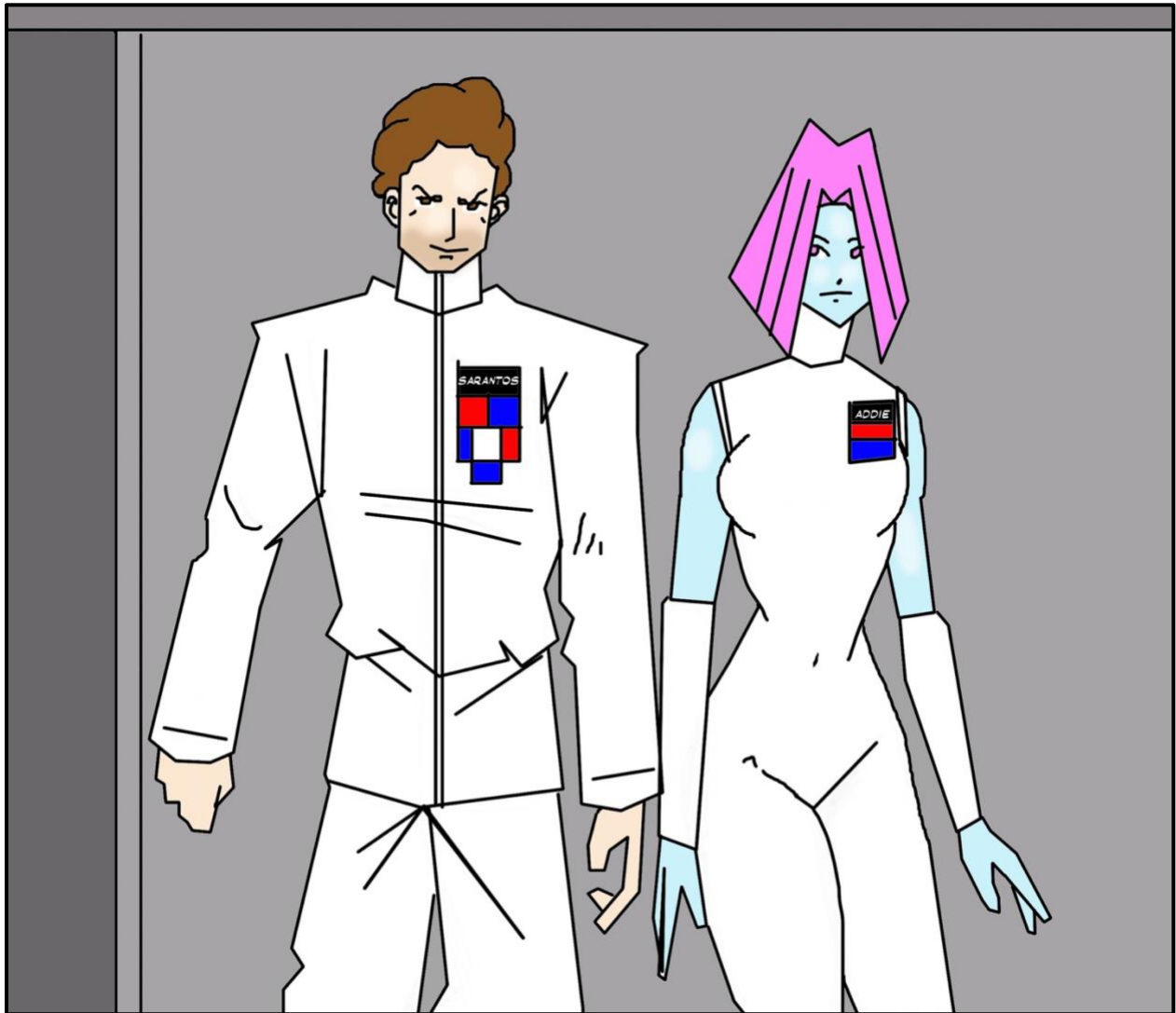
Addie smiled and said, “I appreciate that, Captain. I liked your idea when we were going to send a small ship in. Me, and two from Security, Matt, someone from Engineering, and someone from the Medical team.”

“Who would you send from Security?”

“I insist I go. Brel is already there. Block is on you. I'd want Sonny and have him pick another one of his kind. Also, Chief Stone Drake. Sir, I'd like to take Petty, to assist with equipment, if needed, and from Engineering Lieutenant Margaret Stone. From medical, Private Snow Walters as an advisor and surgeon, highly skilled in both areas.”

“Agreed on all accounts, Lieutenant,” said Sarantos. He couldn’t argue with whom she chose. It was who he would’ve picked. The combination of her and him was magic.

“Captain, are you okay with being left behind?”



“Not really. I think I should be there as Captain of the ship for unity and I think I should also be the one to lead the team because I’m not sure what’s going on. It seems to be a death trap. Something about it makes me nervous.”

“Okay, Cleary can head the ship in your stead. We need John in Security,” said Addie.

He tried to contain his excitement. He should go, and it thrilled him that Addie suggested it. He didn't want to be left behind. What if they all died? He would be alone again. Friendless again. But, if he truly thought about it, he was never alone. His ancestors and dad seemed to lurk about in their holy place supplying him with an endless supply of inspiration. At times, he could feel their presence so greatly that he would step forward with new-found compassion and determination to achieve success. Often, knowing they were there brought a comforting smile to his heart.

He nodded his agreement towards his Lieutenant. Sarantos felt such joy. He wouldn't let her die without him, if that was to be their fate on this day.

Everyone was notified. Then, they all stood in the teleportation room ready to go. Addie moved forward.

“Captain, I will test this first. You wait until I contact you. Before he could object, she leaped onto the teleport device and nodded at the person who controlled it.

Major Sandy Flora from Engineering, an Olivian, pressed the button on the screen in front of him as his ears twitched. He watched intently because he was part of the crew who finished it and took pride in the proper functioning of the machine.

Addie vanished.

Seconds later he heard, “Captain, I'm down here.”

They all nodded at the Major as they all stepped onto the platform. We don't remember the days. We remember the moments!

Next, Sarantos felt like something disconnected him from his body, falling into nothing; it was him floating on the edge of emptiness. Then it was over. He was standing in front of Addie.

Brel nodded and went into his mind. “Captain, I believe we are alone on this station. There are dead bodies everywhere, what’s left of them, anyway. It appears to have been a battle of sorts with those that lived here and the races from the two ships we see docked outside. I’m not sure what happened.”

“Wonderful. How many bodies?” He sent the thought into his own mind for Brel to pluck out.

“Not sure, I didn’t have time to check all the decks, but they are scattered everywhere. It does look like most of the equipment still works. We might find something we can use.”

“Thanks, Brel.” Out loud he said, “Crew, it seems we are in a strange situation. Everyone on this station is dead. I would like Walters to check out a few of the bodies to make sure it wasn’t something other than crew members that killed them. Make sure it’s nothing unusual like a virus or any other weird alien bug, if you know what I mean?”

“Yes, Captain, can Matt attend me?”

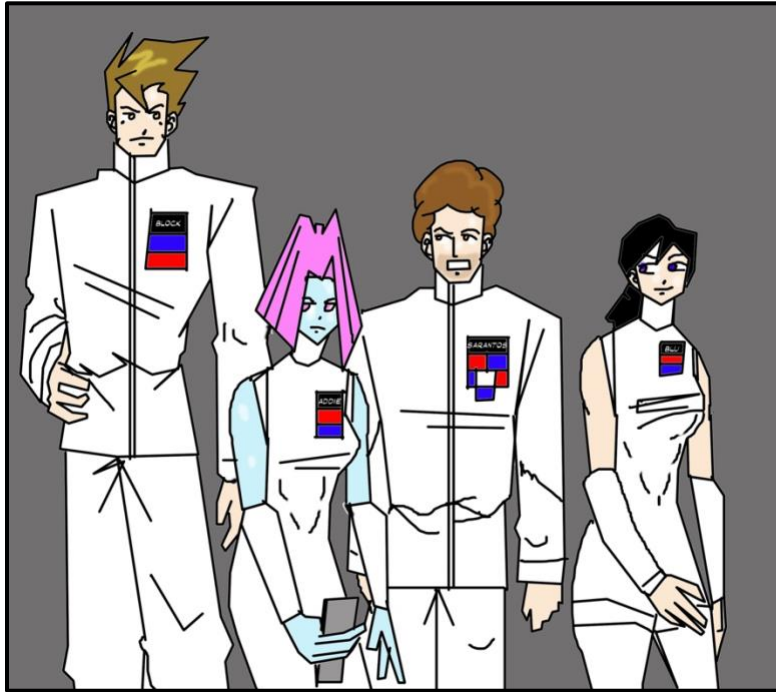
“That’s fine Walters. Matt.”

“Yes, Captain I’m there,” said Matt.

Sarantos then said, “Sonny, can you accompany them?”



“Yes, Captain. This is Blu. Not sure if you met her, but she is skilled in any weapon imaginable. She picks it up and can use it with skill, instantly. She’s observant and has also medical and engineering experience. That’s why I brought her on this mission.”



Addie smiled. “Block you’re with me. Blu I need you to stay by the Captain at all costs. Do not leave his side, no matter what.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” said Blu with a firm and friendly voice.

“Lieutenant, is that necessary? Block was fine.”

“Captain, as Head of Security,

I find it very necessary,” said the Lieutenant.

He didn’t argue. Her demeanor would not allow it.

The medical team immediately went to work.

“Lieutenant Stone would you like to take Drake, Petty and Block with you to check the equipment - what’s working, what we can use, and any device you find that can help us communicate, possibly with the Federation.”

“Captain, Block was with me,” interrupted Addie.

“Right, then you and Block check out the ship. Look for anyone alive or possibly hiding. Thoroughly investigate each room, oh, and your Captain and Blu will accompany you both.”

“Good idea, Captain. Everyone should stay in touch. Security, watch their backs.” said Addie.

They found several corridors that led to what appeared to be the space station’s staff quarters. They found a few dead bodies noticing they were killed in combat, then disintegrated them with the weapon they’d gained from the Okurians.

There was no sense in keeping the bodies lying around. They were already decomposing with a strong odor that was distracting. This was the first time he’d seen a Frank, but they didn’t recognize the other race. He assumed they probably belonged to this dark quadrant.

The rooms were elegant and nicely decorated. Each room had three replicators, appearing to be for food. It would get checked later.

After thirty minutes of not finding anyone alive, a wave of anxiety came over the Captain. All the ones his group came across were killed by weapons, nothing sinister about it.

He checked on Snow. “Snow, did you find any disease or viral infections of any sort?”

“Captain, no it appears the ones we’ve seen were healthy, but murdered. We’ve checked out fifteen bodies so far. We are disintegrating them after examination. Hope that’s okay, we don’t want a disease spreading unchecked because of these dead bodies.”

“Great, exactly what we’re doing too. All the bodies we’ve found are the same as yours. Seems like they were all murdered by each other. Not sure what happened, yet, but keep your eyes open.” Nothing is ever easy.

Snow said, “Will do, Captain.”

He checked in with the Engineering crew. Nothing new. All machinery they found worked. Then they walked into the quarters of what appeared to be the Chief in charge of the station. He was dead, a human, and sitting in his chair.

“Wonderful,” said Block.

They removed him quickly.

Addie was looking around. She sighed, then looked at Sarantos. Her head was shaking back and forth, almost in denial.

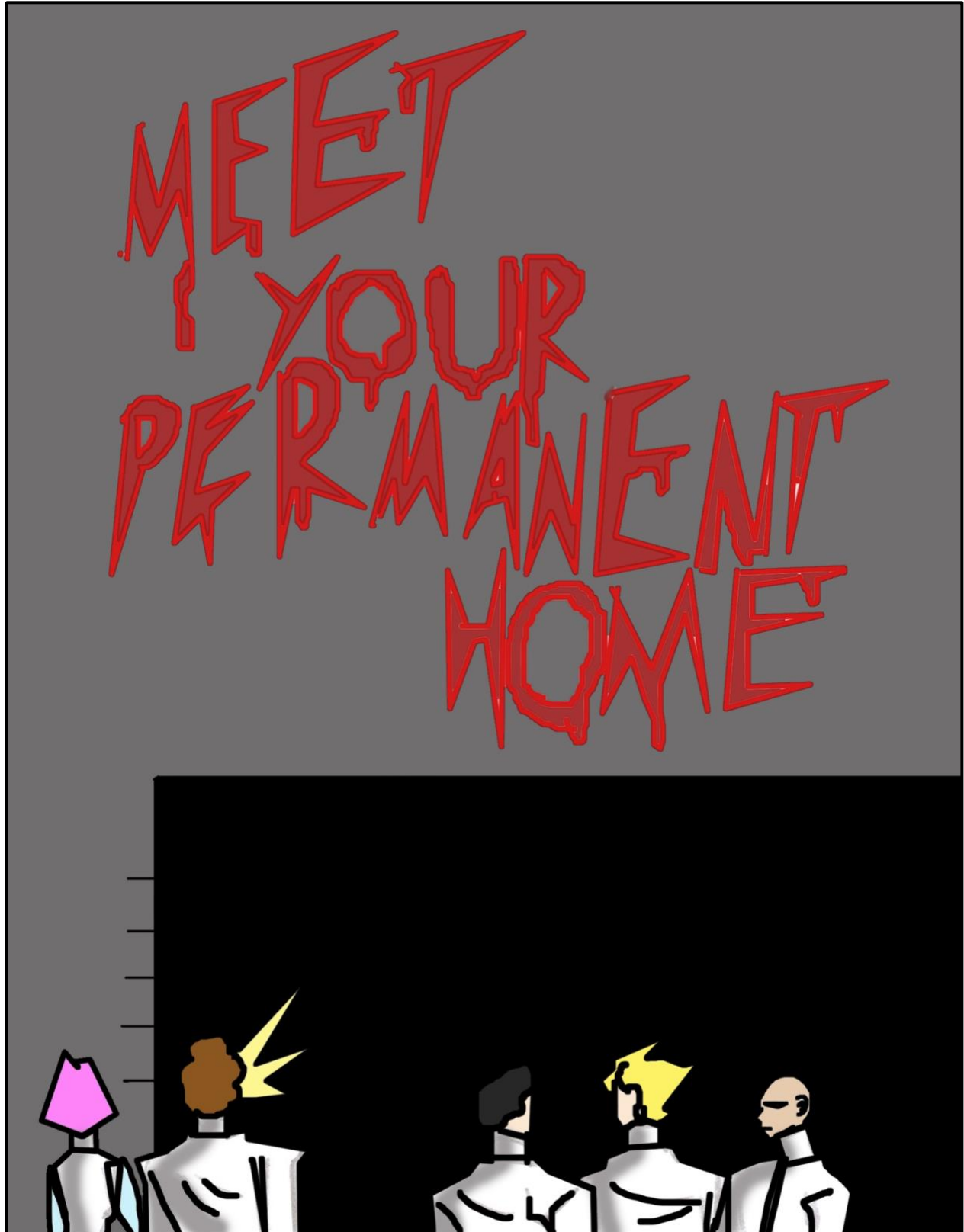
“Addie,” he said forgetting any formal pleasures.

Brel came into the room, looked at Addie, “What’s going on?”

“Oh, no. Oh, no... no, no, no.”

“Addie?” He moved to her side and saw what she was looking at.

“No!”



Brel, Drake, and Block looked at each other as the Captain raised his head reviewing the inscription in blood, “MEET YOUR PERMANENT HOME.”

What else could he say at this moment? His mind was racing. They would hate him. He would be friendless again. Sarantos would become a legacy built in isolation, seclusion, pain, and solitude, and now, he dragged what few real friends he had here with him, to nothingness - not for a brief moment but for the rest of their lives.

Brel said, "What's going on, Captain?"

Sarantos didn't have to answer. Brel probed his mind and the answer was standing in the front of his mind. Brel surely read what a loser his Captain was then moved through his valley of self-pity until he found what he was looking for - it was a dark chasm, and they were all lost in it.

"I shouldn't have had us dock the ship before we knew exactly what was going on." He blamed himself. History can be chased but never caught. This was all his fault.

Brel sat down in the nearest chair. "Captain, it wouldn't have mattered. I probably would've never seen that, and even if you sent a small crew from the ship maybe none of us would have seen it in time."

"What's going on?" Drake was pacing.

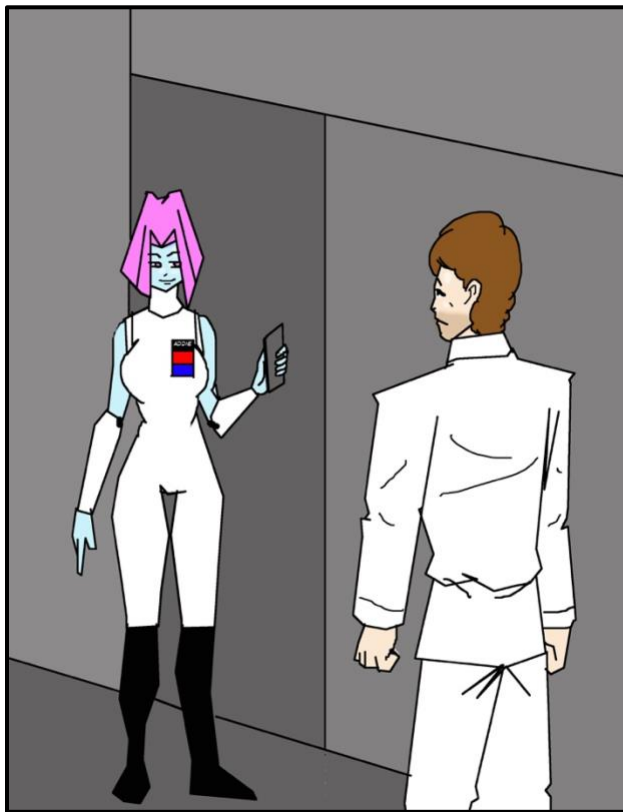
Block stood like a statue and never questioned them.

"We're stuck here. Once we docked, we sealed our fate. We're trapped forever. As far as we know there is no escape from this place." The worst kind of sad is not being able to explain why.

"We can search for an escape of some sort, Captain," said Addie.

“Yes, but meanwhile, we need to secure this place in case we get company. Get all hands in here and secure this place ASAP. Gather the weapons from the bodies and anything else you can find. Get the cleaning crew in here immediately and even extra help from any of the departments that can assist. We need this facility sanitized immediately.”

He felt weirdly alive and in charge. He forced his mind to think positive. They were going to make the most of this bad situation, if he had anything to say about it.



“Addie, get most of your crew in here to secure and lock this place down. Only leave a handful on the ship. Get John and his crew in here checking out this equipment to find any loopholes that might allow us to leave. I refuse to believe there’s no way out.”

“Yes, Captain.” Addie smiled at him, hit her IC and said, “Major Flora, one to beam out of here to the ship.”

“On it, ready.”

Again, Addie was gone.

Sarantos needed to stop reading the tea leaves. He looked firmly at Block and Brel. “Well, that leaves us in charge of scouring the rest of the ship for leftover bodies.”

“Yes, Captain, I’m sure we will find more, but I wonder if we might want to check out the two ships that are docked first. Let’s board them and check if anyone escaped

there. We wouldn't want any surprises. Since we're not sure how long they were here before they realized they were stranded, we might also find supplies there we could use. I would assume it would've been within the last week or so," said Brel.

"Right, good idea, Brel. I think we can have Major Flora scan the ship and then try to teleport us directly into it, possibly to the command deck. That might be safer."

"I'm game. Should we bring someone else with us?"

"We should be okay Block," said Sarantos.

"I have the disintegrator gun, just in case," said Block.

"Then we're good," said Sarantos before tapping his IC on his jacket. "Major, did the Lieutenant get there okay?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Can you teleport me, Brel, and Block into one of the ships directly, preferably to the Bridge, or Engineering? Can you also scan the ship first?"

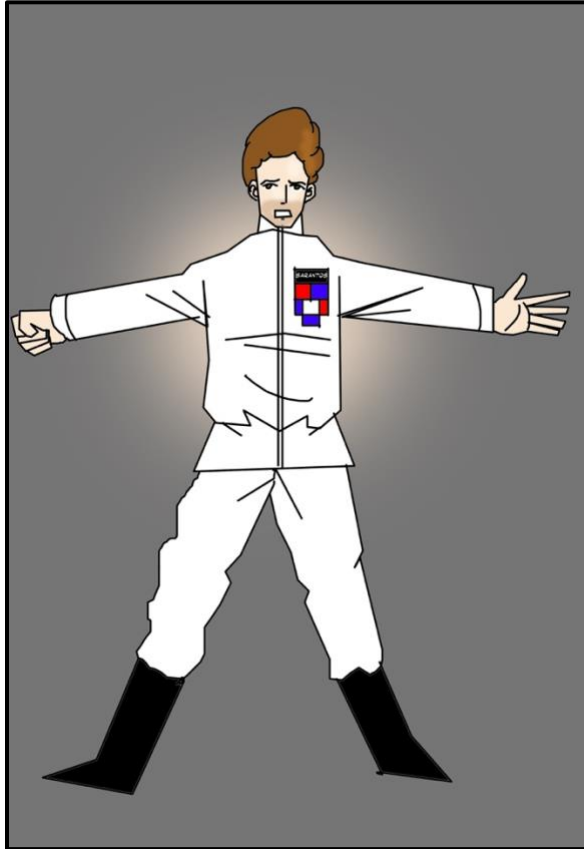
"One moment Captain, this will be a first."

"Sure," said the Captain.

"Okay, got it, I found the Bridge of the ship you refer to as the Franks ship. I can send you there, fingers crossed."

Sarantos grinned. There's an old earth custom to say fingers crossed, sending good luck, but to come from an Olivian, it was even more humorous.

“Great, fingers crossed Major. Have Chief Storm, and Ensign Harry Born meet us there. We might need their assistance.”



“Done.”

The feeling of falling again, he didn't think he'd ever get used to it. Tomorrow is a tease that becomes today.

\*\*\*

The ship was dark and felt like a dreary tomb as they stood on the bridge of the Franks' ship. The Captain's chair was empty, and cold. A chill went through Sarantos. Do you ever wish you were the person you used to be?

Brel checked the Captain's room. No one was there.

Once Storm got over to the Bridge, he found some information about the black space they floated around in from the scattered documents of the Franks. He couldn't understand it all but got the gist of most of it. They'd arrived just over a week ago and were angry when they found out someone trapped them. From what Sarantos could make out, those that were living on this station would kill any crew from the docked ships and use their supplies to keep their little hustle going.



Storm said, “Captain, I think the Franks were great warriors and fought back. It might take me a long time, but the group that were living here managed this place for someone else, meaning there has to be a way off. I’m only assuming that, Sir, a positive thought thrown on our heavy situation.”

“Sure. It makes sense though. That will give our crew a glimmer of hope. Hope is sweet and all powerful though sometimes brittle and fleeting. You can log into our main port back to the Federation, right?”

“Yes, Captain. I haven’t heard from them in a while, but I send daily logs regardless.”

“Good, keep doing it and let them know of our current situation. If they receive it, at some point they might rescue us, if we don’t figure a way out first. What worries me, is someone coming here to collect us, or someone else docks here and is then stuck too. That would be the worst-case scenario.”

“Will do, Captain,” said Storm.

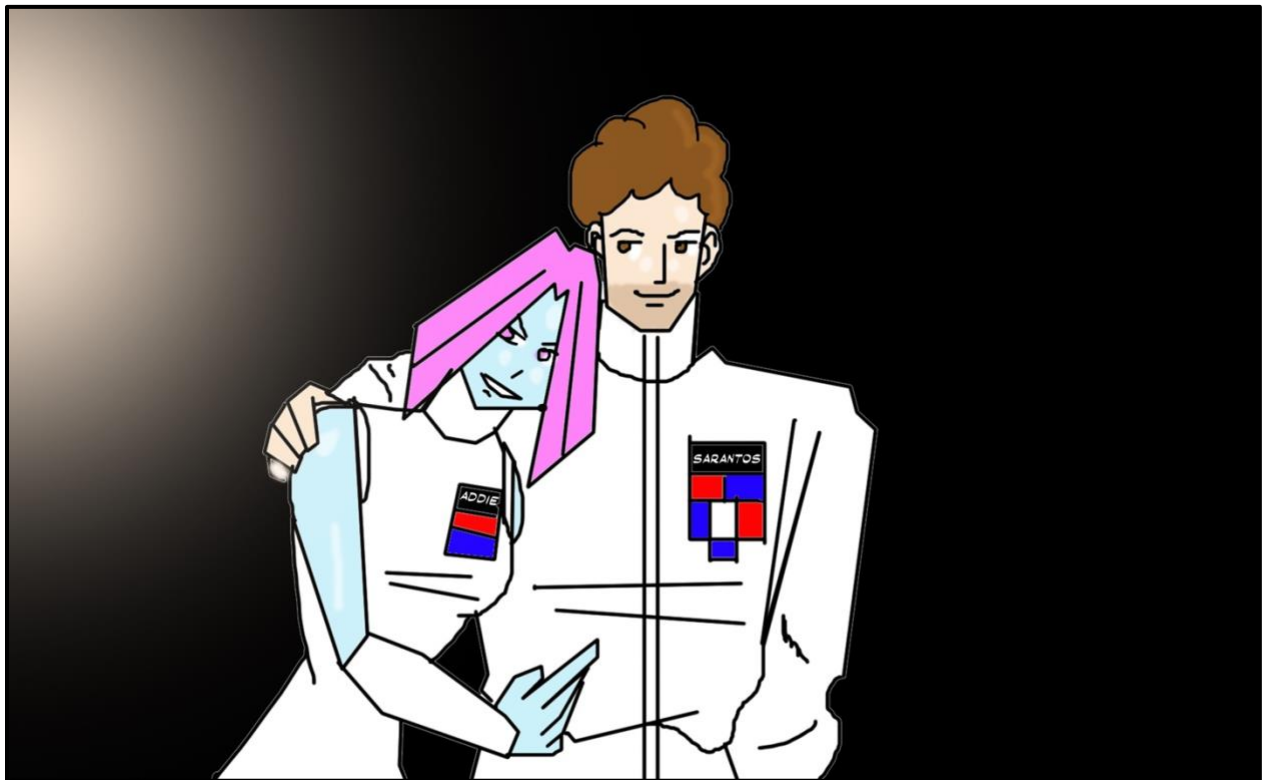
“Born, you’re a good researcher. Check more of their logs and get a Security team with you to go over to the other ship. We need to know how long that’s been there? I wonder how often this little space station has their rendezvous with their partners. Let’s check more logs on the station too and see if we can find out when to expect their arrival. Born, work with Storm. Team up with three Security crew. Get a hold of the Lieutenant to set it up and make sure everyone is on the same page.”

Sarantos, Block, and Brel finished checking out both ships for any sign of life over the next several hours. They found none. They managed to find a greenhouse on the Franks’ ship growing quite a lot of produce. The space station had their own pond with a great supply of fish, located inside a massive green farm that could feed a community for a very long time. It was good to know at least they wouldn’t go

hungry if trapped here for an extended period of time. Progress was slow, but it was encouraging.

The three of them continued to check out every nook and cranny of the space station until exhaustion finally hit Sarantos and Block. Brel never seemed to tire, another one of his charms.

For now, the Captain had them all meet back at their rooms on the ship, except about ten Security members who slept on the station, keeping watch during what they thought should be the station's sleeping hours. He couldn't remember what it looked like anymore to see a nice sunny day, or hear rainfall, or smell the wet earth. The space station's farm was as close as he would get except for the Creative Room, but it just wasn't the same.



The night found him and Addie together. He held Addie in his arms softly as she rested on his shoulder. “I love you, Addie. I’m sorry about docking here.”

“Oh, my love, it’s not your fault. We couldn’t know. You couldn’t possibly know. I wonder, however, what might come along and plant themselves here and it worries me. Maybe we can send out a signal around the station to ward off those that might want to dock here, so they’ll know it’s not a good idea.”

“How are you so beautiful? You’re absolutely right. We’ll have someone look into that tomorrow. At least we can live here with a reasonable supply of food and each other until we figure something out. If we can avoid other people docking here and being trapped here with us, it would eliminate a major concern of mine.”

“What if we never do, Sarantos? What if we are stuck here forever?”

He nodded slowly. Sarantos wanted to run but couldn't. He wanted to scream but the sound wouldn't come.

“Addie, thankfully I have you. I was trapped in a box before I met you, a small box that needed to be unlocked. You found the right key and turned it. There I was finally seeing color for the first time, and you were the first thing I ever truly saw. I guess, what I’m saying is with you my love, I can live anywhere, even inside this little box. You are my world.”

She snuggled deeper in his chest and sighed. “I know what you mean. You’re my Captain, my lover, my whole world. Your happiness is a part of my happiness. I could also live anywhere with you. By the way, did you notice that they have a movie theater and an ice-skating rink?”

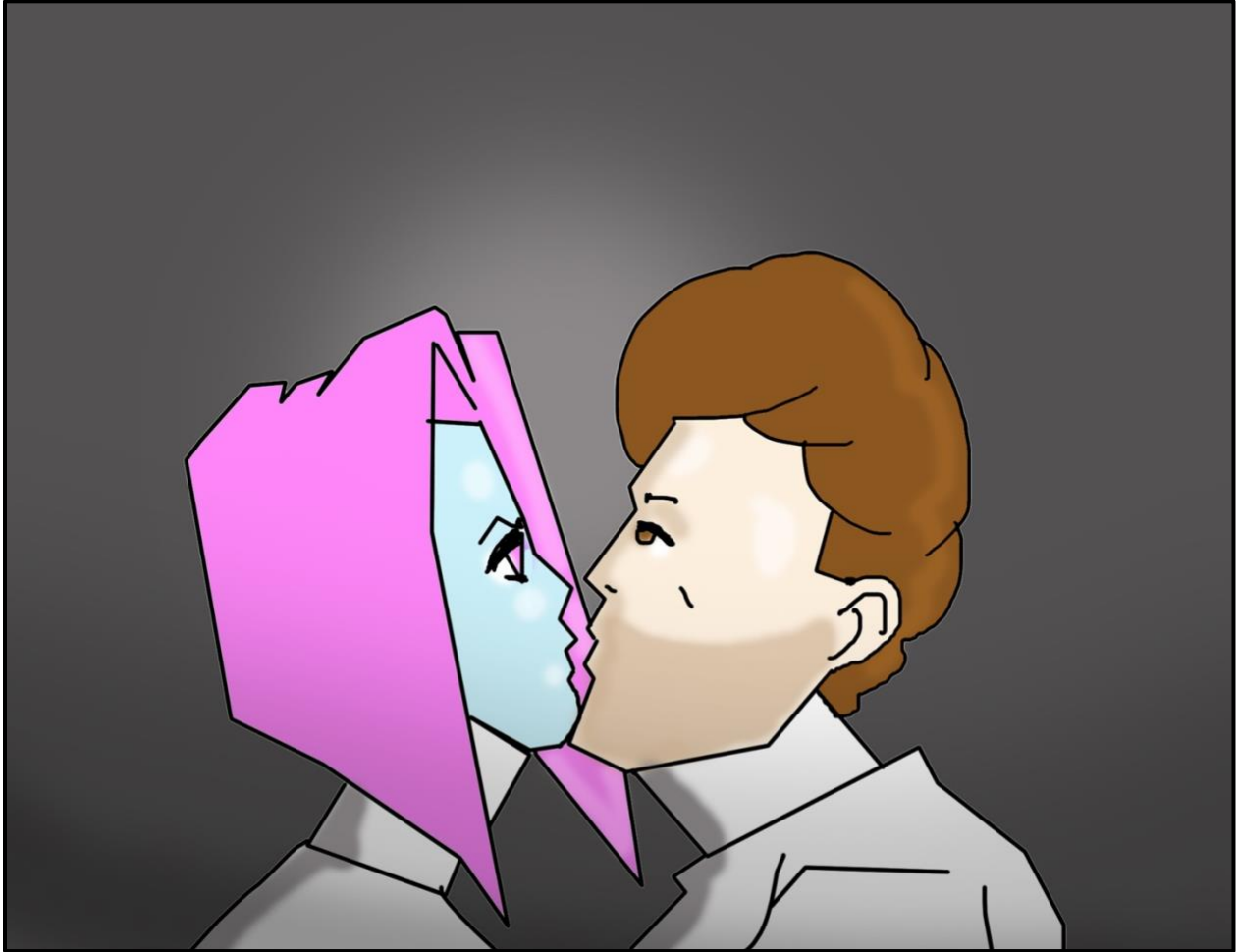
“I did. Did you notice the roller rink and tennis courts? They may not have a Creative Room, but they have quite a few other bonuses.”

“Yes, Sarantos, and the farm rains, did you know that? The farm rains! Whoever put this together knew what they were doing and clearly came from outside of this quadrant. I think the Franks heard about it and wanted to make it their own,” said Addie.

“I’m sure you’re right. I doubt they knew they’d get stranded. There must be some sleezy bar somewhere in the other quadrant that has paid broadcasters whispering about this place for a price. Whoever owns this is making some big bucks, that’s for sure.” He leaned back pulling Addie with him. “Smart business, without a big risk, until they met the Franks. Had we not come upon this, they would’ve probably collected their products to sell in their quadrant, and hired more fighters to run the place. Brilliant, actually.”

“Yes, I hope everyone is okay with our new arrangement,” said Addie.

“The Doc went around with Charlie talking with each crew member and checking them over to make sure they were physically sound and mentally stable, under the new circumstances. The Doc reported to me today that they were all adjusting well. Some were a little distraught, especially those that will no longer see or be able to talk to their family. Unless we can figure things out, I can understand why they feel that way. You know, Addie, it’s like we died and are trapped in limbo. No way in, no way out.”



“Yes, it is, Sarantos. At least I have you. I feel blessed and full of joy with you here. I can’t imagine what I would do if you weren’t here.”

He nodded and pulled her closer kissing her lips without looking out into the blackness. She was his light.

\*\*\*

It’d been five weeks since they were stranded, but the crew were fitting into their new home quite well. To make an end is to make a beginning.

Charlie headed up farming excursions by playing in the earth and feeling the rain, which she said would help heal their spirits. Sarantos thought she was right.

The Doc made sure they attended their checkups, and everyone held down the jobs they always did, and even more. Brel decided he liked movies. He'd never seen one but now had movie night once a week, with popcorn. Brel was finally forced to give in to Earth's comforts.

Matt and Donny served the healthiest food at both the Chicago and in the station. Matt kind of turned over the Chicago diner to Donny, because he was used to working at a station. He preferred it.

The 97F8's learned to skate and play tennis. No one would play with them because they couldn't lose. So they played against each other until boredom set in and they called the game tied, until the next time.

The Engineering team had their hands full with three ships and a space station and Security was split between the Chicago and the Station.

Block continued to date Charlie, and he named the new station, The Fellowship after watching the Lord of the Rings at the movie theatre.

The new name took.

Private Snow Walters fell in love with Stone Drake and they said their own vows and lived together as a couple aboard the Chicago.

It felt like they were starting a whole new world here where they were thriving and adapting. Heck, even the Doc wasn't visiting the Creative Room as often, she had her hands full.

It was weird because they had been trapped in the thick darkness for so long and their mood was affected by it but now that they were caged in darkness's heart within a station they could not escape, it began to feel like home to them and they grew comfortable. No more adventures, no more unknowns to explore, everything somehow seemed more peaceful even within the confines of this prison world.

Sarantos, Born, John, and a few others had band night once a week at Matt's place where music rocked their world and anyone could come to unwind, dance, and laugh.

Walt hired several crew members even their stowaway, Candy O'Malley, who at 11 was all too thrilled to become a part of this new world in the dark void. He needed help to keep up all these locations.

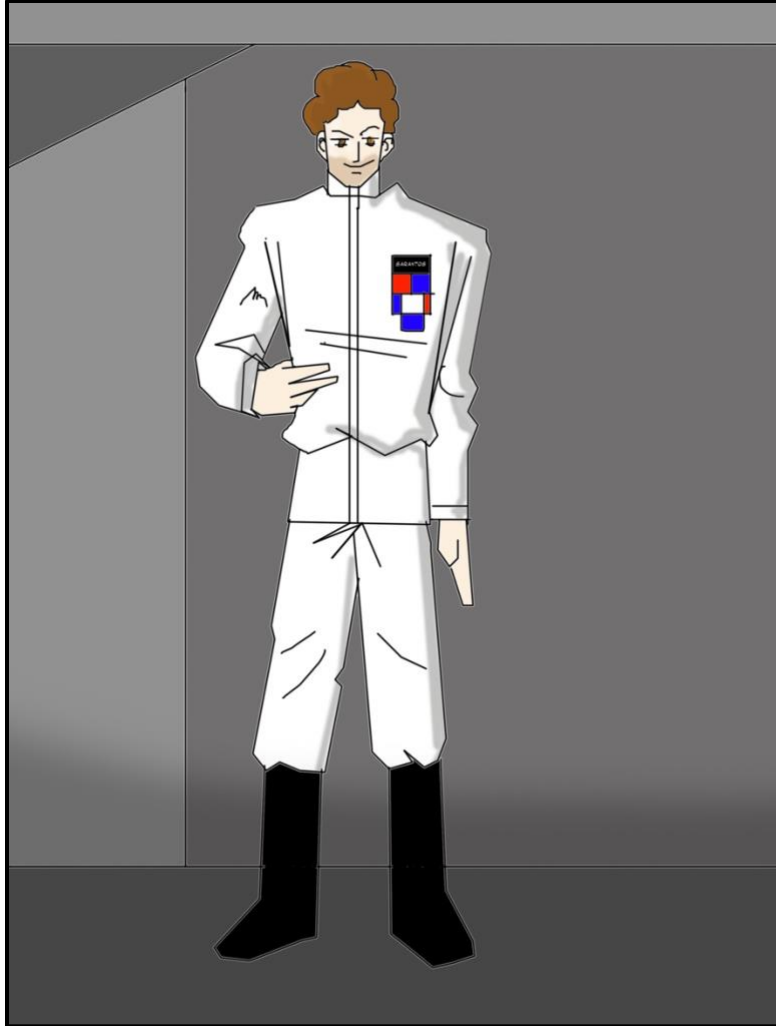
Well, the Captain and Addie had a child to start the new world. Little did he know that she would get pregnant in a day and the baby due in three weeks. The Doc said Addie's fine and that they're having twins, a girl and a boy. As far as Doc can tell, the boy appears more human while the girl has scales like Addie. Go figure. It doesn't matter though, does it?

Captain Sarantos explained, "Well, I'll report more later, I have to get ready for band night. Oh, before I forget, it looks like a ship will be here in four months to take what they want, but Major Flora has assured me, he'll transport our team onto that ship once they land and we'll take what we want, not the other way around. They'll be in for a shock. It possibly could be our way home too."

Captain Sarantos of The Chicago Starship and founder of the Space station - The Fellowship.

He stood up and handed the Captain's official letter to Storm. "See that this gets put through to the Federation with the rest of our logs."

“Yes, Captain.”



He felt good. His life was good. He'd always dreamed of understanding the key the universe was singing in, the key people in far-away worlds were screaming in, but now he knew – we each hold our own key. He was the key. What other people think of him is none of his business. Without regret or shame, he smiled widely. Maybe this was a small world others wouldn't understand, but him and his crew did. Maybe they'd escape soon, maybe they wouldn't.

But none of that matters if you experience life thru your own lenses.

The End?