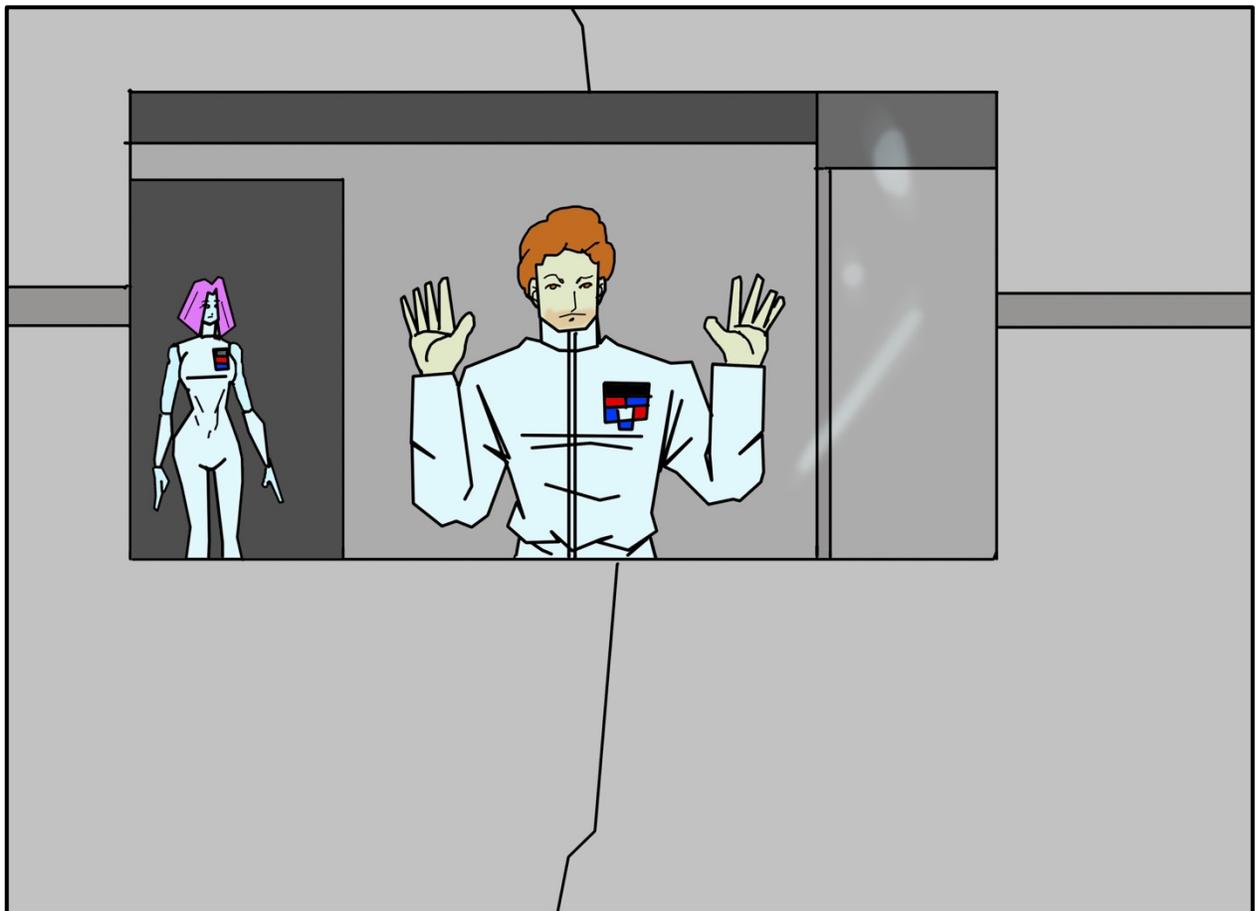


Chapter 2

“Kids In Love”

They met truly by chance. Addie and Sarantos were traveling through the stillness of space on a top-secret mission per Admiral Bane. Sarantos and Addie were engaged. The new year had just begun. None of it mattered as the ship Chicago moved toward a new course set by Bane’s master plan. The journey was the destination and their new destiny, like the new year, was unknown.



He stood with hands pressed against the thick glass of his ready room. He peered out into the colorful magnificent universe. The door slid open.

“Captain, can we talk?”

Sarantos recognized the sunny voice with ease. He quickly found the eyes of love, his one true sunrise. When they first met, it was a hammer to the head, love at first sight. How could it not be? She was everything he'd ever wanted in a woman. And much more. She deserved credit for not playing the game. Immediately, he sensed she was the one.

“Sure. Come in Lieutenant.”

They'd agreed when on an active mission, all encounters would be on a strictly professional level, except in their private quarters.

“Captain, I'm supposed to inform you that the Admiral contacted me separately. I was instructed on what needed to be done before leaving the dock.”

It annoyed him immensely. He realized the way his face warmed revealed his emotions. Existing meant surviving unfair choices. Yet he wondered why Admiral Bane would do this.

Addie continued, “Captain, it was only because I'm head of security, and you were compromised. I discreetly left some behind to handle our previous situation. There are no intruders on board. I told the crew left behind to find different transportation to their destinations. I only kept the minimal crew necessary such as cooking detail, security, and engineering. Also those that work on board as part of the starship federation team. Finally, a high-level fighting force. Sonny is on board with his elite group of soldiers. Does that make you happy?”

He couldn't help smiling. Sonny was a dear friend.

“That's good news Addie. I suppose that's why the Admiral had me stay confined to my ready room until the ship launched. Why didn't he let me help though? I hate not knowing what's going on.”

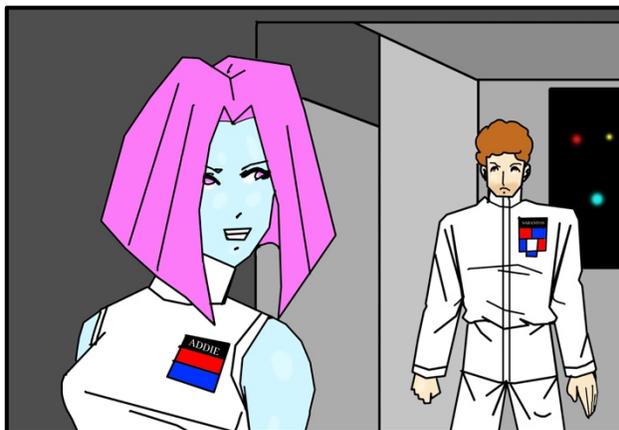
“Yes, having Sonny aboard is great news. He wants to join you for dinner later. I already told you my love the Admiral didn’t want you compromised because of the previous incident. I know you prefer getting your hands dirty. That is a good or bad trait depending on the situation... Captain, before you ask, no I don’t know where we’re headed.”

Making mistakes doesn’t make you damaged, it makes you experienced. Addie consistently appreciated what was on his mind. She grasped how to cure him of a funky mood. He wondered if the Admiral consulted her about confining him to his room too. She would have said yes. He understood her reasoning behind it. It was for his safety and the ship’s. It was never personal, just professional.

“Well, it was a smart move leaving on New Year’s Day. Everyone would have hangovers and be none the wiser until we were far away. You knew before today, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Captain. I did. I had to know to be prepared. It was important to get the proper crew lined up and others off the ship. This is a mission that may not bring us home, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t like hearing that Lieutenant. Where’s your sister?”



“Sorry sir. I’ll try to have a more positive attitude. We’ve lost track of my sister and her ship. There are rumors someone destroyed it, but that could be a ruse.”

“Well, Addie, at least I can leave my quarters now. Thanks for the information and keeping your Captain and his ship safe. Would you join Sonny

and I for dinner at 1900 hours?”

“Okay, that sounds good, but you better check with Sonny.” She grinned and turned towards the door. As she arrived to it, she threw her head over her shoulder. “The time works. I’ll be there with bells on, as you humans say.”

Her chuckle faded the further away she got, but the smile it put on his heart didn’t. She was so different from when he first met her. Her attempt at sarcasm and humor was growing on him. He still couldn’t fully understand her sometimes but it's not a crime to love what you cannot explain. Only lovers who risked it all usually found a prize.

He smiled remembering how Addie finally said yes to his proposal. He unassumingly strolled back to his chair and contacted Sonny. “Lieutenant Sonny, are you up for dinner at 1900 in the Diamond Room?”

“Yes Captain, I’ll be there.”

“Oh, and one other thing Lieutenant, welcome aboard The Chicago.”

“It’s an honor Captain.”

“Out,” said Sarantos.

He leaned back in the chair and grinned. He loved working with Sonny and his crew. His eyes narrowed, but why would such an elite team join them on this mission? That was not a good omen.

He checked to see where the Chicago was en route. Their ship was heading towards the Stoma quadrant. Why would they be going there? He was hoping they would pass though it or go around it. It was pitch black and offered no light, some called it the Original Black Hole. There were several friendly planets located there but mostly

heinous activity emerged from its surface, usually brought on by the dark ones. Was Amy Stuart, Addie's twin sister be in hiding there?

"Chief Baker, are you busy this evening?"

"No Captain. How can I help?"

"Did you meet Lieutenant Sonny yet?"

"Just briefly, sir."

"Ready for a treat? Care to join us in the Diamond Room for dinner at 1900 hours?"

"It would be my honor, Captain. See you there."

"Out," said Sarantos.

The 97F8's were amazing and were very social robots. He preferred to call them androids. It had a nicer ring to it, a more sophisticated word for such an advanced entity. They were like the sea. Nobody owned them.

Everyone has a natural curiosity that tempts them to follow their own interests or agenda. His curiosity got the best of him. Hours passed before he realized he lost track of time. Preoccupied with the navigator to see what other quadrants they might go to besides the dreaded Stoma system was all he thought about. His neck was sore. He stood up then walked towards the replicator.

"Tea, black."

He watched the hot liquid fill up the cup to the brim. He picked it up, blew across the top of the cup as the steam filtered around the edge going back in place just before sipping it. Perfection.

“Captain?”

“Yes, doc?”

“What’re you doing later?”

“How much later?”

“Dinner later.”

“I’m going to dinner with a few friends.”



“Captain, it’s a ghost ship around here,” Cleary said. Her voice held a slight edge.

“Everything ok, Cleary?”

“I suppose I am. Do I have a choice but to prevail in this ghost existence? I’m getting caught up on some of my

overdue paperwork and idle research.”

She was waiting for an invitation to dinner and sounded a little pouty.

“Cleary, it’s not like you to not invite yourself to dinner, or did you enjoy the need to be a little whiny first?”

Her laugh was loud and wonderful to hear. She was a teenager full of fluctuating opinions. “I suppose occasionally I’d just want a simple invite Captain, so I don’t have to get so needy.”

Sarantos chuckled. “Well, doc do you want to join John, Sonny, Kitara and myself for dinner in the Diamond room at 1900 hours?”

“Gee, I thought you’d never ask boss! I’ll be there. Are there actual living people on board the Chicago today? It’s too damn quiet, sir.”

“Well, I thought you’d enjoy the peace and quiet. Later on, you might regret that statement and wish you’d appreciated it a little more than you are.”

“Perhaps Captain, but not tonight. I usually need human interaction and conversation.”

“Okay, Cleary. Out.”

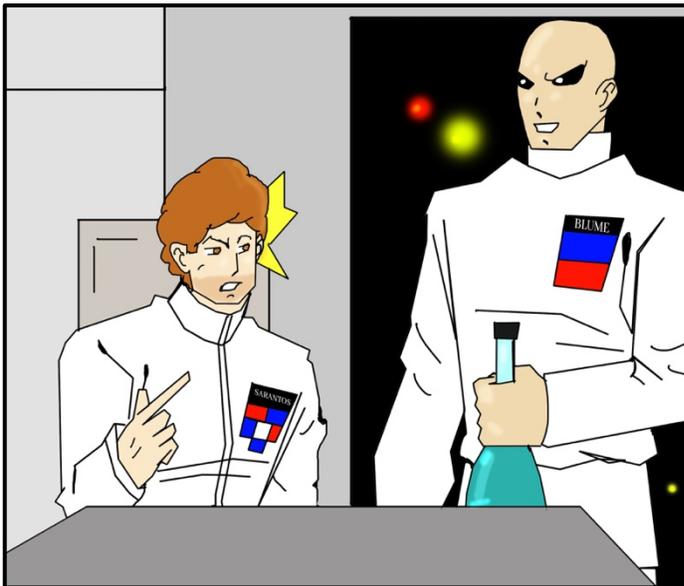
Sarantos couldn’t contain his giddiness. He genuinely enjoyed toying with Cleary and she was an interesting woman.

Well, even though she thought the ship was ghostly, it seemed they had more than enough dinner guests tonight. He sipped his tea and rubbed his stubble. It made him look different. Addie enjoyed it on his face. It made him look sexier that’s what she said, anyway. Welcome to the fantasy...

Sarantos was early and sat down at a long table by the glass that overlooked the galaxy offering a romantic ambience over the dinner landscape.

Matt was moving toward him with a vintage bottle in his hand.

“What do you have there, Matt?”



“Good evening, Captain. I thought I’d bring you one of my favorite bottles of wine from the Olivian homeland.” Matt held the vintage bottle out. “The Boncar Beloc, a classic wine with a hint of an herb called fletch that your taste buds might enjoy but I warn you, it’s fairly addicting. Someone needs to enjoy it though since it seems we’re on a ghost ship.”

“You too Matt? Now you sound just like Cleary. It’s not a ghost ship, it’s about right.”

“If you say so Captain but I can’t wait to cook. It’s been dead around here. Cleary told me you were all coming. Glad she warned me so I could prepare a finer meal.”

“Sorry, I suppose I should have notified you.” Matt was never afraid of the work.

He turned to walk away. “Oh, that’s all right, don’t worry about me. I bend with the wind. Time heals nothing unless you move along with it.”

Somehow Sarantos didn’t think so. Matt wasn’t too happy being ignored.

The Captain hollered. “I’m sorry, Matt. Won’t let it happen again.”

Matt waved his hand over his shoulder as he continued to walk away. “See it doesn’t, Captain. Respect is important on this ghost ship.”

What was wrong with everyone? It suddenly felt like he was in a weird dream.

Sipping the wine, he found it interesting. It was mellow with a slight kick to it. He’d never had a wine from the Olivian homeland before, and he liked it.

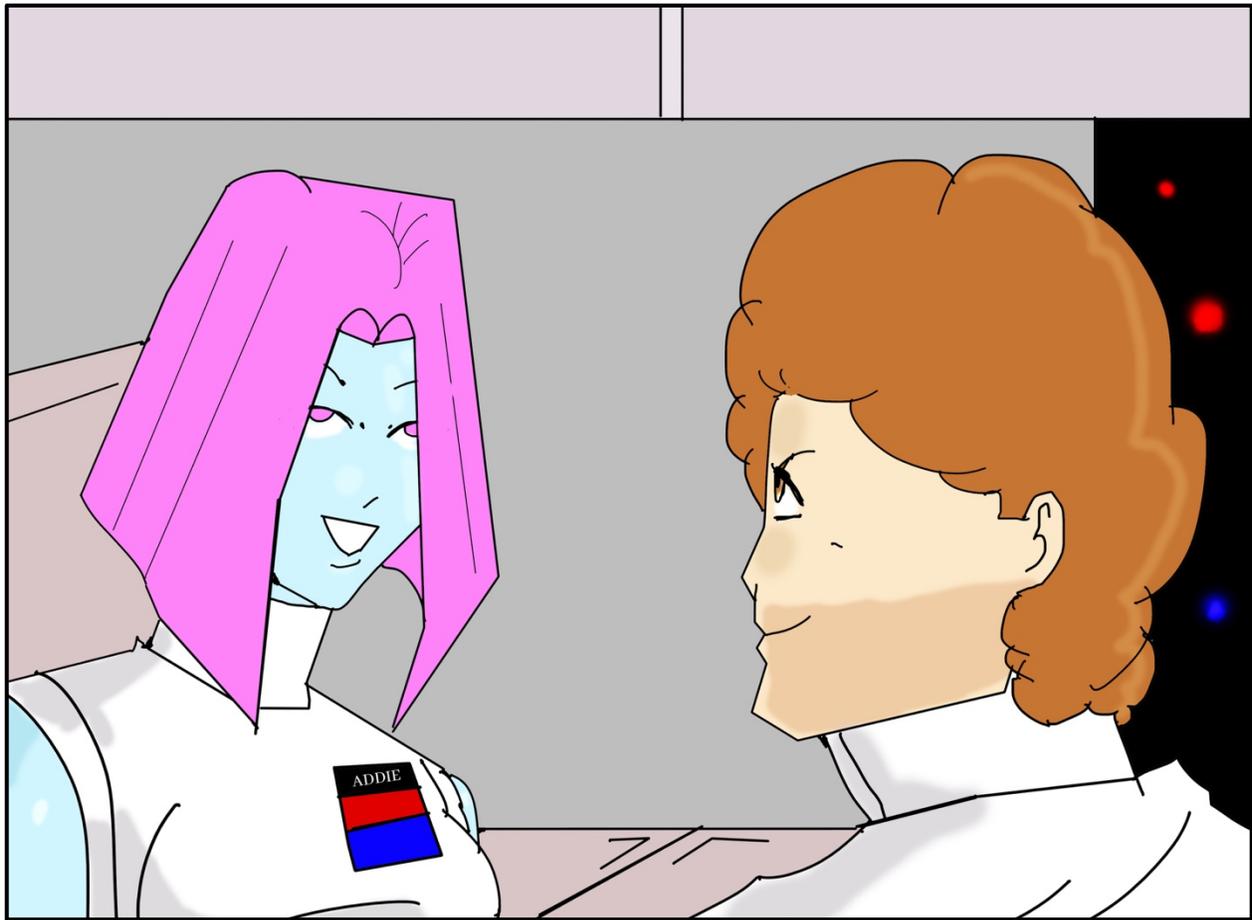
Two glasses were downed before Addie appeared in the doorway. God, she was so gorgeous. Instead of her uniform, she opted for a sateen white dress that hung below her knees but had a slit up the side showing off her upper thighs and hip when she walked. Her hair was pulled tightly up onto her head with soft curls dropping to each side of her ears. This was a new look for her. Things worth having are worth waiting for!

Addie wore her diamond earrings and necklace well. They sparkled contrasting perfectly with her skin and hair as she moved gracefully towards Sarantos flashing that seductive grin that made him want to forget dinner altogether. She never found time to look mediocre.

When he first met Addie, it was surreal. His heart hurt for so long that eventually he had just stopped listening to it. But that first glance was different. No matter how hard he tried, he was incapable of taking his eyes off her. As the days went by, he noticed everybody was watching her. Yet, for some reason she looked only at him with loving eyes. He couldn’t escape her presence. From the first moment they met, time moved differently. Their world had changed in a heartbeat. There was no going back. He didn’t want to go back. With her, he would always anticipate the tomorrows not yearn for the yesterdays.

Sarantos remembered her eyes. Her eyes held his, and he wanted her, she was the missing piece to his entire world, the one missing piece of the puzzle that completed his life. She had a raw talent, a unique ability or gift to make him feel like a kid in love for the first time - every single time he saw her.

They were kids in love and would stay lost in each other's eyes and souls for the rest of their lives. The perfect match, a first love every time they met. It never got old.



Addie's voice intoxicated him.

“Good evening, Captain Sarantos.”

He stood up, took Addie's hand, kissed her cheek and helped her sit down.

“You are the most beautiful woman I’ve every met. Absolutely stunning. How my heart survives I do not comprehend!”

Her eyes twinkled in the lighting looking like tiny pieces of glitter swimming around inside them. She was unadulterated magic. Addie was able to capture the imagination of any man.

“Thanks, my love.”

Her words melted his heart, just like they always did. He was in a trance-like state.

Was the Olivian wine too much? No, it was Addie. She was too much. Addie and having no regrets was all he wanted. With Addie as his wife, he’d never experience another day of regret.

They quickly put a glass in front of her and she sipped on an expensive 1987 Harlan Estate from one of Earth’s California wine favorites, and one of hers.

“How did the day go my darling? Security should be easy,” he teased.

Addie’s eyes narrowed before her mouth curved up into a slight grin. “Oh, dearest Captain, us security officers are always worried. Security is all we think about even if there’s only one being on board. Alone, we are most at peace, but keep adding people around us and the probability of risk increases.”

She crossed her long legs, leaned back and gently rotated her glass as the liquid inside swirled like a storm surge about to erupt from the depths of a fiery volcanic ocean floor.

Sarantos could do nothing, and mumbled, “I suppose that’s true.” He watched the glass even as he said the words waiting for the violent storm to hit. Instead, Addie lifted the glass to her lips and altered the course of the storm.

He nodded his head and smiled.

Major Cleary whipped through the door, barking orders to Matt from across the room as she hurried towards her destination. The dinner party for five.

Sarantos stood up, kissed her cheek and pulled out her chair. Two men from security entered and sat at the bar.

“Well, Captain and Addie how are we this fine evening?”

He only smiled, and Addie said, “Fine. You look great Major.”

The Major wore a pink chiffon dress cut just above her knees. She was an attractive woman and played it well.

“Thanks, Addie. Sometimes I forget how well I clean up, you know when I’ve been in scrubs all day.”

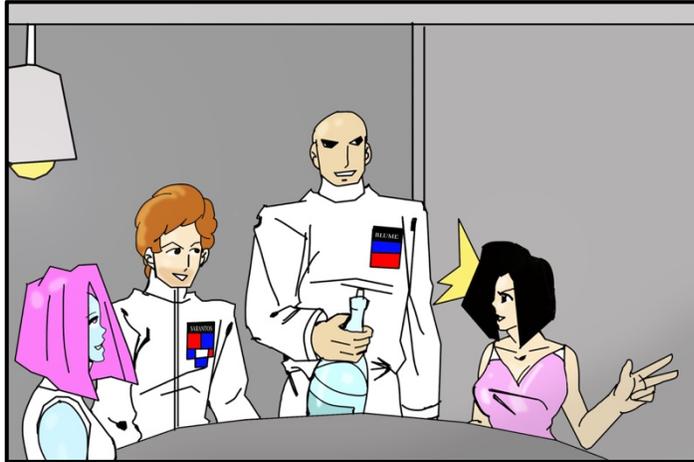
She was quite the lady, never shy, and not one iota of modesty in the smallest bone of her body.

Sarantos laughed.

“Something funny, Captain?”

“No, nothing at all, Major. I’m just in a great mood.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way then shall we?”



Addie lowered her head trying to contain herself. Addie understood - she always did.

Matt came over and brought the Major some champagne and presented a plate of crispy dough wrapped around a soft potato center, along with a basket lined with red linen and warm bread

inside.

“Thanks, Matt.”

“You’re welcome, Lieutenant.”

“Will there be anything else? Do you want to wait for your other guests?”

“We can wait,” said the Captain.

Cleary talked. “I heard about the performance on New Year’s Eve and I’m impressed with the reviews you both received. I wish I wouldn’t have missed it, but hopefully I’ll catch you next time. We should have met out on the creative deck for dinner. Probably much more entertaining over there.”

Sarantos might have bitten off too much, but his mouth wouldn't listen to this common sense. "Well, Cleary, I'm glad we didn't. I think you're spending too much time in your fantasy world and losing contact with reality."

Her face matched the color of her dress and for a moment he thought she might throw her champagne on him, but she didn't. Cleary showed restraint? Maybe she finally realized that being mad isn't helpful, it harvests stress and resentment out of thin air.

Her voice lowered two octaves, and he even thought he picked up a slight growl. "Captain, I'm aware of the difference between reality and fantasy. In fact, I'm make-believing right now I'm having a great time. How's that for a reality check, Sir??"

Addie shook her head signaling him to stop now, but he didn't want to. He might have if he wanted to. But he didn't want to!

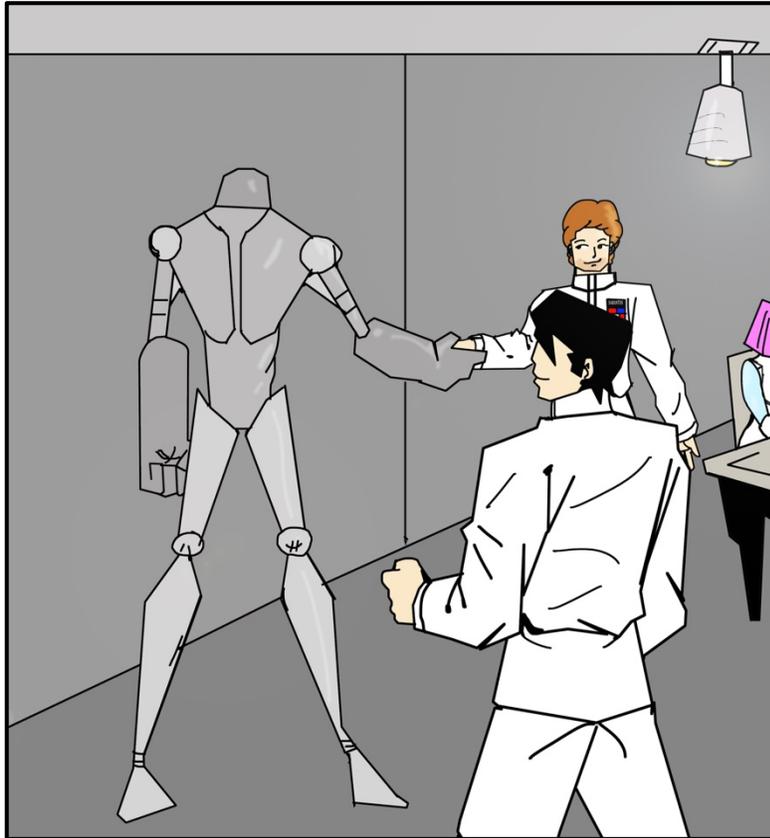
"Forgive my ignorance, Cleary, but planning what everyone might say and do in the fake world makes a person lose their perspective on all truth - other people's truth and not just your own. The atmosphere is great in here. Matt goes to a lot of trouble to create a special ambience for his guests. No programming needed. It makes one really appreciate him as an individual. So what he planned turns into a masterpiece of friendship and caring. Oh, and I recall you wanted to join us, my friend, in fact you were begging for an invitation."

Setting down her glass, she locked eyes with his and burrowed directly into his brain.

What had he been thinking?

Lips quivering, she whispered. "Captain, you're right." What? Big shock there. "It's been a challenging month for me and I stand corrected. Technically, I sit corrected. Let's move past this and try these potato things."

He wanted to ask her what was going on with her, but she made a point of bypassing it and wanting to move the conversation away from the explosion. Now he felt bad.



“Sure,” he said. Under the table, Addie kicked him.

Sonny and John walked into the hall together and headed straight to the table to join them.

Sarantos stood up and gave Sonny and his long-time friend John a firm handshake and a warm hug.

“Good evening, friends,” said the Captain.

Everyone smiled. Once they all had drinks in hand, Sarantos gave a proper toast.

As they settled into the evening, time flew by. The small talk reminded him of simpler times and his motto during his young adult years - if it's meant to be, it will be. It was a relaxed experience, but he couldn't let it rest. After dinner, he questioned this mission.

“So, I followed our movements and I'm not sure where we're going or why. Does anyone have any guesses on the rendezvous of our secret mission?” Addie stared him down after he asked the question.

“I'm not sure. I don't think I like the implications of our course, though,” said Sonny.

“Agreed, Sonny. We won’t be prepared for what’s coming our way if we’re flying clueless into the great unknown. That worries me.”

“Yes, Captain, I agree with you and Sonny, but it won’t do us any good question that which we have no control over. Just prepare mentally for anything,” said John.

Leave it to John to give them logical feedback. He envied John’s control of who he was. He always remained calm, even as a kid. Those damn OKurian.

“As always, you’re right, John, but I’m a little alarmed. I’m glad Sonny and his team 97F8’s joined us on this mission. There are 40 on board. Right, Sonny?”

“Yes, Addie, there are 40 strong. A fierce group of warriors. Let’s set up a get together for department heads for tomorrow to figure out where to put our men.”

“I needed to discuss that with the Captain.”

“Well, let’s discuss it, and declare this friendly and non-professional gathering over and get down to official business.”



“All on board, Captain,” said Cleary. “I too want to figure out my role. I’ve brought ten with me on my team.”

Sarantos felt at a loss. He did not understand what they were doing here. How he could conduct this pointless meeting? “Addie, please tell us what you know. What time? Where we should hold this meeting for heads of every department.”

“Well, we could meet in the conference room over coffee and breakfast at 0700 hours tomorrow. Who would you include? I can get the message out.”

“Sure. Matt should be there, did you bring Brel, I hope?”

“Yes.”

“Brel should be there.”

“Agreed.”

“Okay, Sonny, John, Cleary, Matt, Brel, Sargent Todd Cam, Flint and Sargent Sam Toner to head their own groups into combat, Chief Storm because he understands cultures, history and languages, not to mention myself and Addie.”

Cleary said, “Captain, I’d want to bring Sargent Shawna Dawn into that meeting. She’s OKurian and is part of the group I brought with me. She was leading her own group of medical officers, ones we worked with on the battlefields of Okura. They are a team of ten on board. I thought it prudent to add to the collective of medical staff and combat ready officers.”

“Great job, Cleary. I would appreciate her input. Is that all the heads of staff?”

“Yes Captain,” said John. “I’ve got an extra crew myself in engineering but would want them on site as much as possible, just in case we get ambushed ahead of time.”

“Agreed, John.”



Matt pulled up a chair and sat down. “You mention my name? Definitely I’ll be there. I also brought three extra staff members, observant but reliable soldiers, just in case they’re needed. I cleared them with Addie already.”

“Great Matt. I’m so glad I can count on all of you. Even if we don’t know the end location or what our mission is, we can always do a preliminary preparation and adjust it after we figure out the exact circumstances. Do you all agree?”

John spoke first. “Captain, that’s a wise move. We can only perceive what we already know and prepare accordingly.”

Addie glanced over at Matt. “How about a round of shots to start the madness, Matt?”

“Now, you’re talking,” yelled Cleary.

Matt quickly brought back shot glasses, and they all downed a shot of whiskey toasting to the health and safety of the entire crew.

After a quiet debate on Satorian's ability to drink, they all left to attend to their jobs before ending the night in their quarters.

They left Sarantos looking into playful pools of intensity wrapped with the sensitivity of doe eyes and the seductiveness of a goddess.

Addie took his hand. "I need to get out of this dress."

Sarantos winked. "Yes, you do, although you're beautiful in it."

She stood up. On impulse, he adoringly grabbed her arm and twirled her around.

"Let's dance. You're too beautiful to go back to your quarters yet."

She giggled. "Okay, but where's the music?"

He sang. Addie sunk into his arms and moaned.

"We met by chance and my darling it was love at first sight."

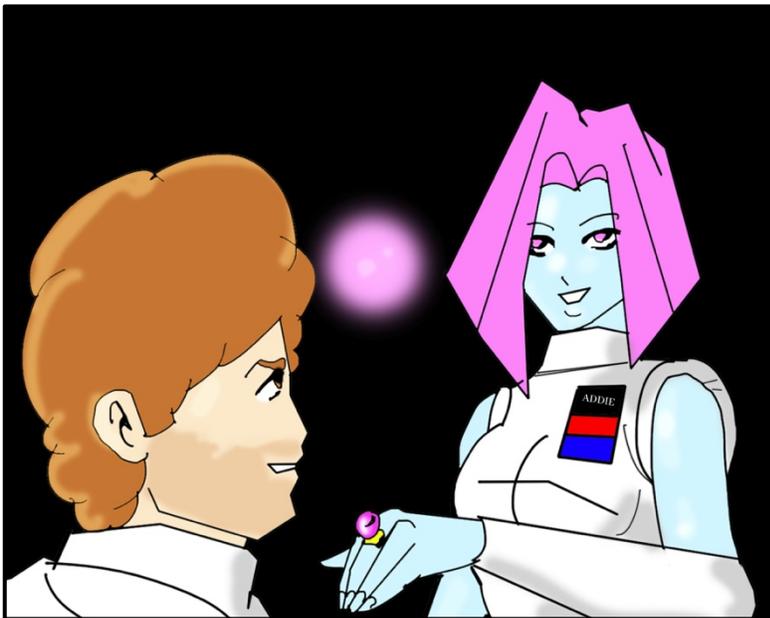
His voice rose into the air and bounced off of the Diamond Room ceiling and sprinkled magic onto the hungry lights.

They danced effortlessly and fell against time stopping it in its tracks at this exact moment. In their moment.

Sarantos kissed her cheeks and lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the ring that bound them together in a future still undetermined. It wouldn't matter what that future was, it belonged to both of them, to Addie and Sarantos.

Addie sang with him. It was glorious. Her voice shimmering like an angel.

Customers were watching them, Matt and his crew smiled as they wiped tables and cleaned glasses.



They could have been kids in love. It didn't matter. Age didn't count because in love one doesn't age. And their love doesn't age.

Sarantos stared at the beautiful face of love staring back at him...lost in each other's eyes for the rest of their lives.

“Addie.”

“Sarantos.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”