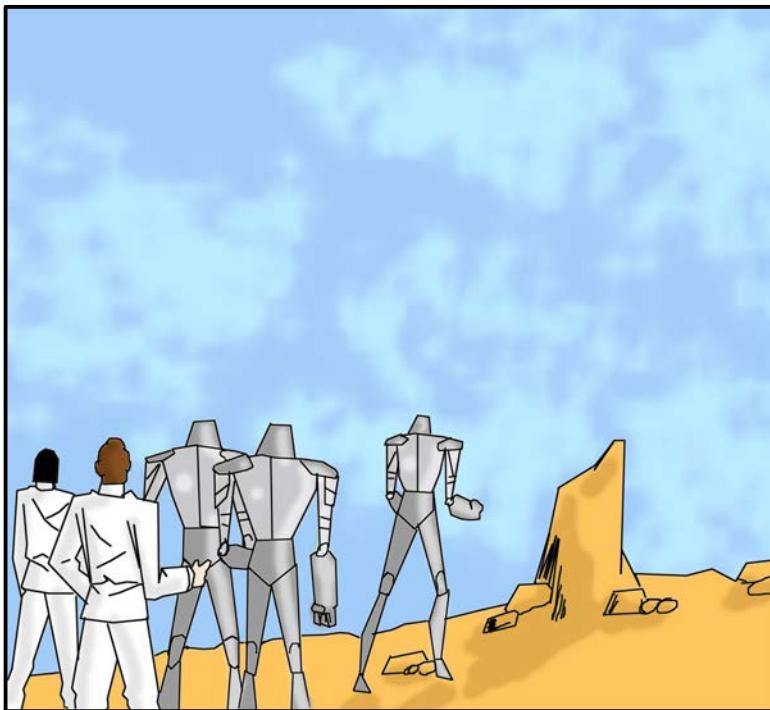


Chapter 3

“Breathe”

Time would win one day and unkindly cut him down until he begged mercifully for death, but not today. He had to breathe slowly and relax. He had to. He had to be patient. He had to know that Brel would find Addie alive, and not, too damaged. She was his life force. He knew his life would never be the same without her in it...and that he would never be the same without her touching his soul.



He felt adrift and frustrated and watched as a group of robots led them through this tough terrain. He needed to quit referring to them as objects, because they had feelings and functioned almost exactly like humans, except for their super human abilities. It wasn't their fault he was anxious. It was being mad at himself, about Addie imprisoned somewhere, that caused him great turmoil. He knew she'd look at him with smoldering eyes and in a serious manner disregard his needy feelings for her, but he understood she felt the same. She was able to control her emotions better far better than he was. That was all he reasoned.

Traveling with this large army was slowing him down. He wanted to bolt forward on his own. He was certain he could get to her quicker. However, a captain couldn't do anything rash like that. It was moments like these that made him not want to be captain of anything.

If he could latch on to the location of Brel, he could probably teleport to him but Brel wouldn't ever allow it. Brel was quicker and better on his own. Sarantos would slow him down by succumbing to human emotions such as fear, pain, and even hallucinations about the worst-case scenario for his beautiful Addie. Brel's reasoning was sound.

Trudging along like the steady, pounding beat of a drum soon found them staring across at rather large rock formations. They threatened to slow down the army. Just what they didn't need. He moved towards Lieutenant Sonny, one of the leaders of the 10.

"Lieutenant, we took a different route to avoid these, as per instructions from Brel. What happened here? It looks like a deliberate attempt to stop us from coming through. Would you agree Lieutenant?"

The 97F8 tilted its perfectly shaped head, with long dark hair that glistened in the morning sun and nodded politely. "Yes, Captain. I believe you're right. It could be the Blinders. We are close to their homes inside the cavern walls, but sir, it wouldn't be an attempt on us personally. They do this to prolong the journey of any traveler, so they can blind them and then carry them to their caves where they devour them. Certainly, as a child you heard of their stories Captain, correct?"

"Yes, I did. But, like most children we were never sure how accurate the stories were. You know how humans tell a tale to make children listen. I never thought they would really eat people. Unfortunately for the children that lived on OKura, we heard the truth of it later on but still had that, 'whatever,' thought about the Blinders."

Lieutenant Sonny looked at him and started laughing. It was a good and hardy laugh. It caused him to join in. He liked this humanoid-robot.

“Captain Sarantos, we can handle the rocks.”

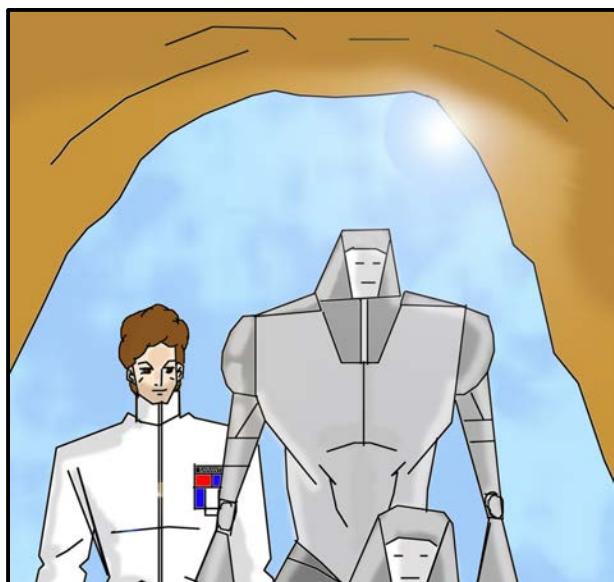
“Okay, Lieutenant, then I suppose we should do it before we’re caught blinded by the Blinders!”

The 97F8 turned and held up one hand. His group of ten robot soldiers pointed at the boulders until a hole appeared through the middle of them, thus allowing the army to move through the center. They made it look so easy.

The Lieutenant smiled at him, then started his group through the rock opening.

Sarantos couldn’t see any Blinders on the other side. It was possible they were not prepared for this type of trick. He knew what to look for because he saw pictures of them when he was young. They resembled Storm Troopers like the ones he’d seen in a movie called Star Wars when he was a kid. Cool looking characters, but very dangerous.

That movie had been around for centuries, and was still famous among the youth of today. It was way ahead of its time. He always wanted to be Luke Skywalker when he was growing up.



He followed the 97F8’s through the center, all the while thinking of the Star Wars movie. It took his mind away from Addie momentarily. His mind preferred to lose itself in a fog of thought when he wanted to yell for help. He imagined being Luke Skywalker.

He was sure he wasn’t any different from the norm. Now that he knew they were in the Blinders terrain, he felt his mood

change from lighter, when he was able to laugh with the Lieutenant, to slightly more edgy. The firm grip of failure tightened around his stomach. He despised the feeling it gave him...beaten down, like a fool.

He looked up to the brightening sky. The sun peeked out of the clouds promising a glimmer of hope, but his chest grew heavy. He felt no hope. Why did he feel bipolar so often?

“Just Breathe, Captain.”

He came back to the droning sound of footsteps, only to see the smiling face of Dr. Major Cleary walking next to him.

He smiled back. It wasn't real, but an automatic reaction. Sometimes he felt that humans only had automatic reactions or reflexes built into their make-up from the cradle, but hid their true thoughts.

“You can see it, Doc? Me, the Captain of the great starship Chicago, feeling his grief and not forgetting it?”

She stumbled slightly making her way across the small and uncomfortable rocks. “Yes, Captain, of course, I see it. It's like you're holding your breath. You need to feel the breeze on your face, don't speak and let the swirling wind hit your body. It might smack some back life into you, and quite possibly a little bit of sense too.”

He shook his head, biting his lip. Only Cleary could get away with talking to him that way. He tried not to grin. She was right. She and his friend John Baker were always right. Today, it ticked him off though. He wasn't in the mood.

He wanted to feel angry at himself, it made it real. He didn't want to slow down and relax, for pity's sake he was breathing! What does the hell does that mean anyway? Breathe? Just breathe!

"Cleary, only you can speak to me that way and get away with it! And I am breathing, or we wouldn't be having this conversation!"

"Captain, no need to raise your voice. I'm your doctor and friend, and I know when you need some soothing advice. Right now, Captain Sarantos, sir, you need to breathe. Relax. Calm yourself. Your body knows what to do. Direct your attention inward. Relax."

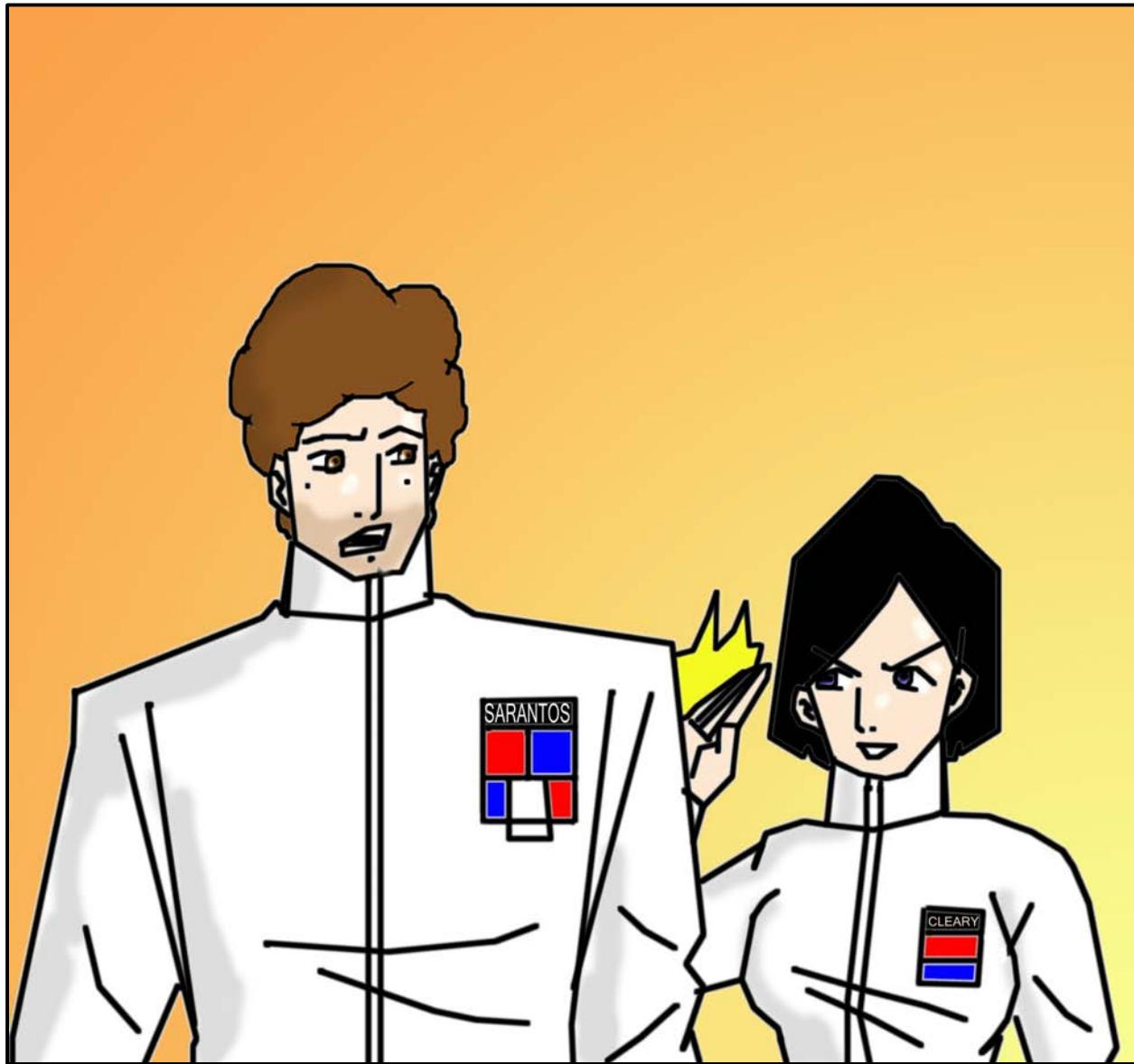
"Point taken, Cleary but I don't feel the need to think about me breathing or focus on that crap. I don't need to meditate. I need to find Addie and bring her back."

"I know, Sarantos, but you have to just believe in Brel, that he will do just that. He's our best hope to getting into that camp and getting her out alive."

"Of course, Doc. I know you're right, but it doesn't make it any easier. You know I haven't even written a new song in a long while, but out here, worrying that I might lose the best thing I've ever found, I've written like 15 of them. They're all in my head. I don't want to write them down on paper. I'm scared if I do, that means I can't change the story of what happens to Addie. I won't forget them, the pain of it all, now imbedded into my head and etched onto my soul, it's not possible to forget. Once I get back to my ship, I'll compose them and take them to the band for another go at being a musician. It's a part of my life that I miss." His smile came naturally, not forced at all, and it felt so good bringing back some real relief, injecting it straight into his heart. "Who knows, Cleary, maybe I'll call the first one, breathe."

Cleary belted out a laugh that had several robots turn her way, giving her a quizzical stare.

“Well, Sarantos, I hope you do, but make sure you use the name of Cleary in it, not Addie since I inspired that one.”



His brows lifted, and his mouth twisted. “Really, Cleary?”

She smacked him on the arm. “Yes, really, Captain. Cleary’s a good name. It would be a #1 hit for sure!”

“Not in my song, no way that’s happening my friend, but maybe if you behave I’ll try to work in a sassy doctor who butts into everyone’s business when I write a book about all this.”

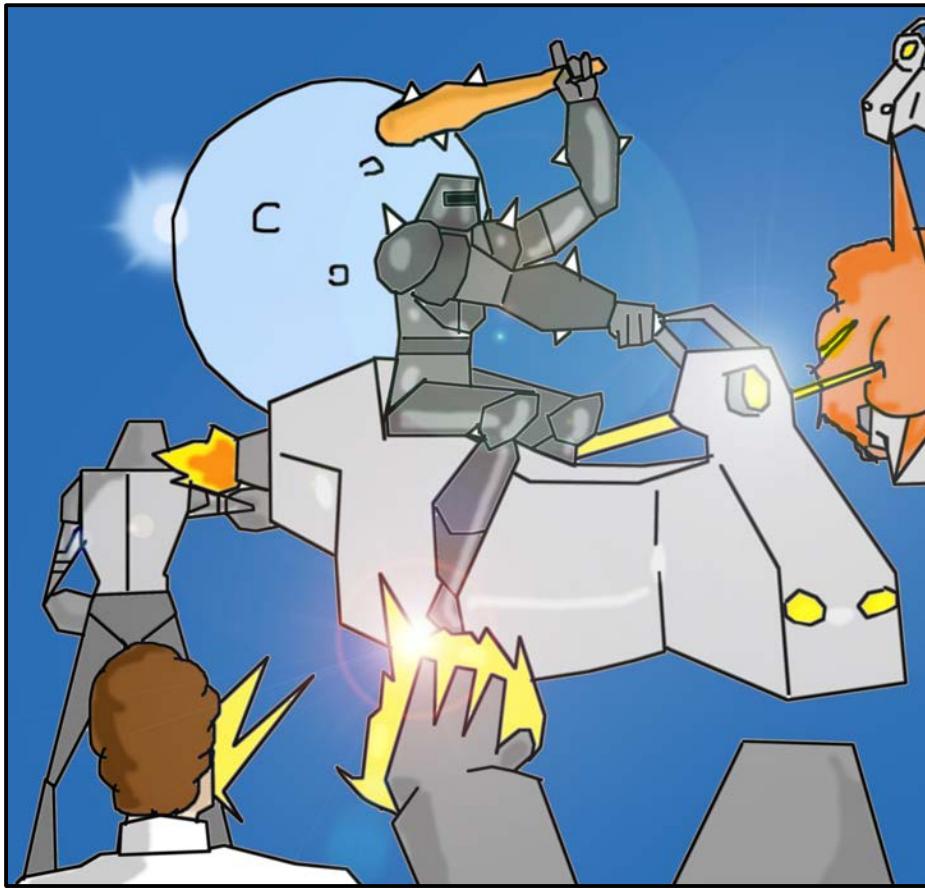
“That’s done then,” she said and moved to the front of the group walking alongside Lieutenant Sonny.

Damn. Now, he did feel sorry for the robot! 97F8’s were only trained in normal human protocols, they weren’t ready for the Doc types. It was definitely an encounter of the 6th kind or was it the 3rd kind? He chuckled.

By the time they made camp and he laid his tired body down on his cot, he was tangibly sore and emotionally exhausted. He was in good shape and shouldn’t be this physically sore, but he knew his body’s tenseness over the stress weighing on his tortured psyche lent itself to be a major factor in causing his currently sore muscles. Maybe he should focus on his breathing after all. He never believed in meditation but it couldn’t possibly hurt, could it?

He simpered when he felt his breath exhale slowly which then allowed the natural inhale to follow. He repeated the sequence at least 6 times before he fell soundly asleep.

He awakened to screaming, crashing, and what sounded like motorcycles outside of his tent. The chaotic sounds had him on his feet in an instant. What the heck was that? Running to the narrow tent opening, he pushed it back and exited the cozy comfort of the fabric walls.



The moon was bright and lit up the area like a magical orb radiating a dazzling mixture of colors. The 97F8's were chasing and disintegrating what could only be the Blinders.

They rode on hover bikes painted black and barely visible in the night. The creatures were much larger than he previously thought, even sitting they

were taller than him. Intimidating, yes. They were very intimidating!

Their naturally armored bodies glowed under the moon's black light and appeared to be moving swiftly without any vehicle under them. The bikes were fast, and the Blinders displayed incredible control. The advantage they had was that they couldn't blind the robots.

Awestruck by their glowing massive bodies he couldn't move. He just watched in amazement.

Lieutenant Sonny pushed him back into his tent while continuing to remove the enemies from their camp. He was so glad the robots were here. He was pleased with Lieutenant Sonny. The Blinders, no doubt assumed that his army would be

vulnerable in the night and under that moon it'd be easy to blind them when they came running out of their tents. But, they hadn't accounted for the Robots.

He sat on his bed holding a gun that would do what the robots did with their hands, just in case one of them got in.

Concentrating on the door, he again marveled at the size of the Blinders. He was certain the armor wouldn't be penetrated easily by any other weapon but a laser. Most alien creatures with higher intelligence had some sense of growth and community that held an organized government, but not the Blinders. They were a powerful yet barbaric race, still living like the days of apes but adjusting to the objects they stole from victims.

He'd heard about the stolen hover bikes but never saw one in live action. About five years ago, a race of Cranks visited his homeland for a holiday and they always brought their own means of transportation. The Cranks being gigantic in size were most comfortable on their own equipment. Ten of them, along with their vehicles disappeared, without a trace. It was assumed they were captured by the Blinders, because the ship they came in had to be picked up by their kind. The investigation was long and tedious but ultimately found nothing.

The robots appealed to him now more than ever, as he kept in mind the thought of being blinded and then eaten. Not cool.

The noise was quieting down and before long, Lieutenant Sonny stood once again at the entrance of his tent.

"Well, it appears we've captured the missing hover bikes. Sad for the Cranks, they are a boisterous and jolly race. I've enjoyed their company on many occasions."

It was funny hearing a robot talk about emotions in that way. They were the first of their kind, a prototype that turned out not to be a prototype, but a functioning and amazing new race.

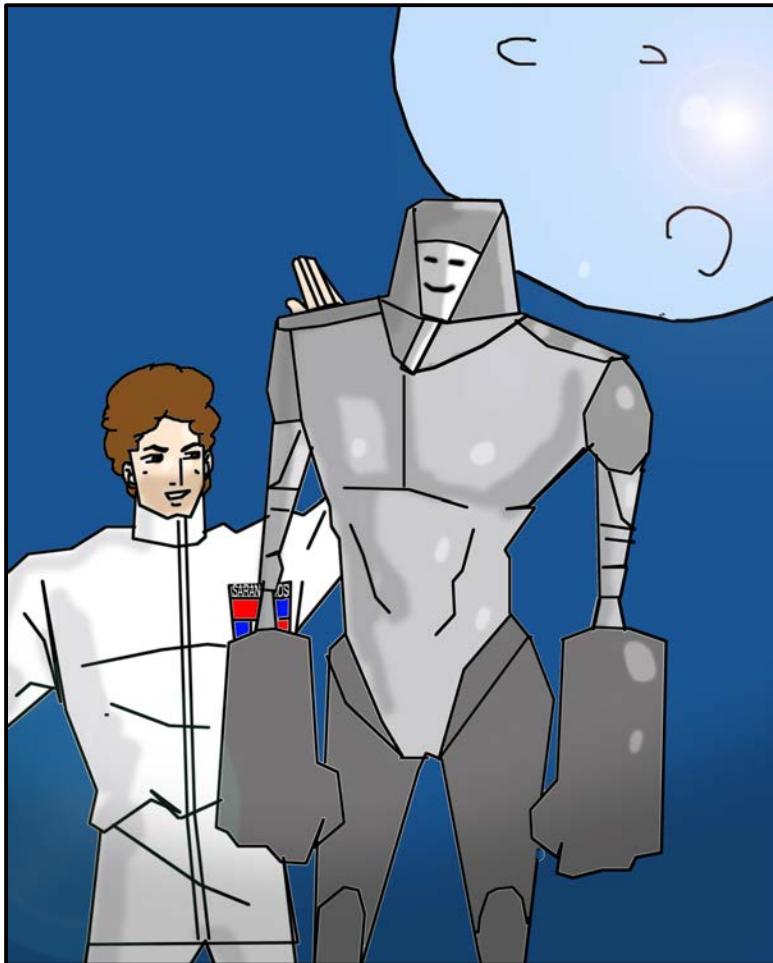
“Captain, are you all right?”

His face must have been confusing for the robot, because he was staring at the Lieutenant in awe.

“Yes, Lieutenant. Thanks for asking but I’m fine. Very impressed with your abilities as a race, but fine.”

“Thank you, Captain. I’m glad you’re from Okura because most races never treat us with such respect. Your politeness to accept all forms of humanity comes from your heritage and a wise and sensitive race, the Okurians. I feel honored to have been born here, as well. I guess you could say we are kindred spirits in a way.”

Sarantos felt speechless. This robot was more human than most humans he’d met.



He walked to Sonny and patted him on his back. “Lieutenant, I’m the one that’s honored. When we get out of here, please join me on my ship for some conversation, delicious food and some of that good humor you possess.”

“Thanks, Captain. I’d love the opportunity to be on a starship, and even more honored that it’s yours.”

“You’ve never been on a starship?”

“No, sir. Always wanted to travel into space, but the

opportunity never arose. Possibly because a lot of humanoids still have trouble with my kind.”

“Well, my new-found friend, I have a question for you. Are you married?”

Sonny laughed. “Again, you surprise me with your acceptance of us as a race, Captain. No, I’m not married. I’ve plenty of time for that.”

“I suppose you do. What would you say to becoming my number one on my starship?”

“What? Are you being serious, sir?”

“Of course, I am, but the woman I have in that position now won’t be happy about it, that’s for sure. Let’s say of late, I’ve not been thrilled with her performance and I think that her time on my starship has expired, for a variety of reasons. I would have her transferred which I think would be best for all parties involved, so no conflicting situations would arise. I’d have to put in the paperwork but come on board when this is over, and let’s see what you think about the starship before we make any permanent changes.”

“In another situation I would become overjoyed, but this is not the time Captain. But, note that I’m thrilled and again, very honored and humbled.”

“Good. I feel good about it as well.”

“This gives me new hope, Captain. I look forward to our newly found relationship, I mean partnership. Not, to jump the gun, but I’m sure it’ll suit me just fine whatever our relation end up being.”

“You’re excused Lieutenant.”

After Sonny left the tent he thought of Kitara. Oh, god, that will be his downfall, bringing that woman’s wrath down on him...he might not make it out alive. He laughed. It was a brilliant idea, of course. Either way, if Addie comes back she’ll be gone, and if something happens to Addie he wouldn’t be able to deal with Kitara’s annoying snickering.

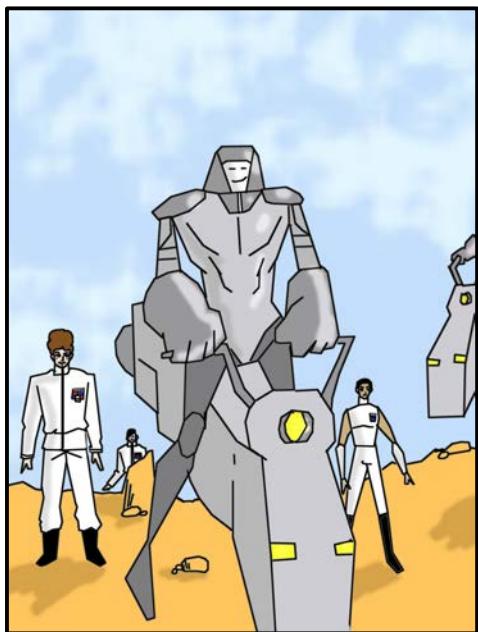
What happened to them anyway? They used to be good friends, and decent lovers. He hated when friendships ended over other rivals. Good friends, if indeed they were

at one time, wouldn't have ended a solid friendship because of another person. That's the way he viewed it.

He couldn't help but to feel something else was going on in Kitara's life. He wasn't quite able to put his finger on it. Maybe, he couldn't because he was so caught up with Addie.

No one else on the ship mentioned anything being off with her, and he was sure they would've seen it first if there was actually a problem. Certainly, Matt and the Doc were all over telling him what he should be seeing, doing and feeling. If they didn't see anything wrong with Kitara, then maybe it was only in his head, which was off because of Addie. Great, could he have been the one to have sabotaged their friendship, because of his own inability to cope with the passion and love he felt for Addie? Maybe it was all his fault.

He leaned back on his cot. It was still late. He was tired. As he drifted off, he felt comforted by the thought of Sonny on his spaceship, but also fearful about what Kitara might do when she found out.



The next day, they travelled quickly. The terrain was not as rocky but the Blinders now openly followed them and hunted them. Lieutenant Sonny had notified him earlier in the day about their new predicament riding in on one of the hovermobiles. They were so large that only the robots could control them and they weren't leaving them behind so the Blinders could use them again. The Lieutenant seemed to be enjoying himself, as did the 97F8's that were using these fast crafts.

They could've destroyed them, but Sarantos hated any waste. The Blinders wouldn't follow them much further as the coming terrain would no longer be as comfortable for them. They were studying the ones that killed them and took their toys.

Another two hours and they'd stop for the night. He suddenly felt Addie, somewhere in the distance. He was sure of it. The wind felt different across his cheek.

"Captain, the Blinders have pulled back."

"Thanks, Lieutenant."

He found it amusing that the Blinders followed and studied their opponents intensely. That could explain why they were so formidable. Okura's land was incredibly glorious but all planets had their dangers, whether it was weather, terrain or living creatures. It was part of what John Baker called "the balance". The Okurians would never remove the Blinders because of that belief. It taught them something, but Sarantos struggled to figure out what.

"Captain, Sarantos. I'm here."

Oh, my god, Brel.

"Brel, tell me what's going on? Did you find Addie?"

He should have called her lieutenant, but Brel knew his feelings for her, and he couldn't contain his emotions. There was no point.

"She's alive, I'm sure of it but, Captain, she's very weak. I'm ready to go in if you give the command. At this point, I don't know if she can help me get herself out and

I'm not sure about the others there. I'm following her mindwaves only, until she's safe with me."

"Thanks, Brel. Well done, Chief Doran, well done."

He couldn't breathe, not yet. Not until she was safely out of that camp and on the starship.

"Chief, please transport her directly to the hospital at our outpost. They're equipped with everything that might be needed. I'll have the doc herself go back this evening to the hospital to prepare for her return, and hopefully the others, as well."

"Okay, Captain. I'll return then and join you for the battle. Their camp is huge. We're looking at 500 fighters, several starships and that's about all I can see, but they have an extremely large tent in the middle of camp. Camouflaged, but before I go get Addie, I'm going back to do some more reconnaissance and check out a few more things. We will surely need overhead help."

"Touch base with the commander at the outpost. I don't want to set off alarms, using my teletalker. They should attack after you're out, target that tent, and hopefully they have nothing else cloaked. Have them target anything suspicious especially on the outside perimeter of the camp."

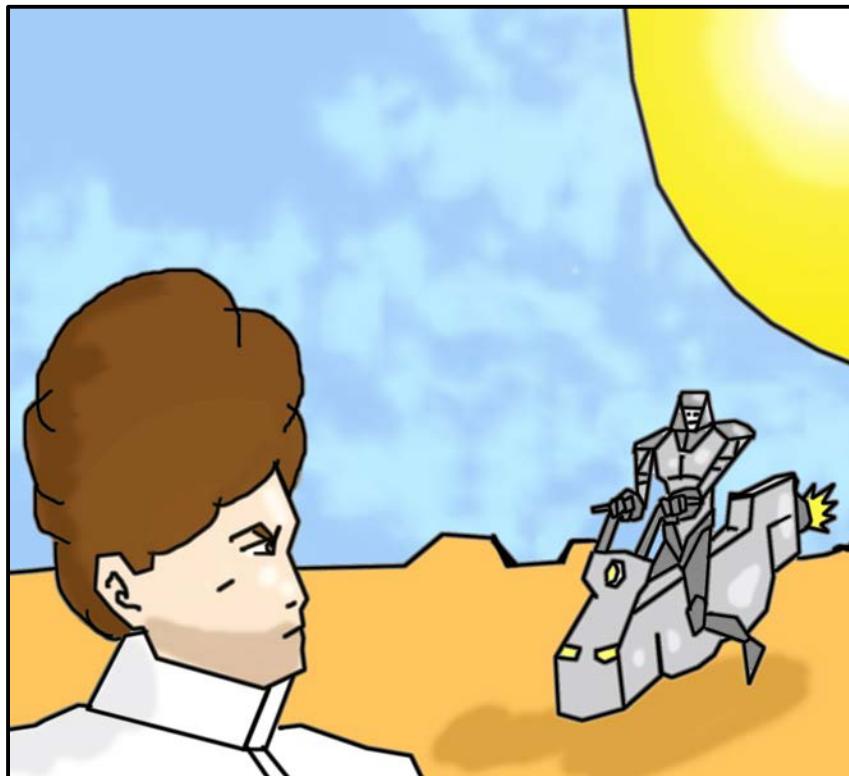
"Will do, Captain. I'm going to bring her out. Trust me."

The silence was deafening when Brel cut him off. It always was, but today it seemed somehow worse. The Chief didn't mention anyone else but Addie.

He felt frustrated when he looked out at the enemy's encampment from the hill. Only days ago, it seemed so close but the darkness made it appear that way with the light

flickering from the campfires lighting up an enormous area and touching their vision with the flames magical ability to play tricks on the eyes.

He wanted to cry. Addie was alive. Brel was there and then he wasn't. "Addie," he whispered her name, as he fought back the tears that burned his eyes. He tried in vain to embrace the pain and accept the fact that he wasn't there for her when he should've been.



He watched Lieutenant Sonny spin around on the hover craft and head his way, after he motioned for him to join him.

"Captain, we're almost to our destination for the evening. We should be okay, scanning the perimeter, nothing following us, and no pending dangers."

"I just got a message from Brel. He found the camp and is going in for Lieutenant Stuart. Please bring Doc Cleary to see me, if you can find her, thanks."

"That's great news, Captain. I'll bring her here, at once."

With his last comment, he turned the craft at such an angle that Sarantos could've sworn he'd tip over with the craft landing on top of him. Handling one of those crafts would certainly be scary and challenging. Very risky.

They continued to trudge forward, and it was the first time in his life that he wished he could lock onto someone's thoughts, namely, Brel's and know what he was seeing and thinking. Otherwise, he would never be interested in knowing what someone else was thinking. That wasn't entirely true. He'd love to know what Addie was feeling and thinking when they made love. She was so passionate. It always floored him.

The image of her naked suddenly enticed him. He directed his attention inward. He felt a swirling windy noise as he went inside his body to feel her against him, once again. It was warm and perfect.

"Captain." The robot hovered next to him. "I've found Major Cleary. She'll be along shortly. I offered her a ride, but she declined."

"Thanks, Lieutenant."

The hover craft zoomed away.



He chuckled thinking about the Doc on the hover craft. She'd never consider it. Not because she wasn't brave, but because she rode on a similar bike years ago with a guy she'd been dating, and they'd taken a winding road down a windy cliffside and she almost flew off the vehicle and straight into the roaring ocean below. She was literally lifted two feet off the bike, or so the story goes, when told by the Doc. She grabbed the poor fellow's neck, almost chocking him, and thus causing them to both go over the edge with the bike, and all. If it hadn't been

for the skill of the driver, she wouldn't be here nagging her captain today.

"Penny for your thoughts, Captain."

And here she was now.

"Good news Major. Brel found our Lieutenant Stuart."

A smile lit up her face and she slapped him on the back. "That's good news, then, Captain."

"We don't know about Stone, or Mann, yet. I'm sure Brel will concentrate on them once he's secured our Lieutenant."

"Do we know how she's doing?"

"We're not sure. All I know is Brel said she's weak, and I'm thinking that means too weak to supply him any information, because that's all he could tell me. I'm scared."

Her eyes softened, and her voice was gentle. "I'm sorry, Sarantos. This must be eating you up inside. I know your heart aches, but at least she's alive. You called me here for another reason, as well. Am I correct?"

If they'd been alone in his office or anywhere else she would've wrapped her arms around him and hugged him fiercely, that he knew about his longtime friend. Out here it was difficult. He was a captain and it wouldn't be proper captain behavior on a battle cry march.

At that moment, the wind gusted around him lifting the back of his long trench coat and brushing his hair with icy fingers. He shivered.

“Yes, Cherrie, you’re correct. I need you to teleport to the outpost hospital and prepare for Addie, Stone, and Mann.”

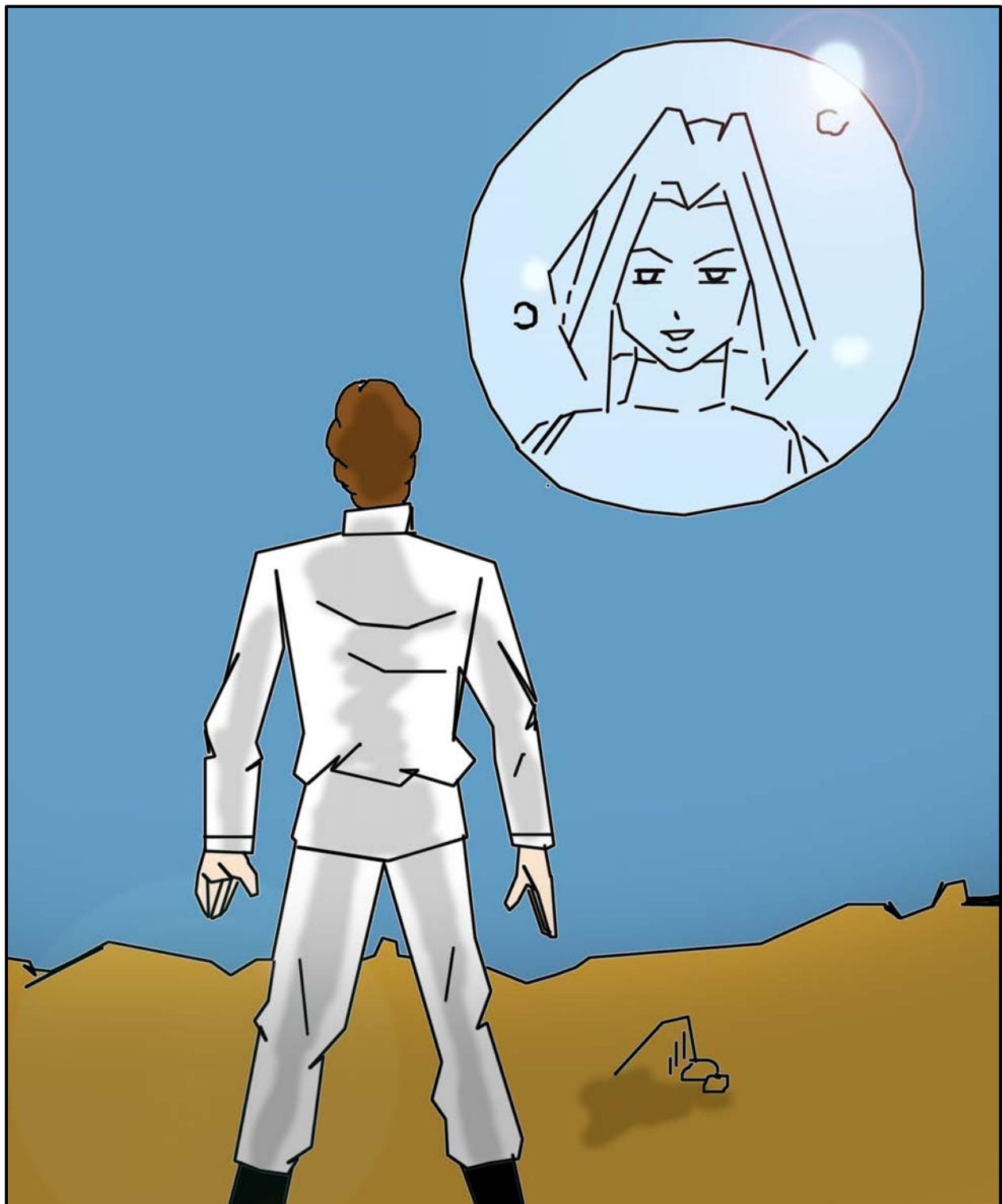
“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay here in case I’m needed here. They do have a well equipped staff at the outpost, one that I hold in high regards and trust explicitly.”

He looked at her face. She meant well, but it wouldn’t do. “No, I want you there. I need you there! I only trust you, for the Lieutenant.”

She nodded in understanding. “Well, Sarantos, I get where you’re coming from, so I’ll go. When I arrive, I’ll send three medical staff to aid you and your army here. You’re going to need it, my dear friend.”

Smiling now, he relaxed his shoulders. He’d had them lifted tensely almost to his ears for days now. He tended to do that when the stress became unbearable. The air slapped at his face again and again. It felt good, and he took a deep breath. He looked at the Major. “Just breathe, isn’t that right, Major?”

Grinning, she placed her hand on his shoulder for a brief moment, then pulled out her teleporter, programmed in her destination, and was gone in a flash.



His shoulders fell once more. He trusted her to fix Addie. He trusted her to not leave her side until she was 100 percent healed.

In an instant, the world stopped spinning and he stood there happy. He felt free, and only now could he believe again, and relax, and breathe. Addie was coming home!

The darkness of the camp got under his skin. Not enough fires were burning.

He approached the fire in front of his tent, where three Okurians were awaiting his arrival.

“Captain, we were sent by Major Cleary to aid your army. We’re medical advisers and surgeons.”

“Yes, I recognize your arm bands. Glad to have you three on board. A tent’s been set up next to mine for the three of you to share. There’s also a screen to shield each cot to protect your patient’s privacy, if needed.”

It might be needed, as one of the team is female.

“Thank you, Captain. It’s much appreciated. My name is Sargent Shawna Dawn, the taller one is Private Adam Glass and then we have Private Snow Walters,” she said.

They were all handsome Okurians. Most were. “Interesting name Snow, how’d you come by it?”

“Thank you, Captain. I was born in a blizzard on the mountain Snow Cap, so it was a fitting name.”

“Yes, I believe it is, fitting.”

“Captain.” It was Brel.

“If you three will excuse me, I need to take my broth and bread to my tent for some privacy.”

He didn’t wait for a reply, but went directly to his tent and sat on a chair by a small table, silently placing his food on it.

“Brel.”

“Addie is with the doc now. She’s not doing well, Captain. By the time I got to her, she’d been tortured hard for so long and was barely breathing. I had to risk teleporting her out before I looked for Mann and Stone. I found them later and they’re in better shape than Addie.”

“Is she going to make it?” He choked on his words, almost breaking down.

“Honestly, Captain, I’m not so sure. It doesn’t look good. I’m on my way back to you now.”

The silence fell again around him. His hands were shaky, as he lifted them to his face and openly wept. He couldn’t leave to go be with her though he wanted to more than anything in the world, after all this was his army to command.

His hands didn’t feel like they belonged to him anymore. They were haunted in grief. The muscles in his body seemed mad with tension. His thighs and temples throbbed



with tearful anguish and his shoulders rose up to his ears muscles tight and bathed in sadness.

His voice quivered, as he spoke out loud to the universe, to his tent, to anyone that was listening.

“Addie, you already know how to make things better, but I stand in a fog of thought with no answers, and I can no longer hear you but in my dreams...”