

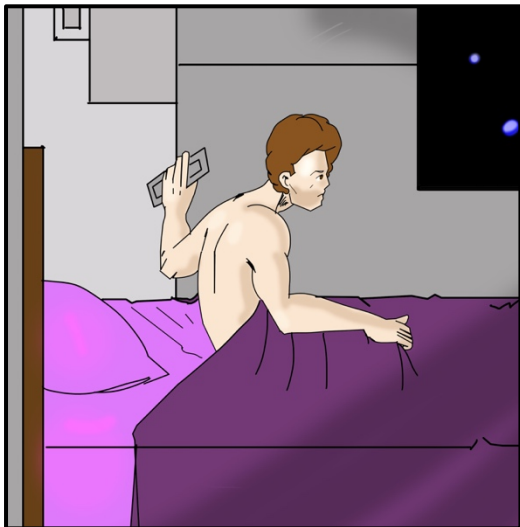
Chapter 3

“Every Handshake Is Important”

His eyes felt glued shut, but a noise awakened him from a deep sleep. He was dreaming of losing his ship to an invisible race. There were hundreds. They were everywhere. They’d taken over his ship. You cannot fight what you cannot see. John would disagree but this was a dream that belonged in Sarantos thoughts, not John’s.

Wiping the sleep from his eyes, he gently opened them. Sarantos loved the hours after 9. Silence greeted him now though. The room was dark. His head was pounding. Turning over, he grabbed the slightly warm pillow that still held the perfume of Addie and pulled it lovingly onto his chest. She’d already left for work. Where did she get her energy?

Someone taught Addie right from wrong at an early age. It was her kind mother who died when Addie was only 10 years old. Addie had confessed to him that her sister didn’t respond well to the loss of their mother. Her sister Amy didn’t take on the healthy traits of Addie. The Lieutenant was hard working and showed no weakness. Her strength humbled him. She hated talking about mistakes though she made only a few. For Addie talking about mistakes and holding onto them might be fatal and in her position it wouldn’t be wise. Addie set her decisions in stone. If she shook on something, you could trust she’d carry it out, no matter who or what got in the way.



There was that noise again - the one that awakened him a moment earlier. It sounded as if something was banging up against the window outside of his ship. He lifted himself up on his arms to look, but the blackness of space was blinding.

“Petty, you on the helm?”

The IC clicked back. “Captain, what can I do for you?”

“Did you hear a noise banging against the ship?”

“No, nothing up here. All quiet in the unnerving blackness of space Captain.”

“Okay.”

“Captain, would you approve of me sending security to your quarters?”

“That won’t be necessary. Thanks.”

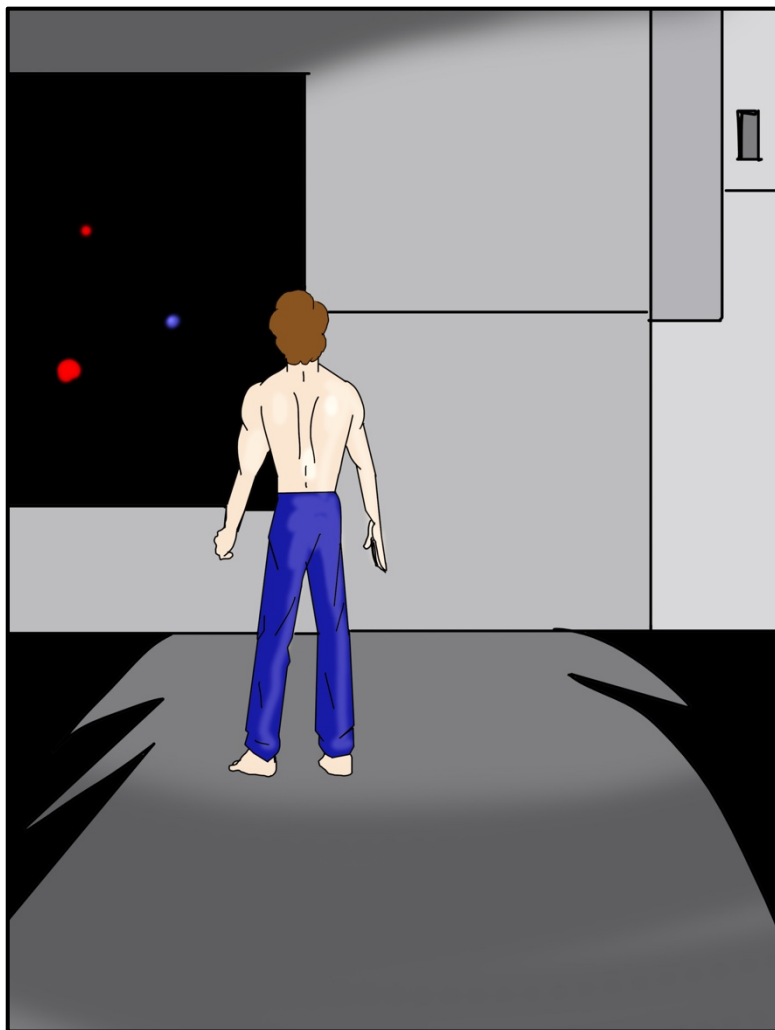
It’d been days since they had entered the Stoma quadrant, the blackest place he’d ever been. He felt anxious. The crew wasn’t managing any better. Cleary was becoming increasingly agitated and hard to deal with occasionally, but what else was new? He was lucky that Addie oversaw security. At least he did not have to worry about security. She ran a tight ship and her crew faithfully trusted her judgment. They’d follow her anywhere. He would too, but for reasons not related to being an effective Chief of Security.

Addie had told him that the fond memories of her mother eased her pain after the loss. Memories are powerful things. Over the years those simple memories kept her sane. Sometimes she joked that her mother’s words stayed etched in her brain permanently right where her mother intended them to stay. Her sister, wallowed in self-pity, too saddened by her own grief to move past it and be a good sister to Addie and a good daughter honoring her mother’s memory the way she deserved. It was interesting how people handled grief differently. Amy forgot her mother’s love when she left her. Amy’s grief had turned to anger.

He hugged the pillow closer and took a deep breath deeply inhaling the scent of his lover. Not everyone could remember words to a worn-out vinyl. Sometimes you

make up the words that fit into certain moments of your life and hope you've chosen words that favor survival.

A shout brought him out of slumber. He sat up in bed quickly and realized he had fallen back into a fitful sleep.



Everything was still dark. It was always dark now.

Clearing the fog from his head, he jumped out of bed naked.

He grabbed the jeans he'd worn the night before, pulled them on while listening again.

Nothing.

"Hello?"

Still no sound.

He swore someone yelled out to him. What was going on?

He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep.

“Petty?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Send security.”

“On it, Captain.”

He pulled on a shirt and grabbed a phaser. He needed coffee, but that would have to wait until he checked the room.

Nothing in the bath area. He listened again. Nothing. Heading into the living quarters with a finger on the trigger, his mind and body alert, he paused at the entrance. His quarters appeared empty.

Moving to the replicator he said, “French roast black coffee.”

The aroma permeated his senses, one he often remembered from childhood when he’d wake up to his parents brewing the fresh morning pot of coffee. The thought warmed him more than the coffee.

The door swished open as he was about to take a sip of the steaming liquid elixir.

Two uniformed security men stood in the doorway, scanning the room with phasers ready.

A tall man he didn’t know but had seen with Addie immediately took charge of the situation.

“Captain, is everything ok?”

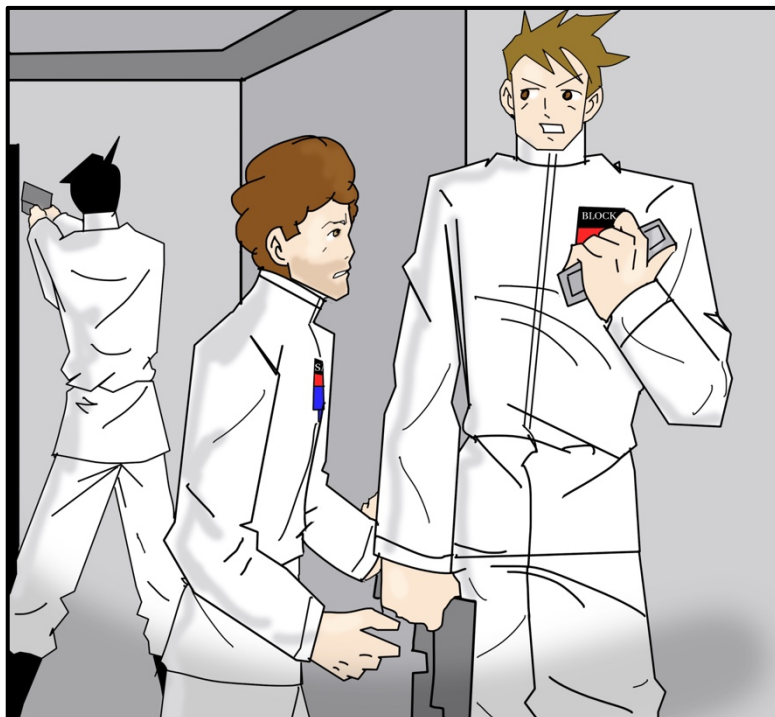
Sarantos noticed his stripes were that of a Sergeant. “I assume so, Sergeant, but there has been a repeating noise I keep hearing that seems to come from outside the ship. A banging, I also thought I made out someone calling me.”

The Sergeant said, “Flange stay by the Captain.” He investigated his quarters.

Sarantos sat down and drank his coffee while the team did what they needed to do.

The door swished again. Running in came Addie. “Captain are you alright? I couldn’t come right away so I sent a team. What’s going on?”

“Just some strange noises Addie. Any similar reports elsewhere on the ship?”



“No.”

The Sergeant fell back into the living quarters. “I found nothing Lieutenant. Although it doesn’t mean there’s nothing out there in that black hole taunting the Captain.”

Sarantos spoke up. “It’s not a consistent noise but very sporadic.”

“Any location,” asked Addie?

“Not really, but if I had to guess I’d say outside the ship. Banging against the glass windows of my quarters, a whisper, not sure why. I couldn’t pinpoint the exact words or even what language. I know that sounds crazy but...”

Addie never answered but passed him to check out the situation herself. When she returned with her brow was wrinkled in thought, he was getting another cup of coffee.

“Captain, this place is unknown to us, this dark matter in space. I’m leaving Sergeant Block with you.” She turned to Block and said, “Sergeant inform me of anything suspicious right away and stay with the Captain throughout the day. Flange take Stanford and Middleton with you to check out all passengers on the ship. Let’s ask if they’re also hearing voices or other sounds of any sort. Tell them to leave no detail out no matter how trivial or silly it may seem.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” said Flange then departed the room.

She nodded to Block. “I’ll return later unless you encounter anything.” Addie turned to him and said, “Captain, I’ll find you later. Be alert.”

All he could do was nod. This was all so strange. Was he the only one sensing the noise? If so, why?

“Sergeant Block would you prefer coffee or tea?” He couldn’t offer him anything stronger, after all Block was on duty.

“Coffee is great. Thanks Captain.”

Block was uncomfortable, shifting from side to side. Sarantos understood why. It was difficult being in the private quarters of a Captain, much less having to guard him all day. Well, they should probably talk. Getting used to each other might help both of them. He didn't know much about Block.

“Black?”

“Yes, thank you Captain,” said Block.

He had his back to Block and smiled.

Sarantos handed him the steaming coffee and sat down. “So, Sergeant where did you grow up and how did you get placed on my ship?”

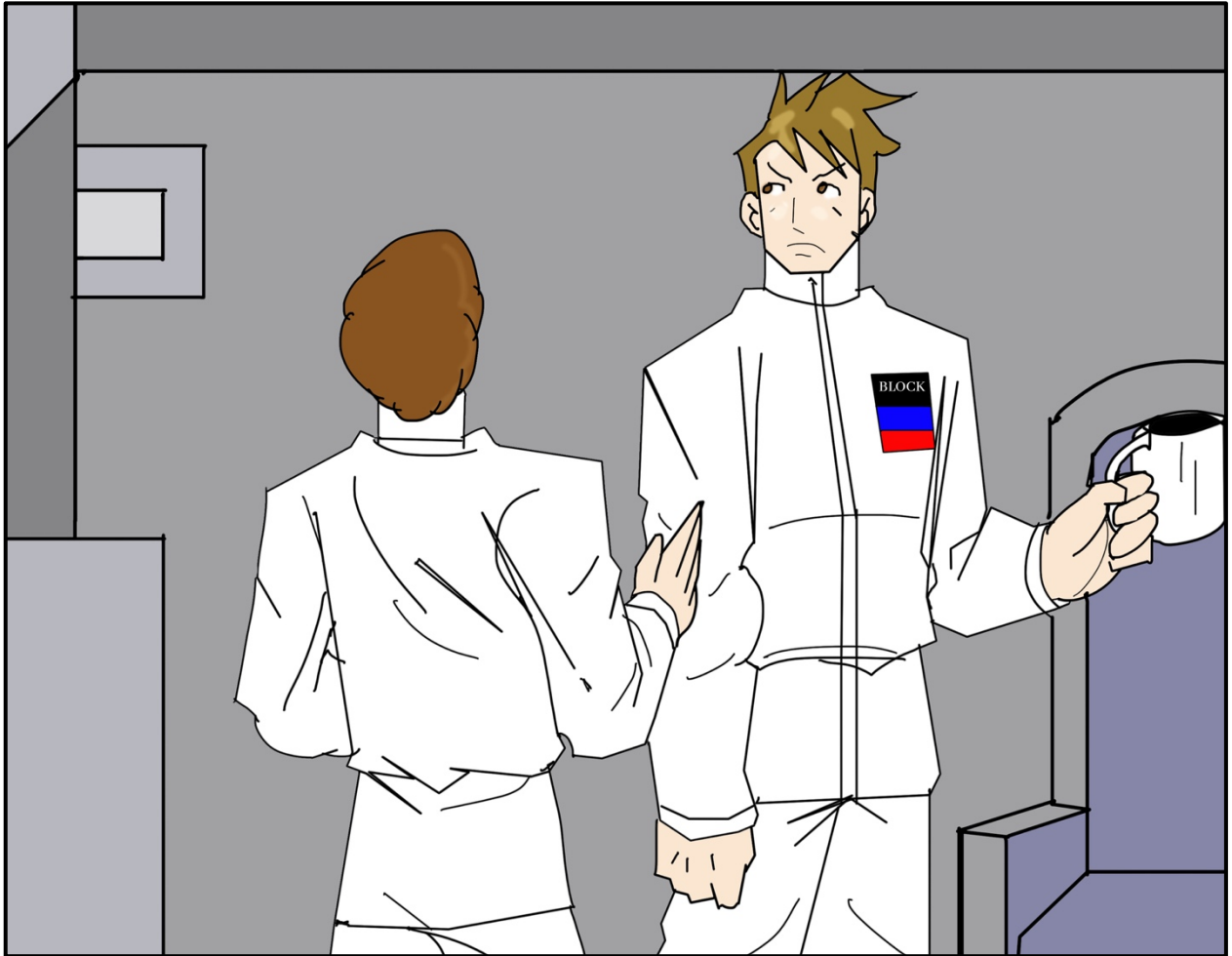
“Sure, Captain.”

Sarantos tried not to grin too broadly as Block shifted his standing position, sipped his coffee and frantically moved his eyes around searching for a resting place for them. He fidgeted trying to think about how to answer the Captain.

“Block, you can sit down, please. It'd be easier for us both. Let's get used to being together today.”

The Sergeant's body tensed, and his head tilted.

Sarantos tried to ease the grown man's discomfort. “It's okay, I insist.”



“Ok, Captain.” Block set his coffee on the table then scanned around the room. His eyes shifted with purpose as he studied every inch of the Captain’s quarters. The Sergeant went into the bedroom meticulously examining everything.

Sarantos understood the man was doing his duty by double checking everything again before he dared to take a relaxed position in the offered chair.

Block was gone for at least five minutes. Sarantos sipped his coffee pondering the current predicament. No one would come to their rescue. If their ship got into trouble, this was one of the worst places to be. It gave him the chills.

When Sarantos was a child, there were stories told about this curious place, this black pit on the outermost edge of space. Kids wanted to check it out just to figure out if the horror stories were true. Now, he wished he hadn't thought of that childish eagerness from years ago, because here he was now in the depths of the black abyss.

Before he continued his thought, Block came into the room. Sarantos studied him to be sure nothing possessed him. Honestly though, how would he know?

“Everything okay, Sergeant?”

“Yes, Captain, just checking out your quarters for hidden sounds or motions. I scanned the windows for a while thinking if something hit your window while I was there, I might notice it, but there was no sound.”

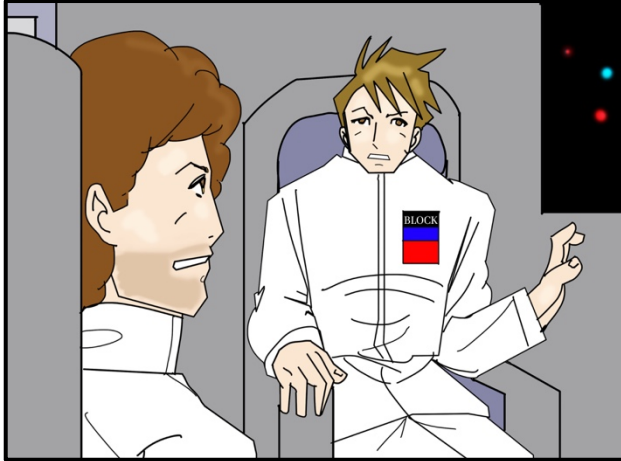
“Block, it's death out there and personally it unnerves me. Possibly, we only see what we let our eyes see.”

Sarantos wondered if he should let his guard down like that and say things that let the crew know he was nervous about their situation.

Block stared at him as he sat down easily into the chair. Funny how you bond when you're in danger!

“Captain, I couldn't agree more. When I look out into the darkness, it's like I'm buried in space on a ship with people in the same situation as myself. But, Captain every once in a while, I sense something weirdly alive. Kind of a life but not a real living organism. Maybe something else?”

“Yes, Block. I know what you mean. The truth is out there.” Nobody lies when they think those might be their last words.



“Not to change the subject Captain but I grew up in Chicago. I always wanted to be on this ship named after that proud city. I joined the academy and hoped one day I would get my wish. Finally, here I am. My parents are so proud that I accomplished what I always wanted.”

“Congratulations. What made you go into security?”

Sarantos was glad Block changed the subject and wanted to open up discussing it more. It reminded him of when he was a kid. He always wanted to digest the most horrible story.

“Well, Captain I held interest in safeguarding friends in the neighborhood I grew up in, not to mention I have a younger sister who usually needed my protection.”

Block had a good strong laugh, and it filled the room.

“I don’t have a sister or brother, but I can imagine security a perfect fit for you because of that.”

“Yes,” stated Block firmly.

Sarantos said, “I sometimes wondered what it would be like with brothers and sisters, or at least even one? I guess my parents spoiled me, their only child.”

“It helped make you into the leader you are today. You were a loner and always in control of your own situation. What do you think Captain?”

“Block, I think you might be right.” He chuckled.

It was the first time he considered this but it made sense. He focused his world on living without the distraction of caring for someone else. He was in charge of that world. As Captain, this world too. A world full of crew members and a ship that needed attention every minute. It was more stressful than just looking after himself, but he was in command and they all needed him. Sometimes you have to step up to the plate and create your own destiny!

Sarantos was watching Block. His eyes were constantly scanning the room and his head leaned as though he was listening for any unusual sounds.

“I don’t know Captain, but that’s why I think I’m the way I am today, and part of the reason I chose this job.” He grinned at Sarantos and nodded. “Strangely, it makes me more connected to my family. The crew are my family now.”

A smile can hide so much pain. Sarantos liked this Sergeant Block. He had style and commitment. This tall lanky man from Chicago, Illinois would absolutely honor a handshake just like Addie Stewart. Block’s ability to honor a noble handshake said a lot about who he was as a person. He never shook Sarantos hand and made a commitment to him and the ship, but his code of honor and how he handled himself daily was effectively a non-verbal handshake. He was faithful to the ship.

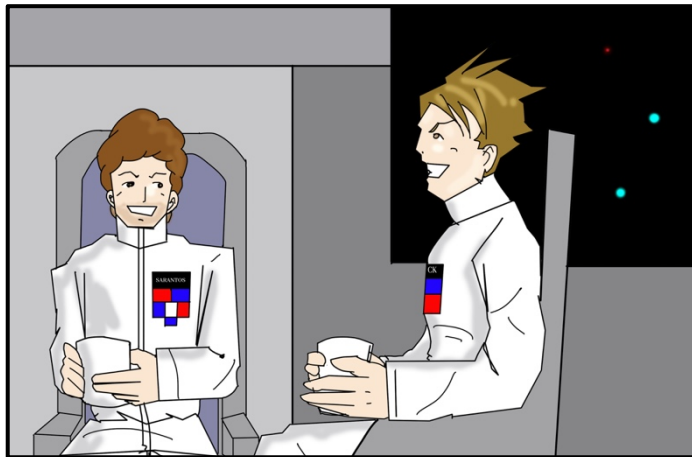
A person didn’t have to shake someone’s hand to be honorable or loyal, hell, over the years he’d had quite a few people shake his hand on a promise or commitment, but never respect it. No, it was people like Sergeant Block knowing true devotion that reminded him of years past. Their word was their bond.

Block was dedicated to his own self-worth, which played out in all aspects of his life no matter what he did. Knowing his demeanor, there was no need to actually shake hands. He was a trusted individual, one worth knowing, which is why Addie probably assigned him to guard him. That was good enough for Sarantos. Actions speak louder than words and his spoke loudly.

Thinking of honor and loyalty made him think of Brel. He was a faithful friend, a man who would never let him down. Brel's word was his bond, probably in this life and beyond.

As Captain, try as hard as he might, he couldn't always keep stuff on the up and up. Not all decisions turned out to be bad ones though. Most would consider him trustworthy, but he was sure there were others that thought he broke promises. He was only a fragile human and humans forget and sometimes get it wrong even when they remember. Brel wasn't human. There was a difference. Humans are flawed but not all who wander are lost.

It's unhealthy for people to always comply to the demand of others. He hadn't, but he did the best possible in that moment and was quick to apologize when he got it wrong. Trying to understand his own shortcomings so he could be reasonable towards the crew was always on his agenda. Sometimes a misunderstanding took center stage. The Captain guided the ship both inside and out.



“What were your parents like, Block?”

Block confessed, “They were strict, sir. Not in a horrible way, but you understand that throughout the quadrants most parent personalities are the same types. Same old story, same old rules.”

Both men laughed.

Sarantos had to agree. Parents usually expect the best from their children and rarely make an exception. Before his father died in war, he used to tell him to not act silly. Sarantos still never understood quite what that meant though he was sure he played the part of a fool exceptionally well far too often.

Sarantos said, “Block did your parents ever tell you to not act like a fool?”

“Nope. What does that mean exactly?”

Sarantos laughed. “Not sure, but I must’ve done it a lot as a kid. My father used to tell me not to act like one pretty regularly. Yet, right before he said it, I thought I was acting rather cool.”

Block smiled, “Well, a fool is a fall guy, a dupe. Were you falling?”

That made them both crack up until their sides hurt.

Finally, Sarantos managed to speak. “Can’t say I was falling. Oh, the English language, Sergeant... the English language how it can confuse children. I thought a fool was a stage actor in an English court, like a jester. When you look at a deck of cards with the fool on it... jester.”

Block was snickering. “Were you dressed up with a funny hat?”

That created another round of hideous laughter.

“No, but my father probably saw something I didn’t.”

Tears were rolling down their cheeks. Sarantos wasn’t sure where this came from. It certainly was just what the doctor ordered though for relief from the tension. Comic relief offered by the fool in a time of seriousness.

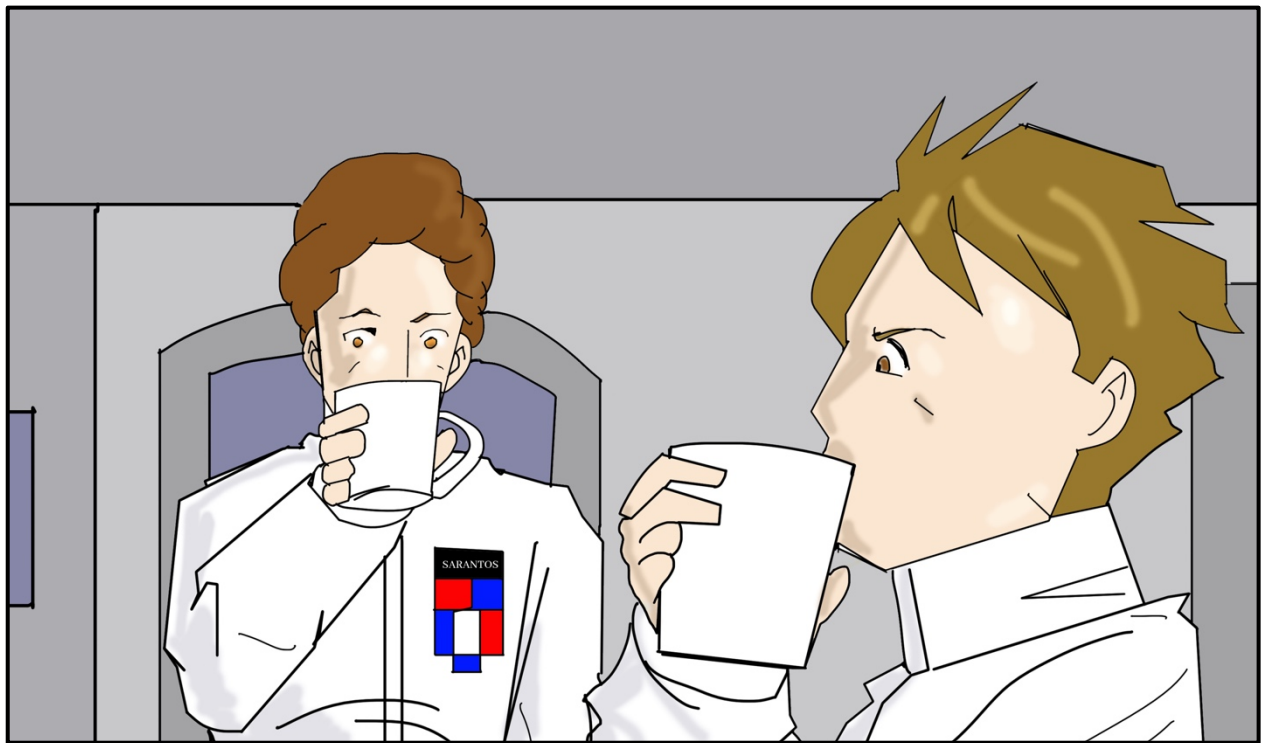
“I finally got it, Block. My father saw me as being too comical in serious situations, or just being too silly for adults.”

Block said, “You’re onto something Captain.”

Sarantos said, “Yes, I am. This was a great way to alleviate this nerve-racking circumstance, so the fool rushed in and relieved the tension.”

“Captain, we needed your foolish self at this moment.”

“Yes, it’s been so dark and dreary here lately. Life is short – we gotta smile while we still have teeth!” One last laugh.



They both sipped on their now cold coffee and allowed their serious faces to cover the mask of the fool.

“Captain.”

The luscious voice on the other end sent his nerves racing to his unmentionable areas.

“Lieutenant?”

“Security has gone through about half the ship and found two other similar incidents to yours. I’ve posted guards at each location and we’ll continue our investigation. Both incidents are on opposite sides of the ship from yours and at different levels, so it’s hard to speculate on what it means. We’ll try to figure out any potential relationship and continue the ship inspection.”

“Thanks. Glad to know I’m not the only one hearing things. Were the others human?”

“One human, the other Olivian.”

“Interesting.”

“Yes, sir. No rhyme or reason.”

“Please continue to keep me informed. Eventually the momentum will move towards you at some point. We are good here. We’ll be leaving to go to the deck shortly. I’m forgoing my morning jog in the creative room for now.”

“Yes, Captain that would be advisable.”

“Out.” His voice sounded so chilled as he ended his call with Addie. He wanted to say come back here! Let me kiss those soft lips, but it would not happen. He let out a heavy sigh instead.

“Everything okay, Captain,” said Block.

“Yes, it’s fine.” He didn’t sound convincing. “Excuse me Block. I’m going to secure my uniform and get on the helm.”

“Sure, Captain. Just let me check your room one more time.”

“Okay.”

Sarantos waited while the Sergeant worked his magic. Eventually, he came out of the room. He looked a little dazed but acted fine.

Touching Block’s arm the Captain said, “Are you ok? You hear something?”

“No. It seemed there was something staring at me thru the window. Possibly facial features, but I couldn’t be sure. It happened so fast. Do you guess it’s one of those dark ones, you know the stories you heard about your whole life?”



Sarantos looked into Block’s eyes. He saw a little fear. There was sweat on his forehead. His upper lip twitched.

“Block, I conclude anything’s possible. Don’t you?”

“Yes, sir. Did you hear the stories, Captain?”

He scanned the room before circling back into the dark eyes of Sergeant Block. “Yes, Block, I did.”

Block allowed his eyes to drop in reassurance, but Sarantos hurried into the room to see if there was anything unusual at his window.

He found nothing after staring at it for several minutes. Then he decided to get dressed and go to the helm. It was getting late.

The helm was quiet. No one reported any noise. No one saw anything unusual.

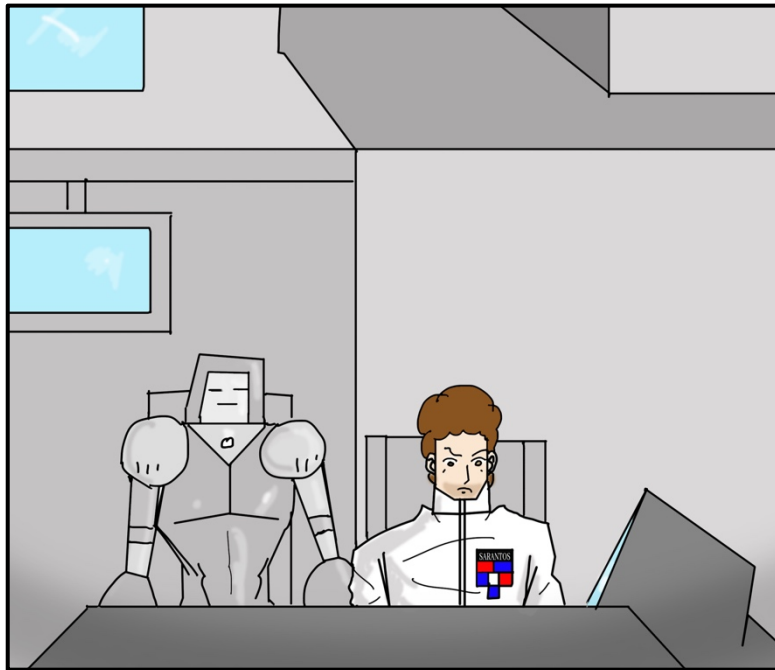
Chief Candy Storm’s brow furrowed, followed by a raised brow.

Sarantos said, “Storm, anything wrong?”

“Well, sir it might be nothing. However, an hour ago, I noticed a... face. I kept watching but nothing afterwards. I didn’t want to say anything because it sounded bizarre. I thought perhaps after staring at the darkness for so long I was imagining things? I definitely could have been delusional, sir.”

“Thanks Storm. That’s precisely the kind of information we need to gather. We’ve never visited this black hole before, none of us, so we need to be on high alert. Anything unusual and I mean anything at all that’s out of the ordinary report it ASAP. Please report all of it to Lieutenant Stuart at once. Let her make the proper evaluation on your sanity. We have a long journey ahead of us and need to stay alert for anything that might have fatal intentions for us or maybe they’re helpful intentions. Both are equally important in this zone.”

Block stood like a shadow by his side as the crew present all said “Yes, sir.”



Sarantos sat down in his chair relieving Petty. He got comfortable and scanned the vast blackness his ship was moving through. What if they ran into something? Though the thought obsessed him, John had informed him the ship would warn them of any obstructions first. It didn't make him feel any better about it. He preferred seeing what was going on out there. It felt weirdly uneasy that he couldn't.

Sonny came onto the helm. Sarantos directed him to the chair next to him.

“Join me, Sonny. It seems faces are being seen periodically in the darkness. I'm not sure if you can assess the situation better than us humans or not, but your input would be valuable.” The Captain turned to Block. “Block sit on my other side, please.”

Block did and looked much more comfortable being a bodyguard of sorts to the Captain than he did when he first entered his quarters.

“I'll be glad to check, Captain,” said Sonny.

“So, Block, do you find the handshake valuable as a moment shared between two people sealing a bond, or is the word alone okay with you?” Back to being consumed with the handshake? A different focus than the current situation demanded. A mind-altering thought.

Block glanced sideways at him like he was crazy. “Well, I suppose when you shake hands with someone, you can tell a weaker person from a stronger one, they say. A strong handshake is secure and forthcoming. You cannot trust a weak one.”

Sonny piped into the conversation. “For my kind, words are valuable but actions even more so. To shake on it or to say it isn’t enough... doing the action is the sealing of a bond.”

“Well said, Sonny. I suspect you have it right, my friend,” said the Captain.

“Perchance, humans just consider it a polite thing to do. I’m not sure. One of those manner things you’re taught when young, more of a way to say hello, nice to meet you,” said Sonny.

“Yeah, we used to shake in greeting others hello,” said Block.

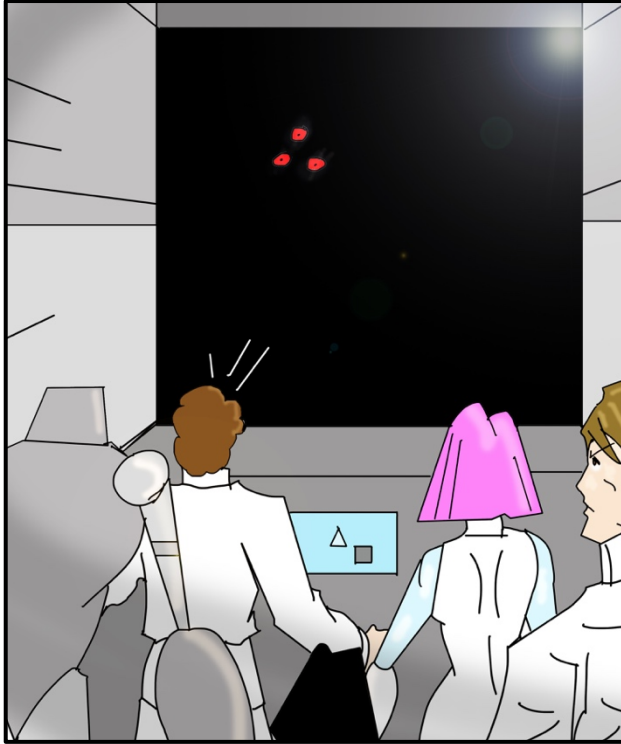
“No matter what it’s used for, it can be a useful gesture,” said Sarantos.

Sonny was intent on peering into the blackness to help solve this mystery. He shifted in his seat.

“Captain.”

“Yes, Sonny.”

“Something’s out there. I can’t tell if it’s organic though. Now and then, I see a flicker but I’m not convinced it’s a form of light penetrating the darkness.”



At that moment three eyes appeared in the window. They somehow looked like mini flashlights. As Sarantos saw them, the entire crew blurted “what’s that” at the same time!

Every idea of handshaking, politeness, and rules was forgotten...