

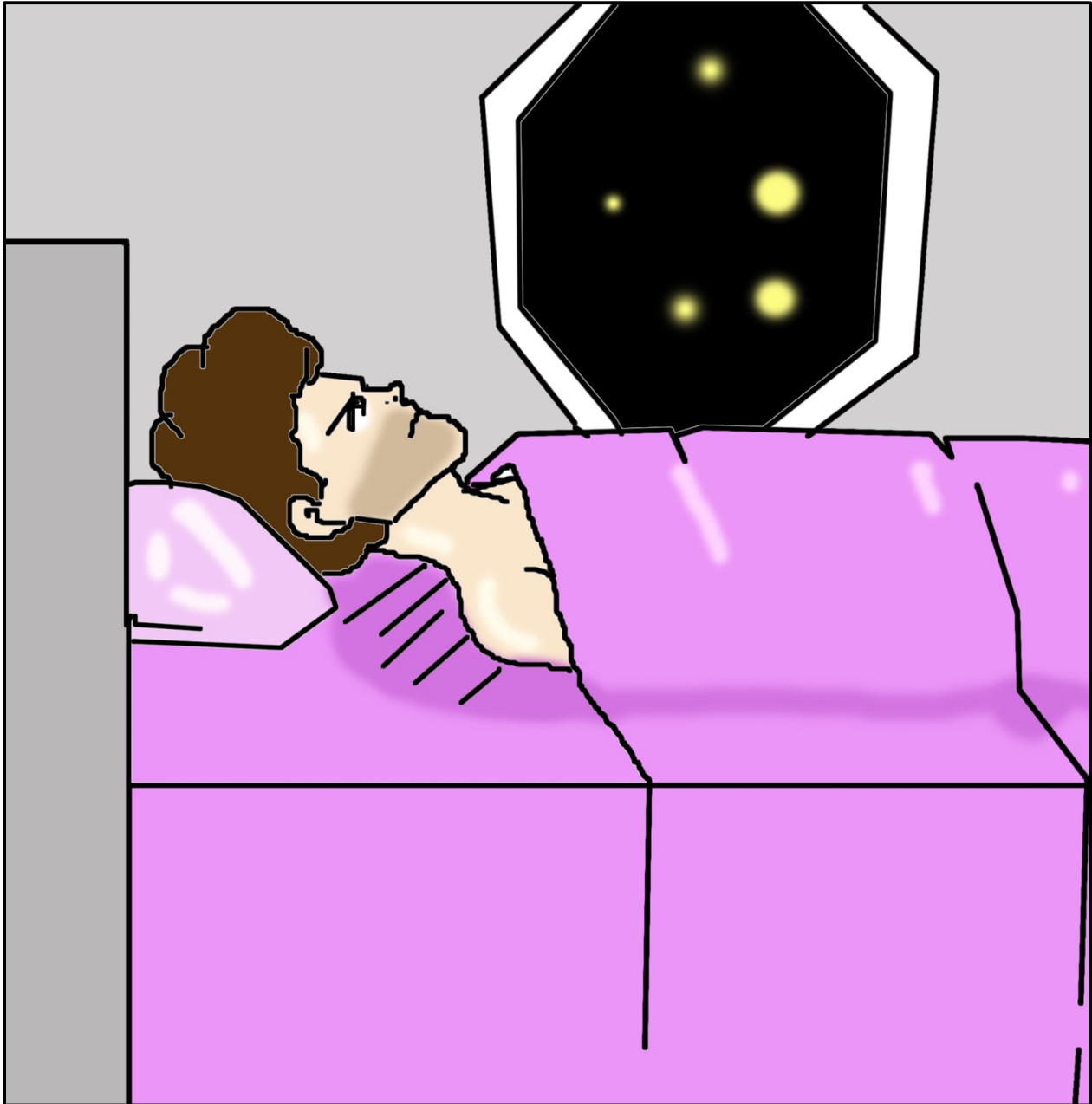
Chapter 3

“Why Ask Why”

He woke up alone. Yesterday had been hectic. He needed some rest. Addie was on the late shift because of the security breach, when Cindy O'Malley's daughter decided to become a stowaway. Sarantos didn't want to get out of bed.

Candy's mother had been in shock over what happened. She was overly apologetic to him earlier in the day about her daughter endangering the mission by not following orders. More importantly, he noticed the concern in Cindy's eyes about her daughter's safety on this now war-bound ship. That's when Sarantos suggested that Candy assist Addie investigating current security protocols trying to figure out how she managed to actually get on board the ship unnoticed. He decided that since she was here, she'd need to learn as much as she could about the workings of the ship. Children could be quite versatile and inventive. Who knows what potential benefits might be in store for them. Cindy had thanked him profusely and took her daughter back to her quarters to get her situated.

Security had been lax because this was supposed to be a peaceful mission, although Addie had made it quite clear to her security team that this mission was in fact riskier because of the blend of several races, different locations and many worlds. They would soon be at war, but for the moment, it remained an underground mission. They should have been more cautious. Addie attentively oversaw her entire crew all evening as they checked out the remainder of the ship with a fine-tooth comb, looking for any other possible infiltrators.



Now, Sarantos lay there, He stared at the window where the depths of space filtered into his eyes always touching his mind with wonder. Never in a million years did he think of captaining his own ship into war... oh, he did have the experience in the past but not as a Captain. This was one ride he never expected to go on.

He chuckled. Sometimes you get hit from the blind side. Crap happens sometimes and this time it happened to him. He'd always dreamed of overseeing an assignment that mattered and where his decisions could mean the end of an era or usher in the

beginning of a new life. Here he was in the thick of it and he wasn't so sure if it was a good thing. Why was it him on this voyage?

He always saw himself as a hero, ever since he was a little boy. He dreamed of becoming a captain, one that everyone looked up to and admired and respected. It was easy on missions that didn't involve a possible loss of life but this one did! And now he had a child to think about on top of all that burden.

This was his dream however so he needed to make the most of it. He should feel appreciative of the fact that his dream came true. Many things hung in the balance and his actions mattered a lot. He kept thinking to himself, why? Why ask why? Why can't he change the world? This was crazy, so crazy and a part of him was kind of scared. Who wouldn't be? He had to stop asking why. The word why kept nagging at him, like a persistent flare in front of his eyes, even when he closed them. His mind kept trying to answer the question but he could not. He tried to refocus. He couldn't let his crew know about these self-doubts. He needed to be a strong leader, one they would follow without question. Otherwise they'd be wondering what is a truth or what is a lie...

During his perfect career, the rainy days made it especially tough. Stormy days made him wonder if he'd ever get through the training, let alone earn the rank of a Captain. His finals were a nightmare and he got very little sleep, but on the good days, he called them 'yellow days' he found strength and resolve. Those days were filled with happiness, laughter and several talented women who managed to feed him the little bit of cake and enthusiasm he required to pull himself up and move forward again like an unstoppable locomotive. Sugar also worked all the time for him. It fed his ego, recharged his cells and boosted his performance. Sugar was like his drug. Sometimes the monotonous routines were vital to moving forward and staying on task. Yep, he had to give credit to boring routines. They helped him climb a step every day towards his goal.

Of course, if he was honest with himself, it certainly helped when the right person was noticing your performance and achievements...and then boom, you're promoted

to captain for your outstanding feats. Others have accomplishments too, but maybe the right person wasn't watching them. Hmm, he reasoned it was about timing, as well. Was he lucky? Or was good timing a credit to the hard work? Or being ready for the right opportunity when it presented itself?

Timing...yes, perfect timing, perfection, Lieutenant, Addie Stuart. She was perfect as his mind drifted her way. He welcomed the distraction. Her timing was perfect. He wished she was here with him now but that probably wouldn't be a good idea; he wouldn't want to get up and shower, much less go to work. He wanted to steal every moment he could with her. He wasn't sure if they were ever coming back from this mission. Would they ever come back safely? One just never knows. They would be out here in space for at least five days and he wanted to make the most of his time in the cold vastness of space...with Addie.

He hated that they had to be extra careful, but it was all to protect the image of the Captain of the ship. He had to show strength of character, commitment to his ship and the entire team, exceptional knowledge, astute decision-making at a moment's notice and those decisions needed to be the right ones. He couldn't afford to be daydreaming. There would be situations over the horizon where his decision could be the difference between life and death. These choices were certainly coming. His stomach tightened. Choices made this job difficult, but he'd always thrived in his job. He had no alternative now. The choice was made for him the moment he accepted the position of Captain and joined the Federation. At the end of the day, it was a career of his choosing...it's always a person's own decision where they end up, if they're lucky. He understood that better than most. Some people don't have a choice.

Addie kept popping into his thoughts like an out of control habit that couldn't be broken. He was hooked too quickly. Why? Most women couldn't get to him like this; he'd enjoyed his free-spirited days, but this one woman seemed to take away his liberty all at once and in one single night. She cast a spell on him. She was the light and he was the entranced moth fluttering to it as quickly as he could. His heart quivered. His body also responded to that light at the most inconvenient of times.

He'd have to think of something else when she was around, otherwise it might prove very awkward. Kitara would be the first one to notice. He thought again of the song he initially wrote for her. He was so glad he never played that song for her because it now belonged forevermore to Addie. She had a smile that drove him wild. He dreamt about her all night long. Were all Satorian women like her or were they different, much like human women where they come in all shapes and sizes and with a wide variety of features? She was a wild card to him and a suppressed tiny part of him loved gambling, though he dared not admit that fact.

His door buzzed. Great. He thought he'd have some peace for a little while longer.

"Enter," he said though he was still tired.



Her body flowed into the room like a rhythmic waterfall. Her purple hair danced around her muscular body as she pulled a clip from the top of her head that held all that gorgeous shimmery hair in place allowing it to finally move with the freedom of escape that turned him on within the span of a single heartbeat. That act by itself was so sexy that he immediately lost it! He smiled and threw back his dull covers showing her exactly where he wanted her. He waited eagerly but impatiently for her nimble presence to come closer so they could partake in a 'particular type of sport'.

She moved toward him like a tigress ready to attack. She carelessly dropped her clothes and pounced like a rabid animal. He could barely keep up. She was on fire! The inferno was blazing out of control. She wore him out after only an hour and a half of powerful uninterrupted intimacy. There had been no foreplay, just action. Raw movement and an agility he'd never experienced before in his lifetime.

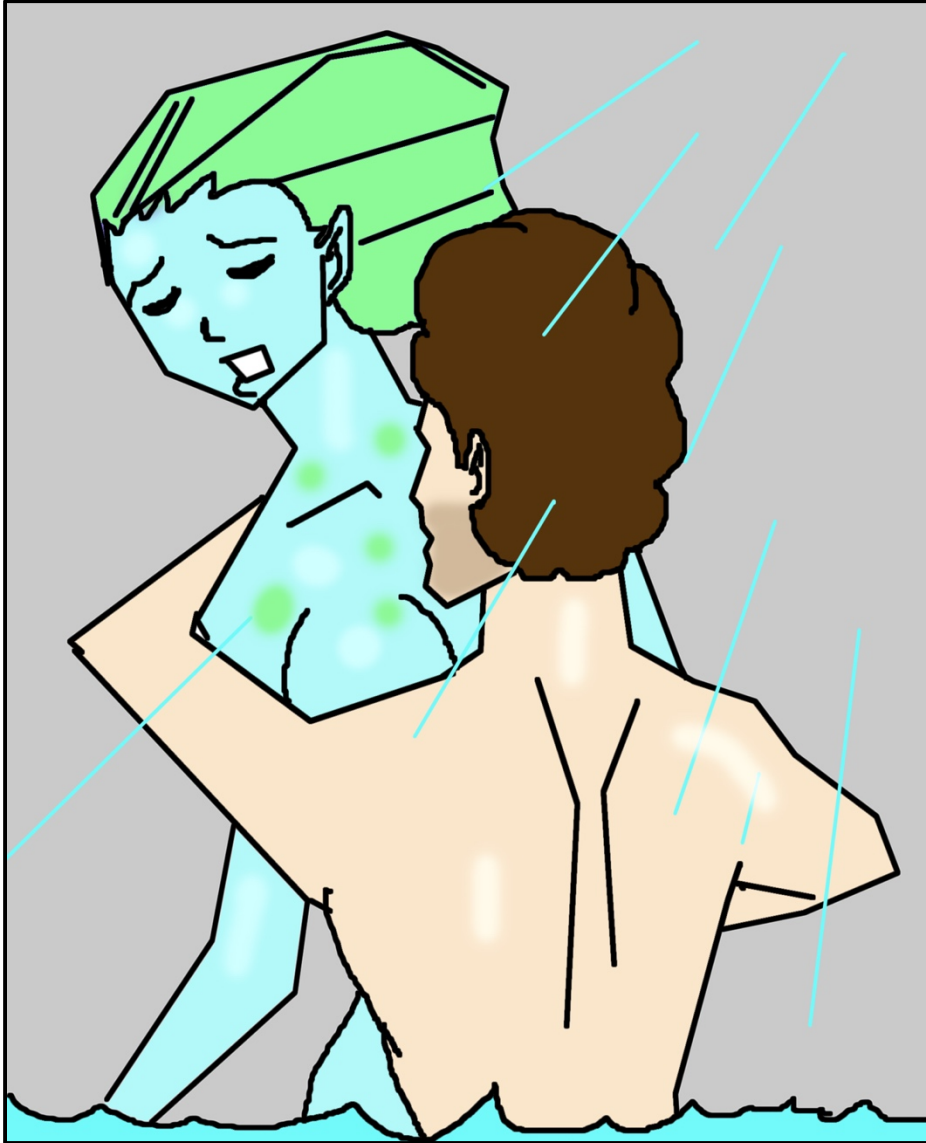
She smelled incredible as she leaned back and smiled at him then said, "Good morning."

"Good morning, beautiful lady. It certainly took you long enough to say a word to me, don't you think?"

"Why waste words when my mouth had other intentions?" She smirked. "I'm hungry Captain. Do you want to get dressed and go to the Diamond Room? I could use a big meal. Last night was exhausting and I just finished my morning workout though it was only a short workout today..."

He looked at her in wonder. If last night was exhausting and she had that much energy this morning...he was in trouble! Wait, did she say this was short workout?? "Sure, I'm hungry, too."

"Let's shower first." She took his arm and led him to the unsuspecting shower. He followed like a lamb going to the slaughter.



She jumped in the warm water and pulled him in after her; the warm water brought out inconceivable and very naughty suggestions from her. Her pupils dilated and her hair changed from purple to a brassy sleek and shiny green that matched the new color of her scales. She moaned with ecstasy as the transformation enlarged her playfully eager nipples. Her hair moved with a life of its own and wrapped around his

arms like wild snakes pulling him into her with a deliberate purpose causing him to react at once in a very barbaric manner. Of course she loved it! He was glad the room was sound proof.

It'd take them another two hours before they were ready to go for breakfast. Her hair was dry and back to her normal purple. He was quite sated. As the adrenaline rush started to wear off, soreness set in.

He looked at her and grinned. "How in the world do you do that to me? You keep me going with a vitality that I didn't even know I had. It's truly unbelievable."

She pulled on her tight blue jeans. She was officially off duty today. “You’ve always had it, Sarantos, but just never knew how to kindle that fire and tap into that raw energy. I spark it. I light it for you. It’s that simple, darling. I know how to push your buttons sexy, and I know exactly where they are.”

He couldn’t believe what he was about to say next. “I think I’m falling in love with you, Addie.”

Her toothy grin lit up the room. “I know, Captain. You turn me on and I think I’m falling hard for you too but let’s see how it goes. Sometimes there’s peace and love and tranquility but you never know what can happen and if things can change. There are good days, better days and bad days. Sometimes we breeze right through. Today is perfect and we’re breezing right through, or so it seems. Time will tell. I’m off the rest of the day, maybe I’ll come back later and make you dinner. Would you like that? Or have you had enough of me for one day?”

“I’d like that. I’d like that very much Addie. Unfortunately, I’m going to pass out now though if I don’t get some food in me in the next few minutes.”

“Ditto.”

They walked out of his quarters and headed straight to the Diamond Room.

Breakfast went smoothly and they had no interruptions. It was late morning so the room was quite empty. Eventually, Matt Blume joined them for a coffee chat.

He was a very animated character with dark brown eyes that bordered on black. His pupils were hidden somewhere in the darkness. He’d been born on a world called

Morla where the land was rich in dark soil and was one of the largest producers of unusual vegetables in the entire universe. The Morlaians were a peaceful and outgoing but quite animated race. Their eyes were large and dark with very long eyelashes that looked like they used mascara. They had humanoid characteristics except for their lack of eyebrows. In fact, they were a relatively hairless race which made them a perfect choice for cooking.

He seemed quite taken with Addie. His dark eyes looked her over with what appeared to be very lustful intentions, but it could just be the over exuberance of the Morlaians.

“So, tell me, dearest Addie do you have any love interest at the moment?”

Bingo.

She looked up from stirring her coffee and smiled. “Well, dearest Matt, I believe I might be following the scent of a certain male from the human species. I’m not sure



if he’s worth my time yet. Anyhow, if he doesn’t work out, I’ll surely give you heads up.” Her chuckle sounded like music as she looked at him with sultry eyes that would make any man melt at her feet and perpetually grovel on their knees for her attention.

“Well, I hope it doesn’t work out, because I’m quite the charmer and great at all the male things,” he winked, “if you know what I mean?”

“Oh, I think I do and right now, I’m quite impressed.”

What was she doing? He was ready to pounce on Matt and tell him to leave his woman alone. What was she thinking? Flirting with him was not cool! He felt his face flush, eyes turn green and his hands become sweaty and fidgety. He was so angry.

“Captain, what’s wrong?” Her voice was drawn out and mischievous.

She knew damn well what was wrong with him, she was a tease. He squirmed under her gaze and sipped on his coffee for distraction. He didn’t know what to say.

“Captain, you’re wanted on the deck.”

It was Kitara, it annoyed him but the interruption was timed perfectly. “Yes...out.”

He stood up and said, “Are you coming, Lieutenant?”

Matt said, “Oh, don’t go yet, Lieutenant. I see by the way you’re dressed that you’re off duty right now. Please stay and chat a little longer with me. I’ll talk about anything your heart desires.”

Now, he was super annoyed but he liked Matt. He had to admit that he was young and handsome and could be a serious threat to his newly founded relationship with Addie.

They both waited for her response like a couple of antsy school boys.

“Sure, I’ve got nothing else to do today and could use the company but I can’t stay long. I’m exhausted from a busy morning and I’ve got a dinner date to plan.”

She stood up and saluted him zestfully while also giving him a cute little wink. “Good day, Captain.”

He wanted to grab her and kiss her, but instead, tried to calm his temper and tame his urges. He nodded awkwardly towards her and then quickly moved out of the room and to the elevator.

He was uncomfortable as hell and hoped no one would jump on the elevator with him at the last minute. It could prove awkward. He hoped he was less obvious by the time he reached the deck. What was he thinking? He needed this job. He also wanted to be a great Captain but this woman made him crazy. He needed a distraction, a mild diversion of some kind. He tried to think of his days at the academy but she just kept showing up in his mind. She was everywhere inside his head, like one of those songs you hear and sing and then can’t get rid of it. She was stuck in his head. Why?

The door opened and he stepped out onto the deck of his ship, The Chicago, the only other woman in his life. It was time to think about her now. Forget Addie.

Kitara stood up. “Captain on deck.”

They all proceeded to give him the recognition and salute that his rank demanded. He’d gotten to the top and it felt good. Any one of them could be here in his shoes if they worked hard and found the right inspiration. He felt good and took his rightful place at the helm of the ship. It was a timely distraction for him.

“What do we have?”

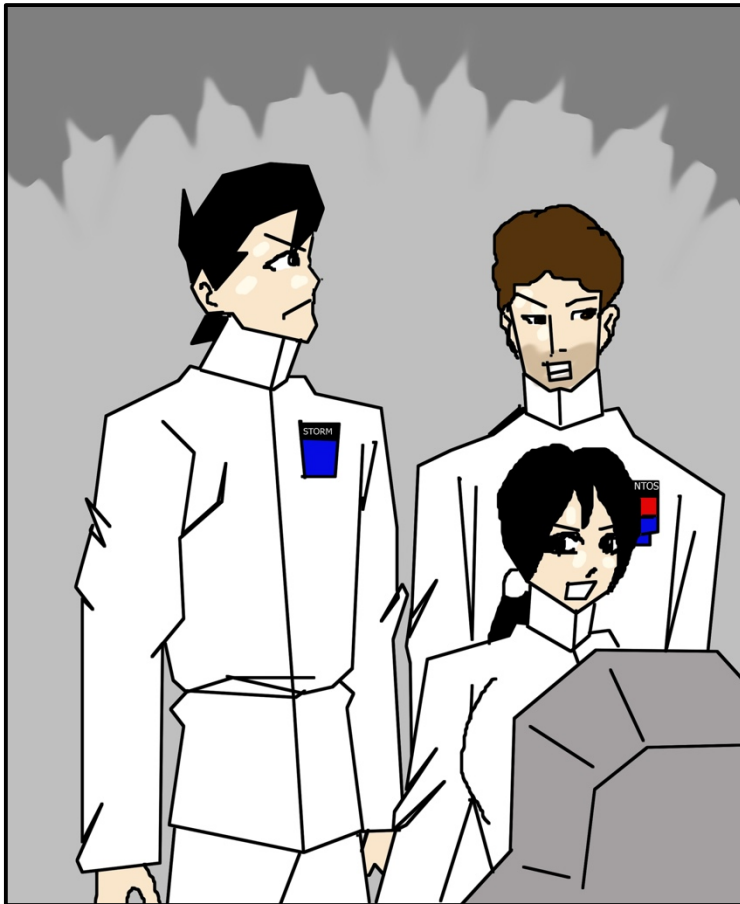
Kitara sat down after him and said, “Captain, our long-range sensors have detected a small vessel approaching from the direction of the nebula “Borton.”

“Do you recognize the mark?”

“No, it’s one we’ve never seen before.”

“Okay, how soon before they are within weapons range?”

“One hour sir.”



“Chief Storm, see if you and Ensign Born can do some quick research on their mark and come up with some possible identity that matches.” He grinned to himself. “Kitara, notify Lieutenant Stuart that she’ll need to get back in uniform and go to engineering and check with Lieutenant Baker about our security system and get weapons ready, just in case. She’ll also need to notify her crew, in case we’re boarded. We need to be prepared, people.” He smiled uncontrollably on the inside.

“Yes, Captain,” Kitara said.

“I don’t want us caught with our pants down. This is our first war mission and we need to make sure we’re ready for anything. It might be a friendly but we can’t take any chances. Sargent Morla, please visit Major Cleary in sick bay immediately and have her notify her staff of the situation. Tell them to be ready for anything. As soon as we find out who our target is, I want to be notified immediately. I’ll be in my ready room.”

He left as he heard intense activity taking place behind him. He smiled. It felt good to be in charge. He was good at it.

The door closed and he could no longer hear the noise of the helm. He was quite proud of himself, getting Addie out of the clutches of that Matt Blume. His smile changed gradually though, as he thought about the consequences of the approaching ship. The possibilities were endless. This could be a test for him as a Captain but also for the ship too. He paced around the room. His mind was racing.

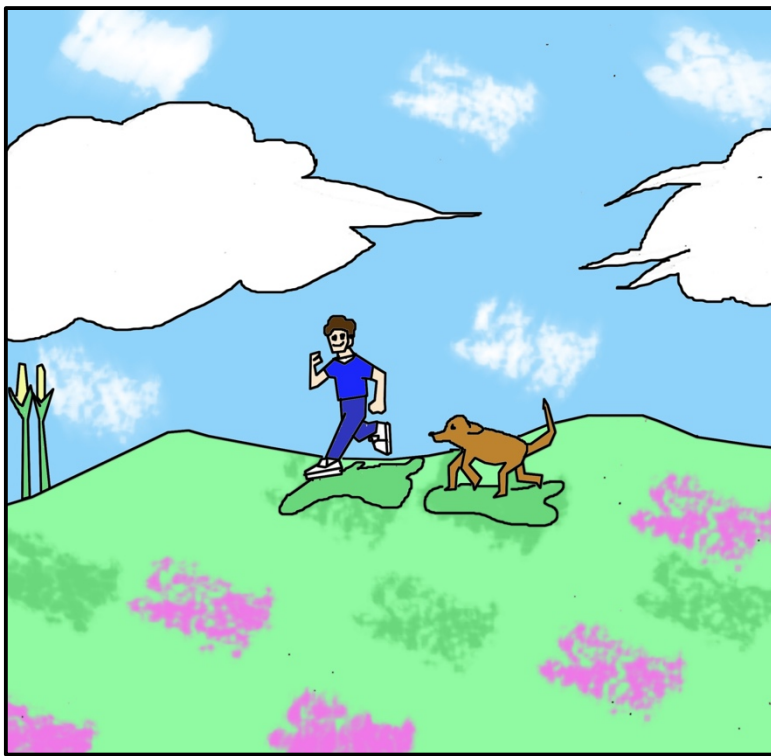
“Well, old girl we’ll soon see if we’re up to the charge.” He sat down in his chair and tried to plan out all contingencies and case scenarios, starting with the worst possible ones he could think of and that his training and imagination would allow, before moving on to less violent and hopefully friendlier outcomes.

He needed coffee, strong coffee. “Okurian coffee, strong, black.” He watched as the cup appeared in the replicator and the steam from the coffee floated in the air. The smell instantly made him feel like he was home. There was a reason he chose coffee from his homeland. For him, it was invariably comfort food.

He couldn’t help but relax as he raised the cup to his lips. The aroma touched his heart. His mother used to brew it every morning. Their farm didn’t have modern technology. She preferred a much simpler life and at times like this, he missed that

simplicity more than anything in the world. He was glad she consistently stayed simple. The memories of her were always comforting and they carried more candor and fondness than this modern world.

He allowed his mind to drift back there to find serenity. It was almost like meditation for him. In that calmness, he sometimes found answers to the perplexing world he now found himself in...



'Fields and fields of crops lay before him as he wandered the hillsides with his dog, Toddy. The fresh air lifted his spirits as the smell of various grasses, flowers, trees and herbs wafted through his nostrils. He rolled down the hills straight into the lavender plants with Toddy biting at his feet and barking while playing joyfully. The clouds were always low in the sky beckoning him to reach out and grab them and freely use them as pillows at the end of a long tiring summer day.'

He loved picking the lavender to carry home to his mother where she would place them in a glass vase with raised edges. The vase was quite old and had belonged to her own mother. Its color was unique and was what his mother called carnival glass. The iridescence of the glass threw images of dancing lights around the room when the sun crept through the window in late afternoon. His young heart believed it to be exploding with magical powers; magical powers that helped him make it into the academy, finish with honors and then become Captain of the starship Chicago.'

“Captain.”

It was Addie. His whole body jumped clumsily, not from the interruption but from the sound of her voice. “Yes.”

“I’m done in engineering. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to come back to the deck and go over some objectives with you as well as look at the markings on that ship.”

“Yes, Lieutenant, that’s a good plan. Out.”

He sipped his coffee and tried like hell to focus on him as her Captain, not as a man who wanted her every time he saw her or heard her voice. At some point, he had to get control of himself. He couldn’t help but wonder if her race was that addicting after you were intimate with them? Anything was possible but she was alluring even before their intimacy, that’s for damn sure.

He sat down in his chair, again took a whiff of the strong odor of his drink letting it fill him with strength. The world was in his hands and she was a soldier, he her Captain.

The sound of the door rang.

“Enter.”

She came in with that aggressive movement that he found appealing. She never pulled any punches. She was up front, in your face and sure of herself. It was admirable.

“Captain. Reporting, sir.”

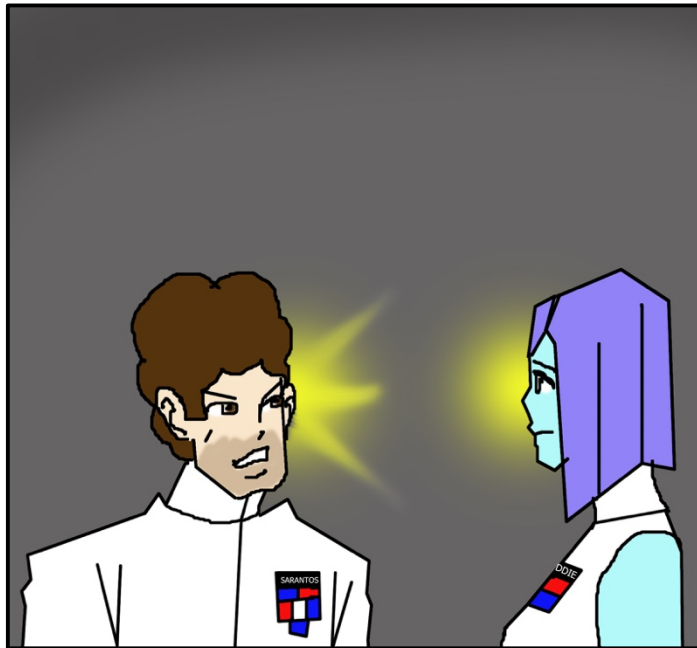
“At ease, Lieutenant.”

“I checked out the marks on that starship, sir. They are unrecognizable to me, as well. The team is still working hard to identify them.”

“Well, I suppose we’ll know shortly who they are and exactly what they want. With any luck, they are just a passing starship from a smaller galaxy. We’re not yet in Federation space, so they do have every right to be out there.”

“Yes, sir, they do.”

“How did you find engineering?”



“Well, sir, I have to say, we do have the latest in fighting technology onboard this ship. There was a newer quantum laser that had only been used during staged rehearsals, but it’s also here and part of our ship’s active weapons. I was quite impressed. It’s deadly. Disintegration to be exact.”

“Oh, yes. Admiral Bane filled me in a little. I’d gone back to my quarters and read up on it. Devastating outcome and only to be used in a worst-case scenario when all other options fail.”

“Yes, they call it the slayer.”

“And a justifiable word for it.”

“Sir, I’m going to follow up on the battle-ready plans. If you need me IC me.”

With that she walked out of the room. He was glad she kept it strictly business this time. She was most definitely a professional. Thank goodness. He needed to concentrate.

“Time till unidentified ship arrivals?”

“One half hour.”

“Thanks. Out.”

“Captain?”

“Yes, Major Cleary?”

“We’re ready in sick bay, if needed. Would you like me up on deck, sir?”

“That’d probably be a good idea, in case something happens and we need your services.”

“I know you’re obsessive and love telling me what to do, but no need to worry about me this time. I’ll bring a supply kit and have my finest crew on stand-by, but,” she chuckled and said, “you might want to also bring Chief Martin on deck. He’s very knowledgeable with languages and culture.”

“Will do and good call, my friend. Out.”

He smiled and raised the com back up before saying, “Kitara, get Chief Martin on deck, now. Out.”

“Yes, sir. Out.”

He had a good crew on board and that’s all he could ever really hope for in challenging times like this.

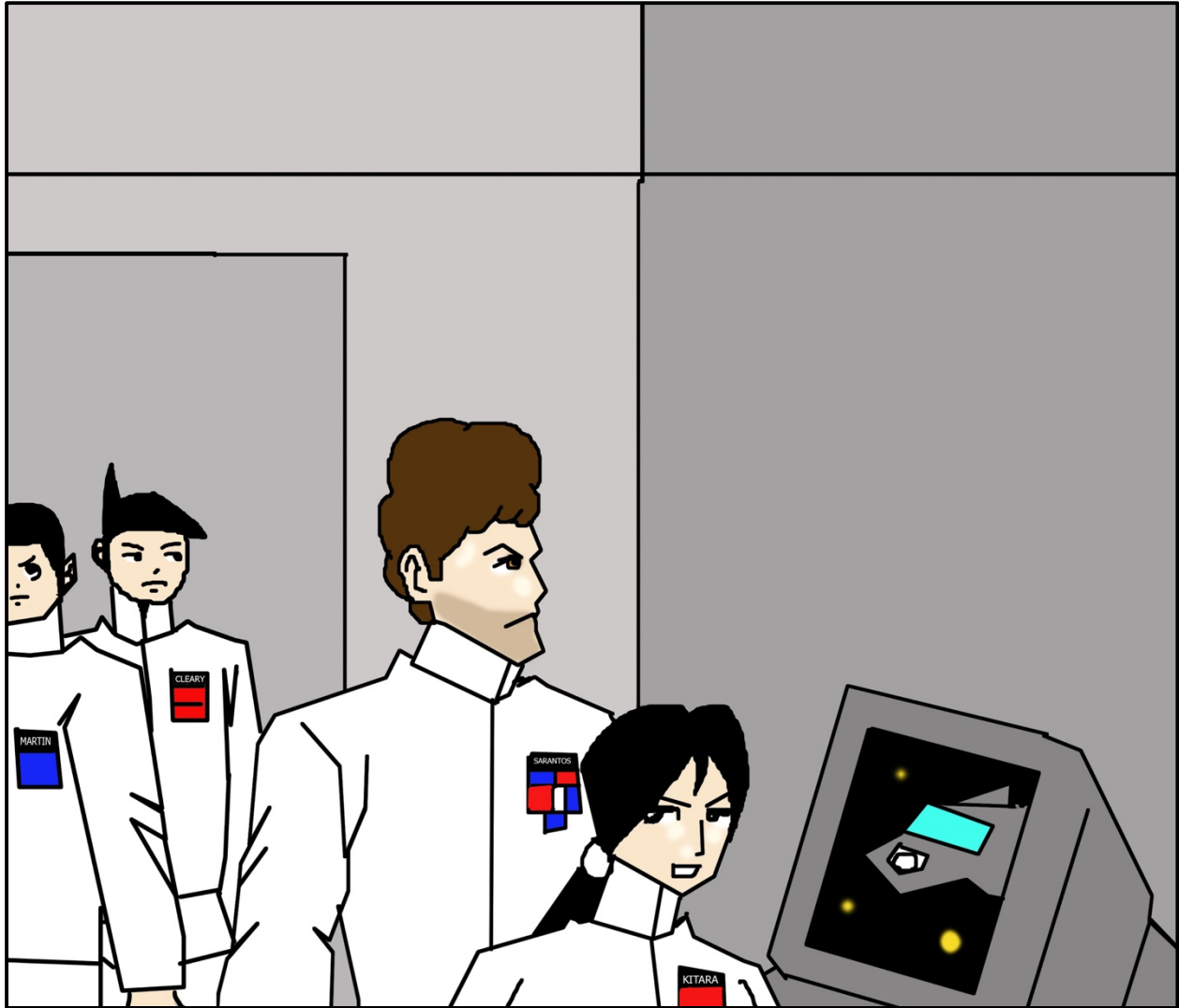
He stood up and straightened his jacket and suddenly wondered why Kitara hadn’t thought of Martin? It’s her job to know who is valuable in any situation, after all she was his number one.

He walked out of the quiet of the room and onto the deck of his ship.

The noise penetrated his thoughts and he was glad he’d taken a moment to recoup.

“Captain on deck.”

“On screen.” He sat at the helm.



The ship was larger now as it moved in closer and closer. “It looks to me like we have a visitor and they do intend to initiate contact.”

Kitara sat next to him. “Yes, sir they do.”

The door of the elevator swished open and Major Cleary and Chief Martin now joined the crew on deck. Major Cleary took her seat on the opposite side of the Captain and Chief Martin proceeded to slowly approach the screen, after first acknowledging the Captain.

“That’s a fine-looking ship, Captain, but I’m sorry I’ve never seen those marks before but I can tell you it’s not a passenger ship. It’s manned for combat.”

“Engineering?”

“Aye, Captain?”

“Ready weapons and put up shields.”

“Aye.”

The main door swished again and Addie took her place behind the Captain manning security checks and breaches.

He could feel the anxiousness of the crew as the ship drew closer.

“Open a link.”

“Aye, Captain. Link opened.”

“This is Captain Sarantos of the Starship Chicago, from the Federation of Antora. Identify yourself.”

Silence.

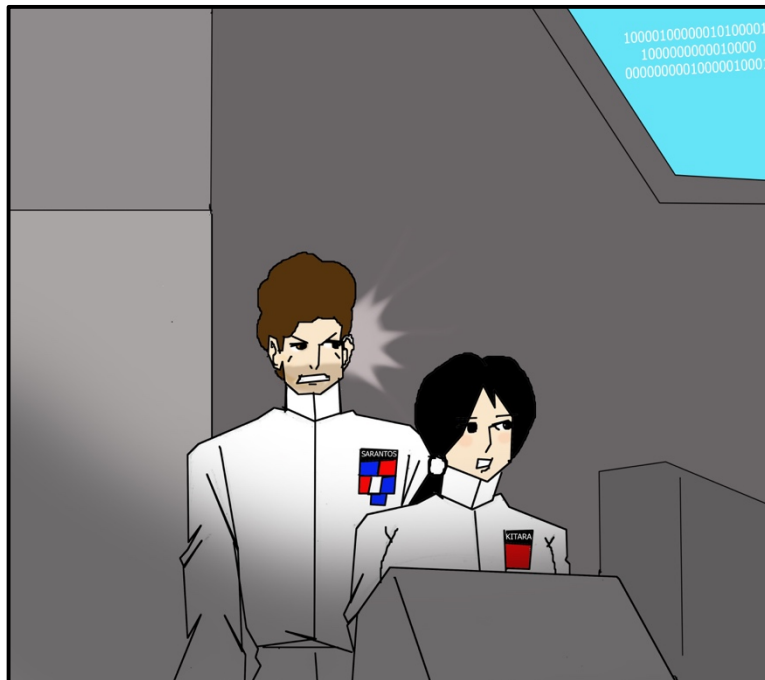
“I repeat, this is Captain Sarantos of the Starship Chicago belonging to the Federation of Antora. Identify yourself. We do not want to engage, but we will if necessary.”

Silence.

“I want to know what type of weapons are on that ship?”

“Captain, they have rudimentary weapons, but there is something else that I can’t identify. I’m not sure if it’s a weapon, or something else. They are no competition for us in combat.”

“Identify yourself.”



The screen started to open, then faded out again. Crackling sounds went in and out and annoyed him. “Clear up that IC and get that screen clean. I want to see who or what we’re dealing with!”

“Sir we’re having some trouble locking in.”

“Well, fix it officer Petty and fix it now.”

“Yes, sir. It appears there’s something on board that’s interfering with our transmission.”

“Kitara, what could cause that?”

She stood and went to the console where Petty was desperately trying to clear a path of contact. “It could be several things, sir.”

“It could be them, not us?”

“Yes, sir and it appears it is. Petty has everything set up correctly and is ready. It would seem we’re awaiting them sir.”

“Wonderful. I don’t like it. It feels wrong.”

“Sir, we still can’t identify the marks.”

“That’s what worries me.”

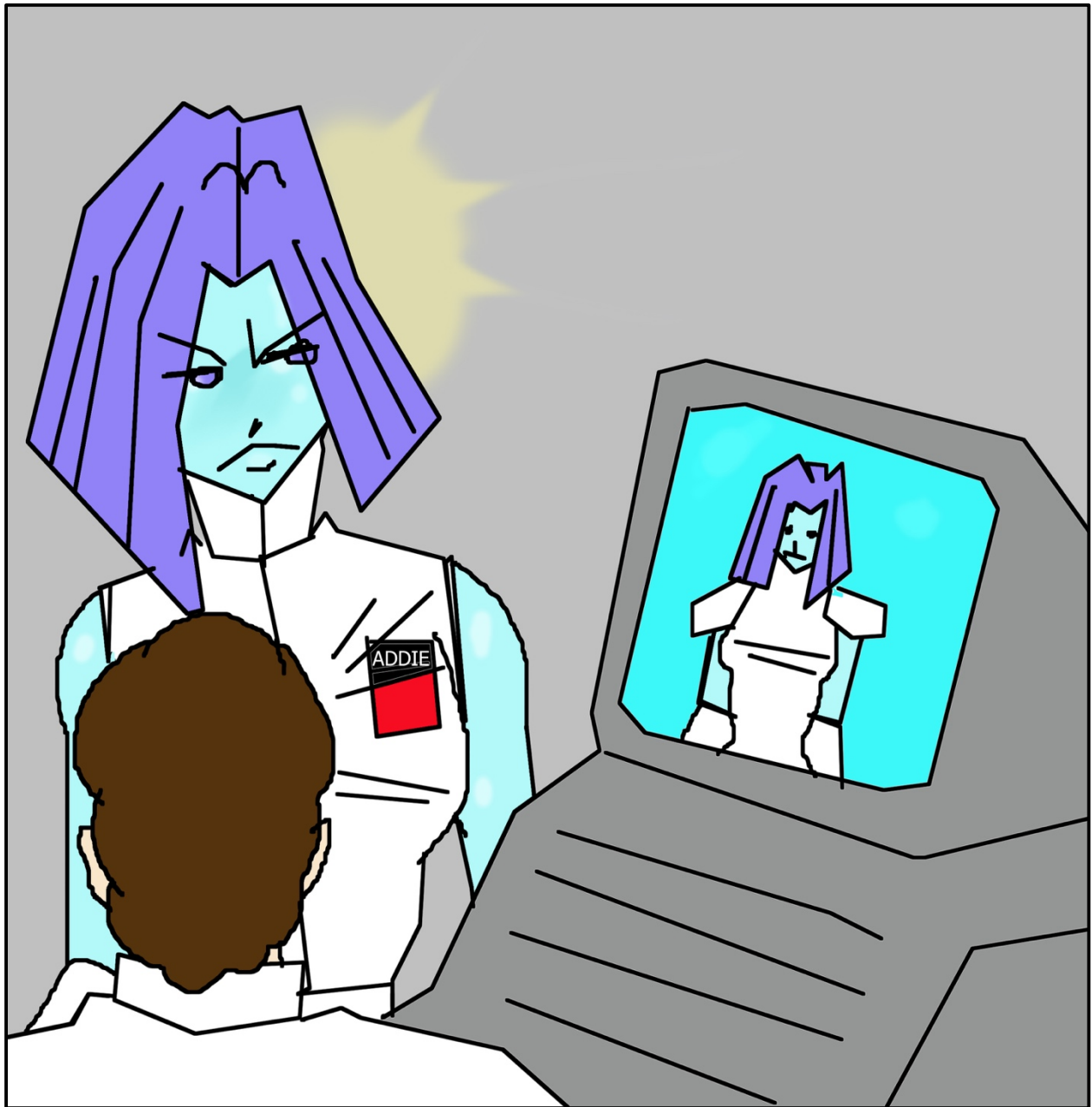
The crackling intensified as Petty worked to clear the noise. The static was abrasive.

“This is Captain Sarantos. There’s something on your end interfering with our communication. Please address this issue and clear it up or we’ll be forced into taking a precautionary action.”

A voice cut through the crackling sounds. “Captain, we’re doing our best to clear it up on our end. We apologize for the delay. This is Captain A.” The name broke up, but it was female and for some odd reason, sounded vaguely familiar to him.

“Did anyone recognize that voice? It seemed familiar.”

No one responded.



The screen started to clear and a beautiful woman stood on the helm of their ship. She had long purple hair and he gasped as recognition set in.

He immediately turned to Addie. She didn't look surprised. She looked angry!

Fear rushed through his head and forcefully landed in his stomach, as the whole crew gasped in horror and shock.