

## Chapter 2

### *“Sweet As Sugar”*

He was glad the sun was shining that morning. It was warmer than he deserved, though the walk would be far too long. His anticipation of rescuing Addie was now just a distant thought, somehow lost in a maze in his heart. He wouldn't be the one riding in on a shiny white horse wearing a plate of armor after all. No, that rose would go to Brel.

Gathering his belongings, he wandered over to sit with a few soldiers for a quick meal of warm oats.

“Coffee, Captain?”



“Sure, thanks Ensign.”

He sipped on the warm drink holding it patiently with both of his hands. The steam reminded him of the foggy dream that regularly plagued his sleep. It was hard to shake that type of obvious torture; it might mean something. His nightmares were always focused on his failure to rescue Addie, before the darkness basically beheaded her. Chills ran up

his spine as they always did when the thought popped in his head. He wouldn't allow

himself to stay thinking about it, because he loved her way too much and it wasn't possible that she'd really ever die in his mind. It just wasn't possible. Not on his watch! The guilt of being too late to save her over and over again on his regularly scheduled nightmare every night gnawed painfully at his consciousness now.

Life wouldn't allow it to be a premonition. He couldn't allow it. That would destroy him; he would be finished. He'd never be able to Captain a crew again. His life would be effectively over. To have a woman in his life that was sweet as sugar and then settle for lemons would be exasperating, and he knew he couldn't do it.

Oh, he could hear his friend, John Baker telling him to stop the madness and move on – to move forward in his life, that he'd find another Addie. He swallowed hard as the oats in his mouth turned to bile...no, there'd never be another Addie Stuart, not in this lifetime or any other lifetime.

He finished eating at once and stood up. "Ensign, can you find Major Flint and let him know we're ready to move out. And, Ensign, find out if the group of 97F8's has arrived. We're going to need them!"

"Yes, Captain."

He hated being on the ground, but if he had to be down here, then they surely needed those machines. The OKurians were worried about their own people dying in the combat zone so he wanted to limit the overhead attacks as much as possible. He couldn't really blame them. The ships were for air combat or for land destruction, but this didn't separate objects so even living beings would be destroyed without mercy. They also wanted to preserve their land as much as was possible. Yes, it made the war harder to fight trying to prevent the slaughter of innocent people and the crimeless land. They could still win, though it would take longer.

He didn't bother to ask about Brel. The Brad would already be gone.

Grabbing the fresh pot and filling his cup with more hot coffee slightly relaxed him - the mundane everyday routine made life feel somewhat normal. Not that going to war against psycho war lunatics was considered normal throughout recorded history, but the normalcy he wanted was the sanctity of home and peace.

He started his walk through the camp and soon found Major Flint giving orders to the Lieutenant commanders of each taskforce. The group of men acknowledged him when he approached Flint. He nodded and allowed them to finish.

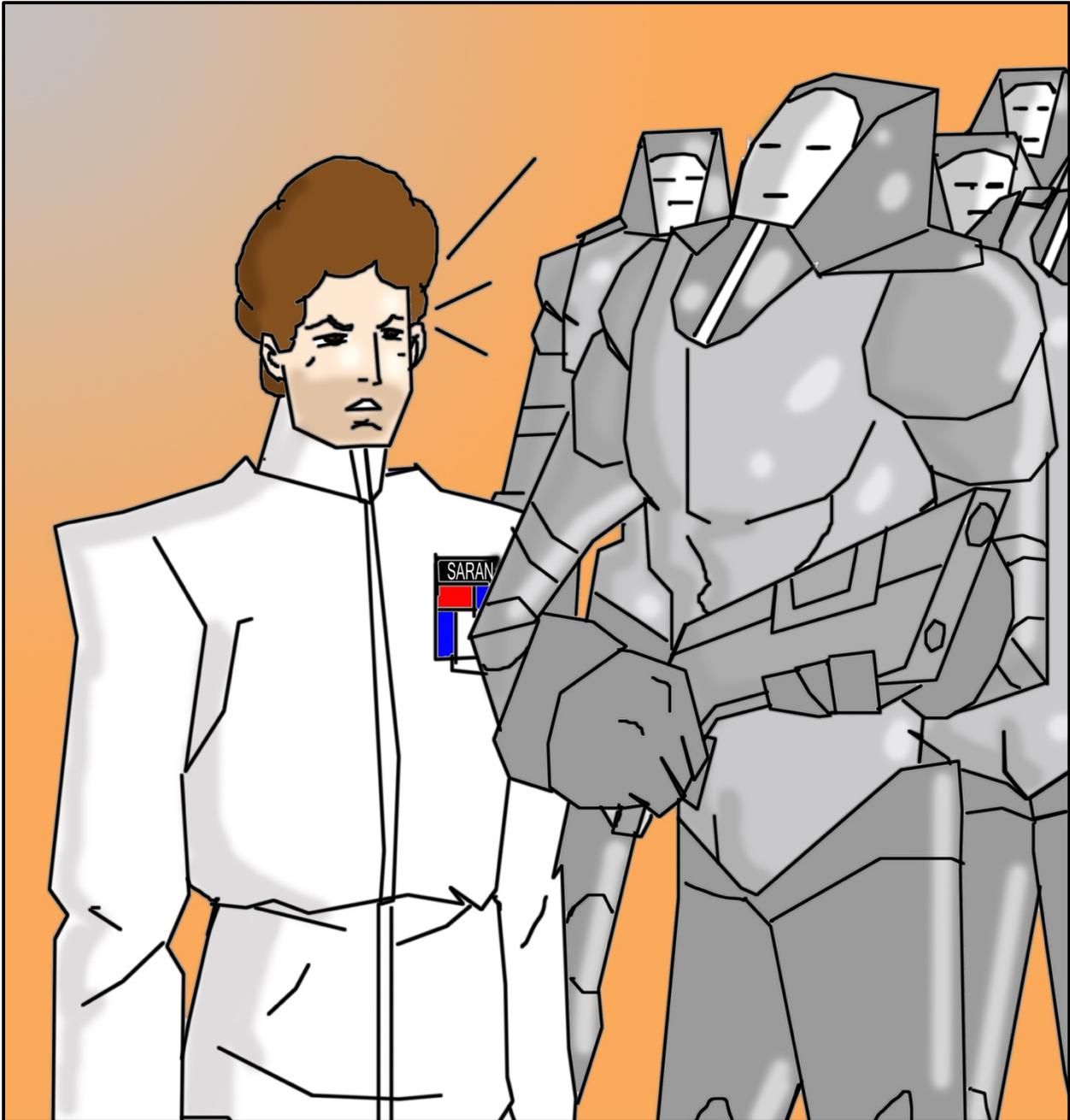
Flint summed it up and turned to his Captain. "Captain, we'll be ready in a little under an hour. The 97F8's are ready for your inspection."

"Thanks, Major. I can see them. Quite impressive, but I thought there'd be more than 30. I should be happy that we got this many I suppose."

"Yes, Captain. This war's spread across Okura and the demand for them is great. They move slightly above ground and can lead the army with ease and superior effectiveness. I've had them programmed already to be alert and active. They are even now listening to your voice, as well as mine, Major Cleary's, Brel's, Matt Flint's and Addie Stuart's."

Nodding in agreement Captain Sarantos said, "Yes, I understand why you did Addie's as well. It's important to have more of them ready and on her position in case the need arises. We don't know what to expect in this war. I think we should put Commander Mack Bonn on there as well, and see if he'd like any other officers listed as well. We can't be too sure. We need to have control over these robots. I don't want to run into a situation where no one is able to utilize them."

"Yes, Captain. They proceed on their own and have amusing personalities, but like any soldier they need a capable commander. I'll go see to it right away, sir."



He looked over the units. They were impressive. Laser weapons built right in to help maneuver towards the enemies, and made of an alloy that is absolutely indestructible. They were essentially super soldiers, like Brel, but without any organic weakness. Now, he knew the Brad had a weakness...Brel, could bleed. He shuddered.

These machines could detect unauthorized approaches by registering the weight and sound of the army moving forward. They had a brilliant sense of smell and superb visual abilities that would prove vital for the army's survival. He grinned. Dr. Leary wouldn't like the fact they offered medical skills beyond normal field healing. She wouldn't like the competition. They would rescue and repair any injured soldier right next to them, while other 97F8's would move to their side to protect them.

He liked having them in the group. Robotics was still slightly controversial, but the Okurians weren't afraid of tech or change. They were sensitive and could think and plan on their own as well. Sarantos considered them a forward-thinking race.

He approached them while they stood to attention. "Welcome 97F8's."

"Captain." Their voices responded together in unison combining both feminine and masculine sounds.

He carefully looked them over and noticed a few females among them. Impressive. They even looked OKurian. Except for the matte skin tone, you wouldn't know they were robotic. Their hair, eyes, and mouth were just short from perfection.

"Thank you for being here and we'll be leaving within the hour. I'm Captain Sarantos, which you already know but I thought I'd introduce myself to you anyway. We're heading on a two day walk to the enemy camp located just north of here. We'll be going over some pretty rough terrain for walkers like pits, rocky hills, crevasses, caverns and swamps. Please be alert for any member of our army having a challenging time getting through them, or getting stuck in any way. Help anyone who needs it..."

He'd love having a whole army of these magnificent robots.

“Yes, Captain.”

“I don’t want our progress slowed down in any way. We might encounter a creature known as a Blinder on our journey. They look harmless but will spit a stream of slime that could potentially blind as many as 30 people at once. They can only be killed by disintegration. Please register them in your programming, so you know what to look for in the cavernous areas we pass through.”

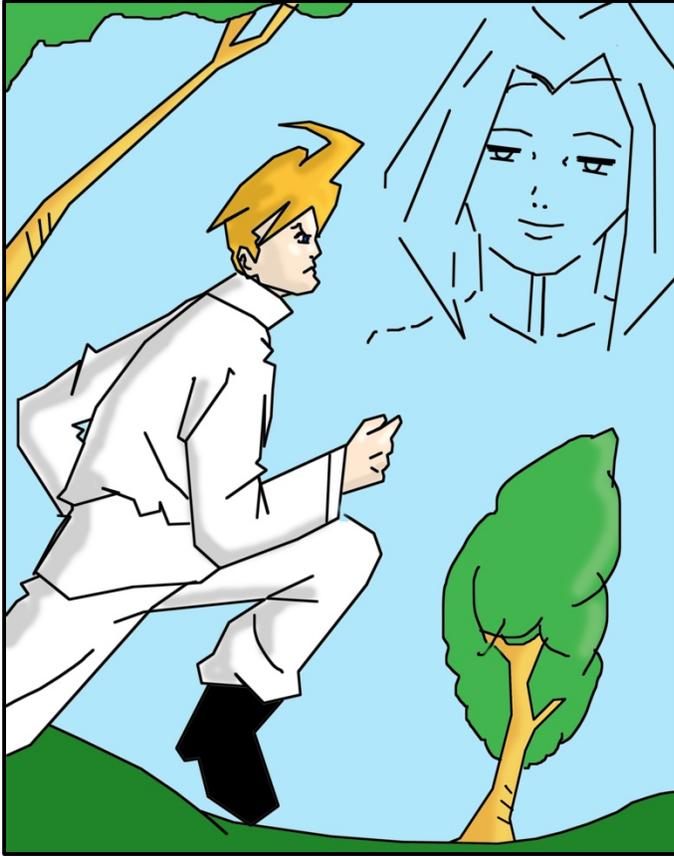
Although he’d never worked with an army of robots, he had a prior experience with one at the academy. Her name was Simone and she was very efficient. She went through the academy just like everyone else - same rigorous training, same harsh treatment. Her human characteristics were charming. She even joined them out for drinks on occasion.

The 97F8’s looked serious, until he told them to be at ease. He watched them talk amongst themselves, flirt, smile and even laugh. It was an amazing thing to see. Technology was expanding at an incredible pace. It was thrilling to be a part of.

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Brel was moving quickly. He knew his priority, not just with this mission of rescuing soldiers, something he’d done hundreds of times before, but specifically her in rescuing the Captain’s woman. The woman he also loved. He was trained to please his commander, no matter what the mission entailed.

If he could love anyone, it would’ve been Addie. He’d known her for a long time and respected her as a person and his commander. They’d had casual sex on lots of occasions, until she’d met Captain Sarantos. He’d enjoyed their intimacy and missed it.



So, this was personal for him, as well as for the Captain. Brad's were not in love with humanoids. They enjoyed the sport of love-making and intimate behavior, but they had no capacity for long-term love, although their compassion was considerable. Love could not enter their highly-disciplined life. Compassion kept them from living a shallow and evil life. It was highly regarded as a significant trait among them.

He'd never felt shallow. He shared a bond with Addie that most wouldn't understand. She was a challenging woman, full of mystery and passion.

Those traits were stimulating to him and if he wasn't so well disciplined, he could've easily been wandering around mindlessly at times like the Captain, high and drunk with desire for Addie, but that desire was corrupt and what ruined her.

Sometimes the Blad stood by and watched the Captain develop the filth of lust on his bones. Brel could almost see it...the frozen breath, that hardened the Captain's soul. A dead ocean, a black hole, but stable in the lust that created it, consuming the Lieutenant. She never saw it for what it was though. She never left the Captain alone.

It was a sickness to the Blad. His race couldn't understand it. Brel felt it had caused his Lieutenant to be captured. He didn't know why at the time but he couldn't help the way he felt. It was a feeling he'd kept to himself. They didn't ever share their emotions. They had them locked in a closet, one that seldom opened. In fact, his lock must be rusted from lack of use.

These rocky slopes were challenging. Nevertheless, he liked it but felt agitated because he was in a hurry. Normally, he'd enjoy this fun type of test on the simulator aboard the ship and space stations. He created the perfect challenge - scaling vertical cliffsides, roping down wet jagged rocks of slippery waterfalls, and going up against 50 opponents in a death pit all at the same time. The hottest temperatures and the coldest winds were all part of these trial and difficult scenarios. They made him stronger.

He better let the Captain know.

“Captain.”

“Brel.”

“I’ve just come across a few rocky slopes that are quite the challenge. As you come down through the Deepening Woods, veer to the east for about 10 miles. I located a small path that meanders down the cliffside and then sways on up the other side. Even though it sounds further, you’ll save time and it’ll be far easier. Otherwise the rocks will slow you down significantly.”

“Thanks, Chief. Any sightings of the enemy?”

“No, nothing so far. I’m about eight hours in front of you.”

“Good luck, and stay in touch.”

“Will do, Captain.”

He loved his ability to communicate through the mind. It saved so much time and energy. This was a gift his race enjoyed constantly, although they would verbally carry on conversations for practice and also to be at the same level as other humanoids.

It was much colder in the mountains. He tried feverishly to contact Addie, but to no avail. He must not be close enough to be able to contact her telepathically. Eight hours out meant another eight hours until he could contact her. Their range was about a day or so. It depended on how strong the contact point was but Addie was a strong contact point. So, he'd tried ahead of time and failed. It was worth a shot and he lost nothing. The sooner he could hear her mind and know she was safe, the better he'd feel.

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“Major, I heard from Brel. The terrain after Deepening Woods is rocky. We'll be going east about ten miles to a path that weaves down and back up to the other side.”

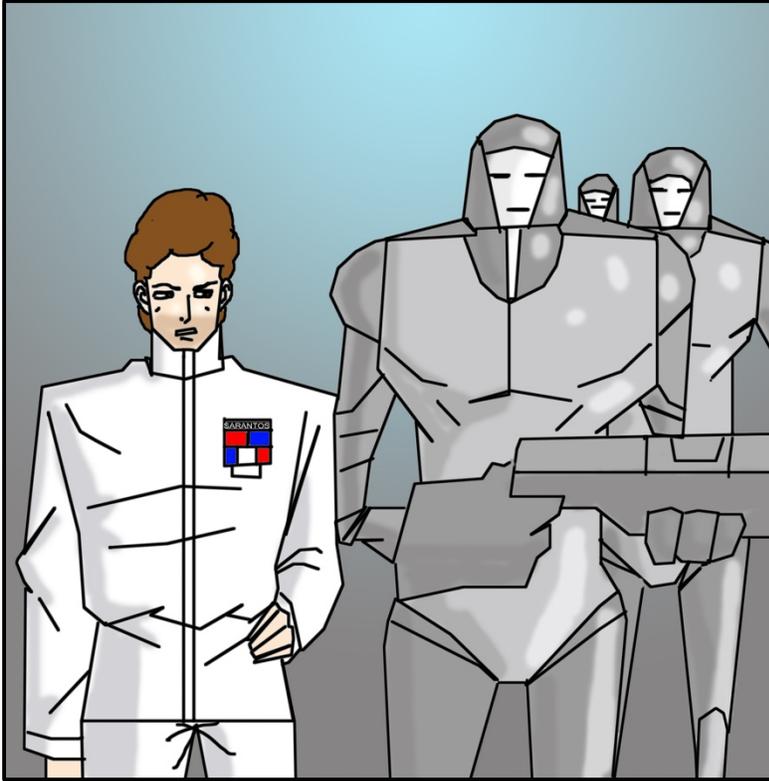
“Yes, Captain. I'll inform the group.”

“I'll contact the lead 97F8 and let him know.”

Sarantos found the lead robot and moved next to him.

“Sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't catch your name.”

“97F8 Lieutenant Sonny, Captain, sir.”



“Yes, and do you have a second in command? You can drop the 97F8 from your names, if that’s okay?”

“Ok sir, that’d be Lieutenant Sandy. She’s in charge of the second line. Also, Lieutenant Frank oversees the third line. We command 10 per unit, sir.”

“Okay, can you inform them that we will be going to the east about 10 miles after Deepening Woods? There’s a path that leads safely down the

mountainside and then up to the other side without as much difficulty as if we just headed straight down.”

“Will do, Captain.”

He liked working with the robots. They were efficient and well organized. They were obedient. He didn’t want to call them a machine. He’d learned that much after being around Simone. They took offense to that.

The constant marching was thumping around in his skull, creating a pounding that might soon give him a headache.

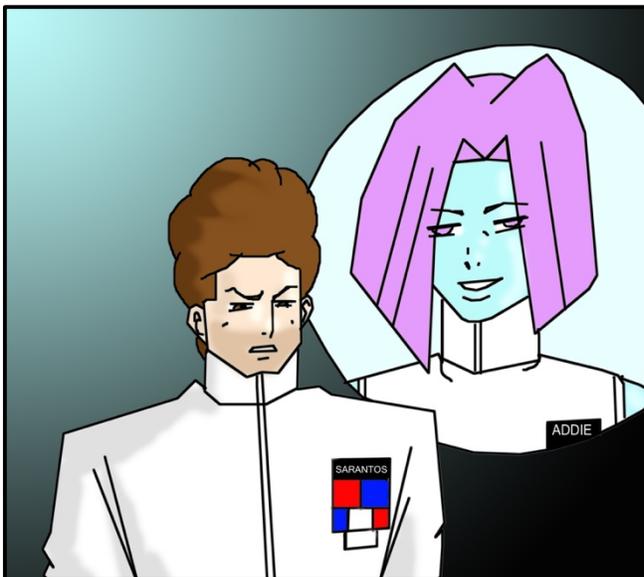
Instead of dreading the sound, his mind drifted to his love. He thought of Addie. Sweet as sugar, Addie.

Her love for him was immense. He was certain of this because she always stood tall and waited for his senses to grow stronger, as he counted down the moments to be with her, to be around her, to touch her and to feel her against him. He worried more about the countdown. He forgot to make the moments count, especially when she was near him. Each second in her presence was precious and now, she was gone!

Oh, he enjoyed her, the feel of her, all that she offered, but had he really made each second count, each kiss count, each look count, each word she spoke count...or the smell of her hair, the sweet smile... No. He failed her. She was always there for him, never left him alone, but he lacked the faith that she had in him.

He didn't trust her because he didn't trust himself. She was glorious and he was always afraid of someone snatching her heart, and stealing her from him like some deceitful plot straight out of a sinister book. He missed her so much. When she was next to others, his jealousy raged like an inferno.

He'd never been in love with such a beautiful woman before. In fact, he really hadn't ever been truly in love with anyone his entire life, until Addie. There were times when he thought he was, but in retrospect, it was just infatuation. Now, he finally learned the difference.



Addie was the brightest part of his life. A star that outshone all others. Addie Stuart was a gift. He never appreciated the opening of the gift though. He was greedy and went straight to the gift, without a thought and pounced on what was inside. Maybe he focused too much on his primal urges?

He was ashamed. He wished so badly he could try again, to make things right. To be better.

His thoughts were interrupted.

“Captain?”

“Yes, Flint.”

“Sir. We’ve arrived at the river Mona. Should we go across, or follow it for a way?”

He looked around and noticed the army had stopped moving. He’d been lost in his head as usual. Sometimes, he must look like a nut to his army. They probably wondered if he was still capable of running a campaign against their fierce enemy, when he routinely appeared to be in a sloppy stupor. That was the problem he was just thinking about, missing out on the actual moments in front of him and travelling to past or future days in advance. What was wrong with him?

He didn’t have John Baker here to help him sort this mess out. As Captain, he should know better and as a boy raised around Okurians he should absolutely know better!

Pulling his jacket around him and buttoning up his top buttons, he answered the Major. “We can go through it, about 20 yards down the river. It becomes very shallow, there, by that giant Bocanny Tree. Where that tree grows the rivers are always shallow, to the point of getting only wet boots when crossing. The tree reaches across to the other side of the river where another one towers over the water. Together their roots create a massive bottom that bridges across the river. Have the soldiers go 20 across. Any more and we run the risk of the width of the bridge not fitting the number of troops. I’d hate to have some plunged into that chilly water.”

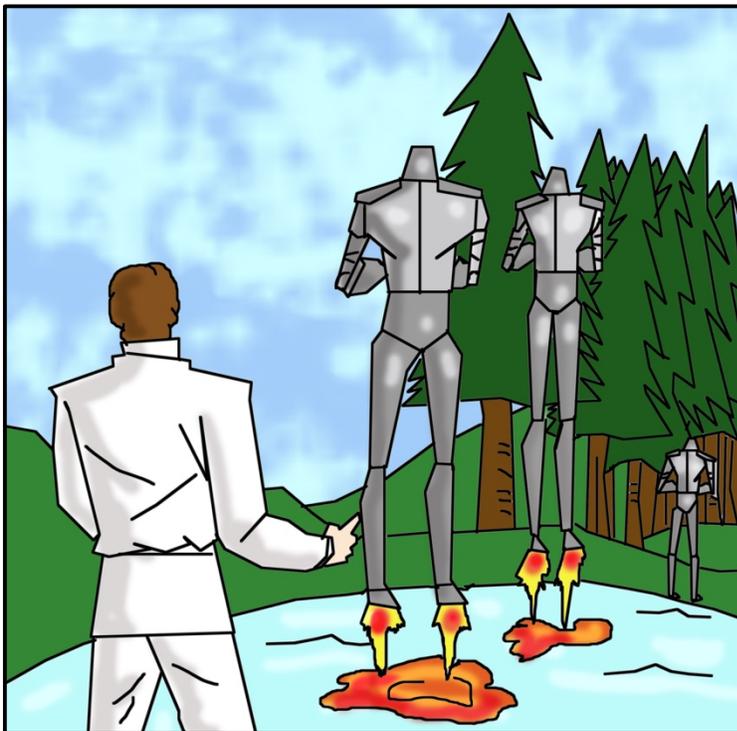
“Yes, sir.” Flint turned and headed towards the commanders.

“Oh, Flint.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Once we get to the other side, let’s find a position to camp. It won’t be easy in these woods, but dusk is moving in and they’ll want to get their feet dried out by some small campfires. We can use the 97F8’s to assist in that area. They’ll create warm fires that lack the dangerous flames that cause fires. They can also, assist in drying out the boots.”

“Of course, Captain. Consider it done.”



They’d been lucky so far, not running into any of their capable enemies. He wondered what had happened to Addie’s sister. They hadn’t heard from her since their first encounter. That scared him a little. What if she was with Addie right now?

They continued to walk to the Bocanny Trees and soon the majestic trees were in full view. He watched the troops get into groups and then proceed across. The 97F8’s went across first without touching the water.

The waves moved quickly along while moss could be found floating randomly along the surface. Their movement entranced him. He couldn't help himself - he watched closely as a flame danced on the water.

It was Addie. It had her shape. It was bright and full of life. A beautiful flame that even the water couldn't put out. It grew to the size of her; he watched her gorgeous fluid body spin with elegance and grace. Her breasts swelled as she inhaled the frosty air.

He couldn't shake the image, nor did he want to.

Her purple hair was hanging down her back and the wind gently blew it across her brow...she turned her face to peer at him, like a gentle flower unfolding for him.

He watched as her body jumped with the intense motion of flames. As she slipped her shirt off her shoulders, he licked his lips and could taste her breasts. Her perfume wafted through the air. He became quickly aroused.

She slithered out of her jeans and threw them towards him playfully. He held out his hands but they passed through them and fell politely at his feet.

He bent down to get them but never took his eyes off of hers.

The flame that was Addie moved with passion and intensified quickly, offering a display of what could only be referred to as simulated sex.

He ached for her. Desire flared. It was desire that could not stay contained.

“Touch me.”

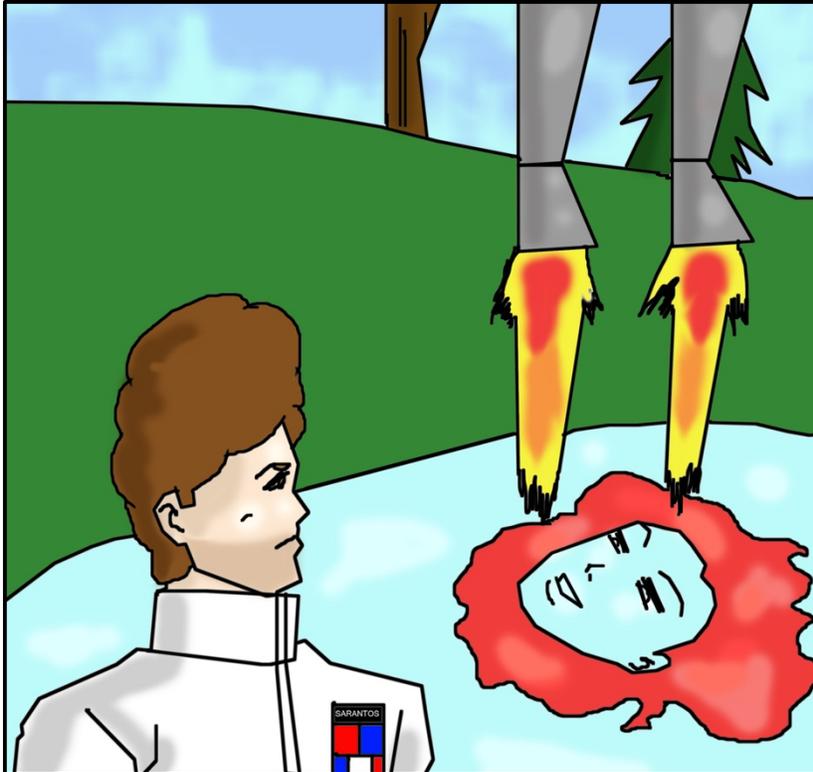
His voice was too soft for her to hear.

“Come take me, beautiful lady.”

Still too soft for her to hear.

She danced like a flavorful flame on his flawed body and the fleeting passion in his heart exploded.

He knew she was there calling out to him, wanting her Captain to save her from captivity. Begging for him. Her hands were moving and calling him to her. He watched as the fingertips he'd just gently kissed transformed to red flames that slowly crept up her hands then her arms, shoulders, breasts, and then down her stomach until all that remained was her gorgeous face and flowing full hair.



“Addie.” His voice got caught in his throat and turned into a harsh whisper.

She smiled, and he watched in a trance as the flames became her hair and engulfed her face...

“Captain?”

Reality knocked abruptly.

“Yes, Flint?” His head was foggy.

“You okay, Captain?”

“Yes.” Most of the army had crossed the river.

“Let’s go, sir.”

“Yes, let’s go, Flint.” He patted him on the back, but looked back to the water searching desperately for the flame again.

Time moved too slow when Addie was not near him.

Once he arrived on the other side of the river, he made his way to the front of the army. Back to the robots. They made him feel safer somehow. He knew it sounded juvenile but it was part of his home, and right now he needed that more than ever.

They were moving slower and it was the end of the first day of their trek to find Addie. They made camp for the night. He didn’t want to be around anyone.

He ate and retired to his tent alone.

Exhaustion moved through him like a disease. He needed to forget Addie for at least a night, so he could get some sleep. This obsession was not like him. No one had this kind of effect on him. He was out of control. That thought had crept into his mind on more than one occasion since he’d met Addie.

He laid down on his cot and closed his eyes, pulling the warm blanket over his head.

No sooner had he relaxed than the sound of a soft female voice filtered through his tent.

“Captain, you up?”

“I wasn’t, but you can come on in Doc.”

He peeked out from the covers. She stood in front of him, like a reminder that he needed to have a mental checkup.

“Captain, I’m sorry to disturb you, but I’m concerned about your mental health.”



There you go. He knew it. She sat down on the edge of his bed and her eyes grew closer together in concern.

“Cherrie, I’m fine. Really. I just need some well-deserved sleep.”

“That’s what you say, Captain, but I think you need more than that.”

What now? He looked closely at her flirtatious eyes. Oh, no he remembered that sultry look. He couldn’t do it! He was in love with Addie.

“Cherrie, I’ve no idea what you mean? I need sleep.”

She ran her hand along his thigh.

“Oh, Sarantos don’t play games with me.”

“Seriously, I need rest. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“My thoughts, exactly,” Cherrie said. Her voice laced in seductive undertones.

“Oh God, Cherrie. I can’t have sex with you.”

She continued to move her hand up his thigh, hip, and then circled her fingers around his navel.

“Why not, Sarantos?”

Her hand proceeded to move up the middle of his stomach finding his nipples and playing with the hair on his chest.

“Because I love Addie. I thought you knew that. I love Addie and my heart is aching without her here.”

“I know, Sarantos. This isn’t about love though, this is just what the doctor ordered. You need a physical release to help you relax. You’re too stressed. I’m concerned about your leadership skills in this condition. Just relax. Trust me. You need this.”

She pulled the covers back and climbed on top of him after removing her pants. He watched her but for some reason, never stopped her; he couldn't fight, he was just too damn tired.

“You need to be tended to and I have no other medicine that can cure you. I will have to take care of you myself.”

Her tongue licked his nipples and found its way to his mouth. He didn't want to do this. He tried to focus on the robots but his arousal was obvious.

“Why are you doing this to me, Cherrie? I don't want to harm Addie. I love her. Do you hear me? Please stop.”

But, even as he begged for her to stop, he unzipped his pants releasing the building pressure.

She blew in his ear, causing chills to move through his body. “Sarantos, this is the only way I'll let you stay in charge of this army. Otherwise, I'll judge you unfit for duty.”



“What! Why? I'm okay. I don't need this, Cherrie.”

He pulled her on him, as her warm lips gently sucked on his chest.

“I know, Sarantos. It's okay. This is therapy. I'm just doing my duty.”

“Oh, Doc, please say it’s off the record.” His movements were wild like a rabid animal who had been caged for months but was now about to be set free...

“Okay, Captain. It’s off the record. Closed for review.” She moaned gently.

“Good, because I don’t want to do this.”

He was on fire.

“I know, Captain. I don’t want it either. Stop making me do this!”

“Good,” he said, as his movements raged out of control.

“You’ll need this medicine daily.”

“No, I’m not that ill.” He could barely say the words.

“Okay, then take it every other day, without fail.”

“Damn it.” He screamed as his body jolted and quivered non-stop for a few minutes.

“You’re now used to my unique brand of medicine and your body can’t be without it.” She moaned and collapsed on top of him.

“I hate when you force your medicine down on me.”

“I know.”



They both lay there in each other's arms until they both fell asleep.

He dreamed of Addie.

Addie always waited for him, loving him still. No matter what he did.

He was disgusted with himself. He whispered her name and said, “Love is complicated. Things that matter always are.”