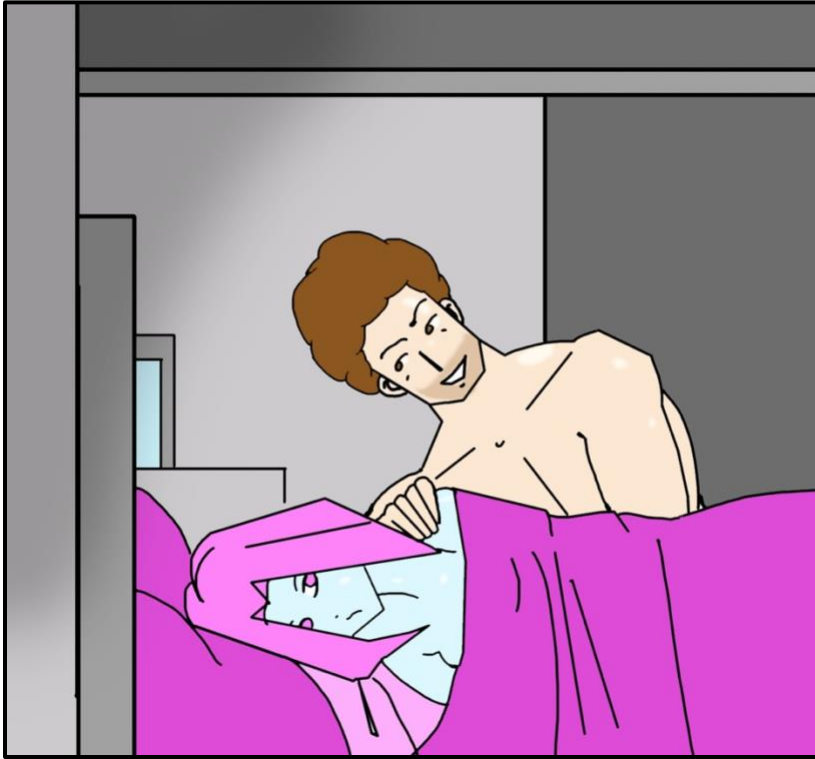


## Chapter 5

### “10,000 Seconds”



“Captain Sarantos.”

The voice was soft but urgent. It awakened him from a deep and restful slumber, one of the few he’d managed over the past weeks.

“Great,” he said, his voice reaching to no one in particular. He searched for his comm and found it embedded in the darkness on the stand next to his

warm bed.

Addie stirred next to him as he gently brushed against her arm. She had slept in her red dress.

He didn’t bother to mask his aggravation when he hit the comm. “What is it? I sense I just fell asleep. This better be good.”

“Captain?”

“Yes. Who you think it is? Someone called me. What’s going on? Who’s this?”

“Captain, this is Chief Mark Beady, Sir. I reported for duty when Born retired after his shift. I’m sorry if there’s some confusion, but I’m not aware of anyone on the Helm contacting you.”

“Oh, sure, thanks Beady. I’ll check with Engineering. Out.”

He clicked off before Beady could acknowledge. Reflexively, he touched Addie’s hair as she turned towards him exposing some very pleasant parts of her anatomy. His mind was temporarily distracted.

“What’s going on babe?” She whispered, her voice soft and seductive.

“I’m not sure, but someone reached out to me. I’m trying Engineering.” He kissed her lips and wanted to linger but duty called so he continued the call. “Hello? This is the Captain.”

“Yes, Captain, how can I help you?” She sounded confused.

“Did anyone try to contact me a moment ago?”

“No, sorry, Captain. There’s just two of us down here. Everything is fine. No one called you from this station.”

“Right. Thanks. Out.”

Addie sat up in bed. A look of concern ran across her lovely face. “Sarantos, are you sure everything’s okay?”

She reached her delicate but strong hand up to touch his shoulder as he shot upright in bed.

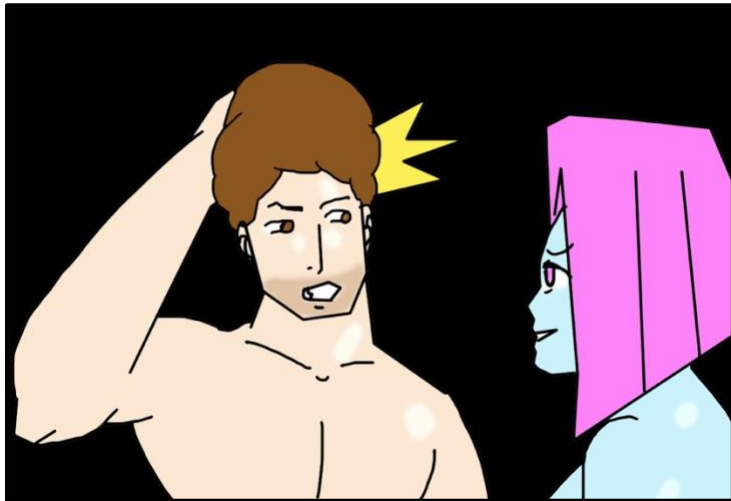
“Sure, I’ll try Sick Bay.” He touched her smooth leg while dialing. “Hello, this is the Captain. Did someone try to contact me from there?”

There was a brief silence before an answer. Sarantos got antsy. “Sorry, Captain, I’m here. This is Private O’Malley. What can I do for you?”

“Did someone try to contact me? Is everything okay there?”

“Yes, Captain, all good here. No one tried to contact you. The Doc isn’t in and I doubt she’d contact you unless it was an emergency.”

“Sure. Thanks, Private. Out.”



Rubbing his head, next his after-five shadow, he looked devilishly at Addie who was still sitting up but now staring at him with a twisted mouth and squinted eyes.

“Oh, Addie, I hate it when you look at me like that, when you’re looking at me with those dirty intentions. I’m getting self-conscious but, no, I’m not imagining the voice. Someone called my name. It was loud enough to wake me up because I was sleeping warmly like a newborn baby.”

Her grin was now making his imagination run wild. Addie's mischievous little playful look that generally preceded some heavy sexual encounters stared back at him. It was always a welcome diversion.

He gazed into her sultry violet eyes but couldn't swallow what came out of his mouth next. "I'm not in the mood right now so please don't give me that look."

He must've lost his mind. That voice did something more than speak his name! If he wasn't in the mood, it must've damaged his brain. This has never happened before, especially with Addie. Did he just say no??

Her head tilted and her eyebrows lifted and for a second, he thought he saw the great Lieutenant Addie Stuart falter. Could he be wrong? If he really saw it, the look was fleeting because she recovered within inches of exposure.

"Sarantos, my darling. Clearly you misread my expression. I was not in the mood but just thought you needed the release. If you lingered on my eyes a little longer instead of listening to your own hormonally over-stimulated urges, you would've noticed that I wanted you to come to bed to relax. I for one need my beauty rest. If you continue with this madness, I'll promptly need to go back to my own quarters."

Okay, he didn't expect that. She played the game to change the game. With Addie it would never be a stalemate. She could only survive on a checkmate. He, on the other hand was either growing, dying, winning, or just freaking out while trying to win. Addie always won.

"Oh, Addie. I think I've unmasked your budding humanity, and your unconscious behavior has led me to appear ungrateful. Shouldn't we stop before you grow more frustrated with me?"

Was he being cute or annoying? Great, now he did it. His sarcasm was perfectly timed or perfectly amiss. She leaped out of the bed, and before he could stop her, she pulled on her clothes and marched to the door. If the swoosh of the door sounded louder than normal, it was only his imagination because it only made the same singular soft sound it always did.

His head ached. He always wanted Addie. Why did he say no? The door whooshed open again and Sergeant Block stepped into the room.

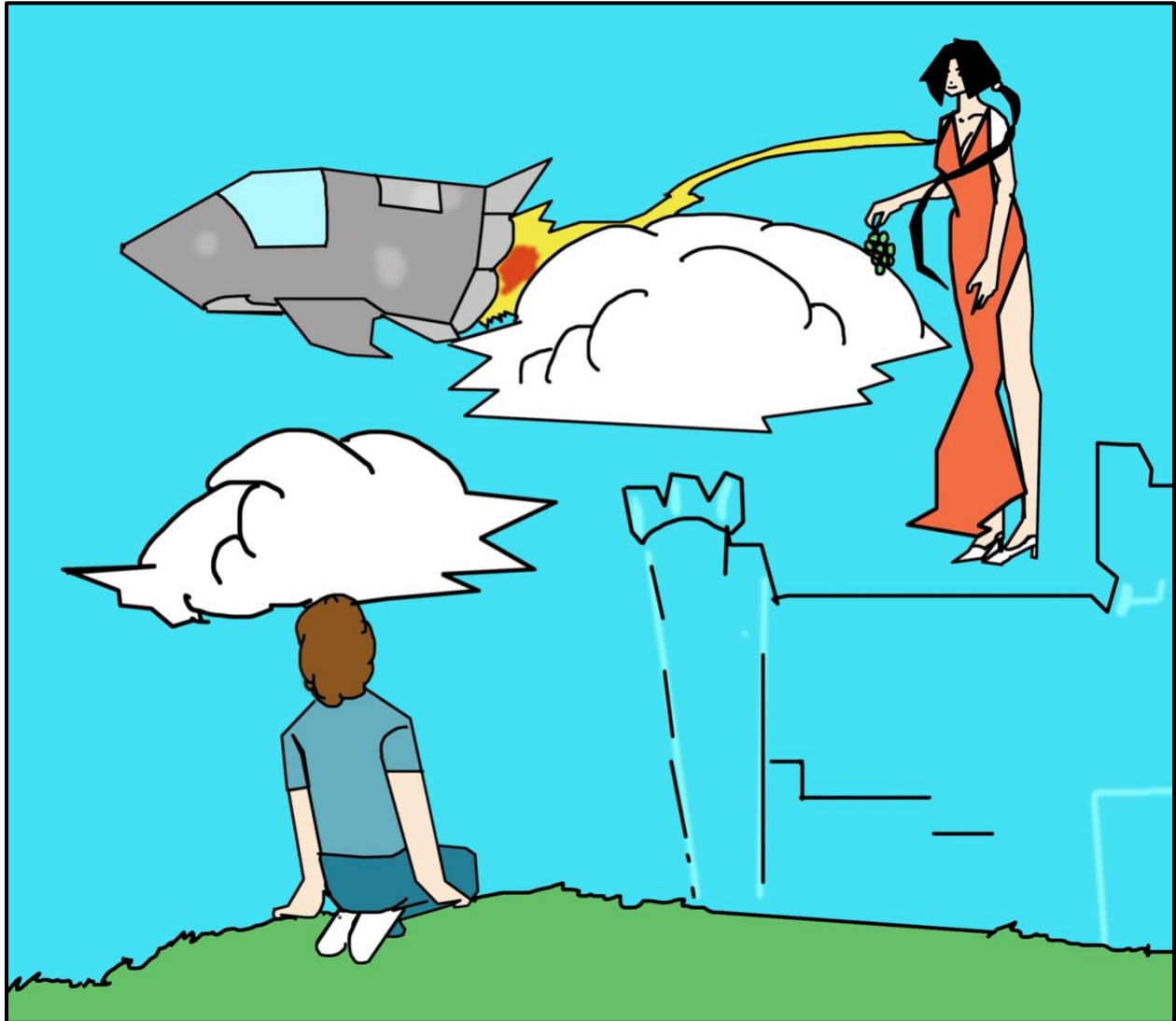
“Captain.”

“Sergeant Block.”

Another word wasn't spoken. Sarantos headed back to bed. Block started his shift watching over his Captain.

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He opened his eyes. It was morning, but it wasn't morning. There was no light, not even a flicker from the tiniest star. He was growing disheartened just lying there looking out into the void. The window seemed lifeless this morning.



When he was a child, he would lie for hours, just dreaming the day away, imagining the clouds held his home. There came to pass starships, castles, dragons, aliens, and yes, sometimes he'd even imagine beautiful ladies dancing on the soft cushions of white bringing him food and gifts while scantily dressed. The women breathed only to feed him and supply him with whatever gift he craved in the clouds. He adored the way they looked but wasn't moved sexually. No, it was much simpler back then with only his hungry stomach and inquisitive nature to fuel him; being an adult always complicates things.

Sarantos crunched his eyes together and focused on the unresponsive window scanning for anything that might move in the blackness. He made a promise to

himself that he'd spend a few minutes every morning just gazing out into oblivion. He hoped to find whatever called him, or what kept hitting the ship causing the entire crew to be nutty. All he saw out the window though was a black void.

He rolled to his side and rested his head on his arm. He sighed.

Enjoying 10,000 seconds a day with Addie was nearly impossible because they both remained very busy, although there was nothing going on right now. Even with only 10,000 seconds, he could have fun with that. If he knew it guaranteed him that much time with her every day, they could easily make it work, unless he said something stupid again making it 10,000 seconds of pain with a touch of heartache. What were the odds of him keeping his mouth shut? Not good unfortunately.

They'd been out of contact with their base for the last 24 hours. He did not understand why they were flirting with the shadows of space. What might escape out of the shadows to come get them? It was getting exhausting to wake up and fight. It hurt not understanding what he was supposed to be looking for or do. The situation felt helpless.

Sarantos rolled over and sat up. Nothing moved but if he stared long enough, he'd start seeing something. As he got dressed, he inhaled deeply while saying a little prayer. As Captain of the ship the only way to overcome the present situation was to keep breathing, moving, and praying right up to the finish line—whatever that finish line might be, or wherever it might lead.

“Sarantos.”

His head jerked towards the void. Nothing there. He quickly scanned his room. No one there.

“Block,” he called out. Sarantos didn’t see if the Seargent was still in his room but hoped he had stayed. Time moved slowly.

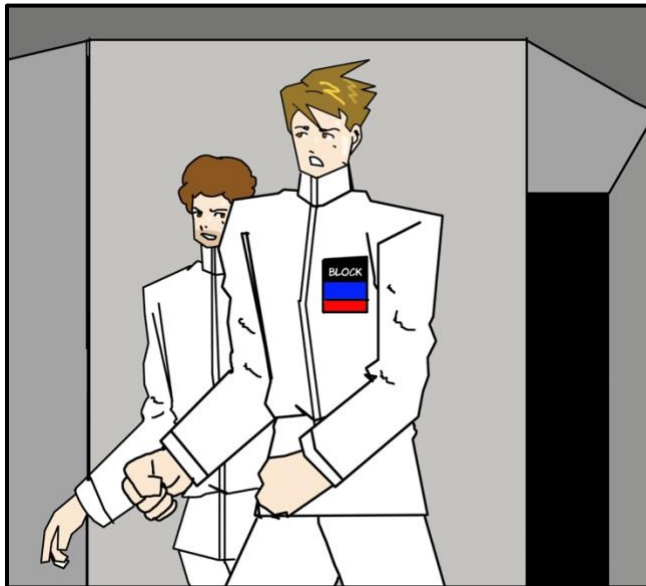
Block appeared at the door a few seconds later. “Captain?”

“I heard my name called, again. Did you hear it?”

Eyebrows furrowed, Block shook his head. “No, I heard nothing.” He scanned the room quickly, and then again with more attention, even checking behind the door to make sure no one hid there. He turned back to Sarantos with a small pout. “There’s no one here.”

“Great. I’m going crazy.”

“No, Captain, perhaps you simply need some breakfast. After that, let’s have the doc check you out.”



“You’re right. Let’s go get some breakfast, Block.”

As they made their way to the Diamond Room, the deathly silence of the corridors seemed to breathe down their spines.

“This quiet gets my nerves agitated, Block.”

“Mine too, sir.”



Sarantos said, “Block, I used to conclude you had to earn your tragedies and endure each agony in the pit of your soul, but I don’t accept that I deserve this tragedy. No Sergeant, none of us do!”

“Captain, it’s like fighting for our freedom without a gun.”

“Well said, Block. Well said.”

The door to the room that would relieve their hunger gently opened. They walked in. The dining hall was more crowded than it had been the night before.

Sarantos grinned as he leaned towards Block. “People.”

It was one of the few times he’d ever seen Block smile. “Yes, Captain, real people.”

Sarantos hit his IC. “Petty, you there?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“I’ll be there a little later, just now having breakfast and going to visit the doc afterwards. Out.”

He cut Petty off before he could ask why.

“Captain, you were too quick. We are good here, but there was more knocking early this morning. Chief Storm thought she saw something at the window. We’ve recorded all the incidents. Just a heads-up, sir. I’ll contact you if something crucial happens. No word from headquarters, Sir. Out.”

Petty was the best. Sarantos needed to gather himself and not push everyone away so impulsively. Just because their predicament frustrated him, it wasn't fair to act childish. After all, he was the Captain.

Two guards stood firmly posted at the dining hall door. A few feet from them, Matt spoke to Donny Frame. Donny looked over and waved, then proceeded in their direction.

“Captain, good to see you again. I'm just leaving my shift and thought I'd stop and say hello. I'm also recording what I see and hear. This place is unnerving. Well, I'll leave you two alone. Later.”

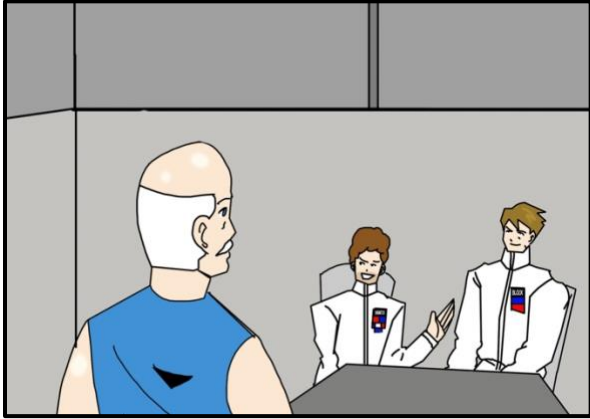
With that he turned and exited the room.

Sarantos couldn't help but grin. Donny was a no-nonsense man. He got straight to the point and wasn't much for small talk most of the time.

Sarantos picked his usual table. Matt hurried toward them with a plate full of eggs, toast, and OKurian sausage, which was vegetarian but tasty. He placed it on the table in front of Sarantos. “I thought you could use your customary breakfast this morning, Captain. If you give me a moment, I'll bring coffee.”

“Looks busy today, Matt. Thanks. I need a good breakfast today. Coffee's always a good idea, buddy.”

Matt nodded and left. He grabbed a pot and two cups but Walt intercepted him. They exchanged a few words, then Walt took charge of the pot and cups leaving Matt to deal with the rest of the crowd. Walt hurried to the Captain's table.



“Captain, a real pleasure,” said Walt. Walt kept his blond hair longer than regulations allowed and even in the cool temperature of the cafeteria always seemed to be sweaty.

“Walt, how are you doing today? You recognize Sergeant Block, I assume.” Sarantos continued eating.

“Yes, I do. How are you Sergeant? I fixed the water in your shower while you were gone from your room working.”

“Wow, thanks, Walt. I’m grateful. I’m hoping to get a break and shower later today. Glad it’s fixed.” Block started eating too.

“No worries, you both want coffee?”

“I do,” said the Captain.

“Pour it out, Walt,” said Block.

Walt nodded and filled the cups leaving the steam screaming off the top. “Well, I suppose I need to get back out there and help Matt. You need anything else while I’m here?”

“Nope, we’re good,” said Sarantos.

Walt saluted, then hastened to a table with several 97F8's eagerly waiting for breakfast. The robots were like humans. They even had specific likes and dislikes for foods, thanks to their artificial taste buds. One of them nodded at Sarantos — it looked to be a female. The females were attractive, and the men matched them with their handsomeness. They even had real hair.

Sarantos nodded back and thought to a time before he met Addie, he might have wondered what it would be like to have...

“Captain?” said Block interrupting his thoughts, which was probably for the best.

“Yes?”

I asked if you wanted me to pour you more coffee?”

Thank goodness Walt had left them a pot.

“Yes, thanks,” Sarantos said, although he was quite capable of pouring his own coffee.

He watched Block spill out the black gold and allowed his thoughts to fall like the dark liquid into the cup, free but contained.

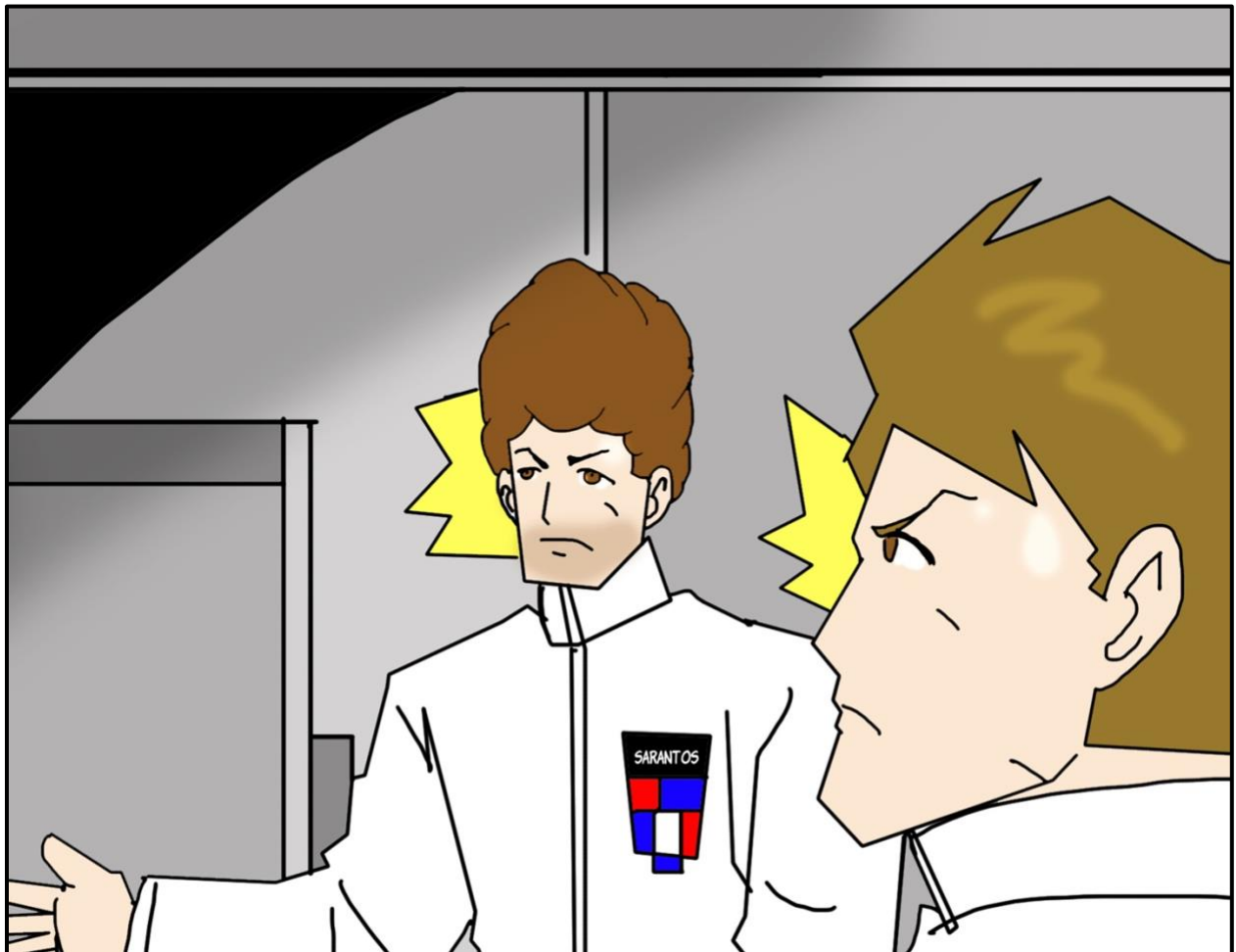
Sarantos mind wandered. Being stuck in limbo for 10,000 seconds in a day was tough. What would it be like to have sex with a 97F8? His mind was all over the place. Yes, here he was stuck in limbo on his own starship as the Captain. Sarantos had the best there was in Addie. He needed to focus on this mission and get control over his zombie-like attitude.

“Sarantos?”

He almost dropped his coffee cup as he regained his composure. “Did you say something, Block?”

“No, why? Did you hear the voice again?”

“Yes,” said Sarantos panicking.



Block jumped up and surveyed the room, focusing hard at the area immediately surrounding his Captain's body, examining the air around Sarantos looking for

something that might not be visible, possibly something he could find only by touching it.

Why was this happening? The voice he heard was pulling on his ear, almost like a bird soaring in the sky urging him to join a great adventure.

“Block, do you suppose this voice brought us here, to this place we have yet to discover?”

Block blinked his stoic brown eyes as he considered the question. “Captain, I couldn’t honestly begin to assume any reason why we are here floating around in complete darkness with no guide taking us to a destination. I just do what I’m told and hope for the best. Do I have thoughts? Yes, but I keep them to myself. Do I question this action that brought us here into this world? Yes, but that’s as much as I will admit out loud.”

“Well, Block, I understand. Only one thing on your mind, work, fight, and survive. That’s all we can hope to do in this stressful situation. Hell, that’s all we can hope to do every day of our monotonous lives.”

Block nodded politely. “If you don’t mind me asking sir, what happened to the Lieutenant? She left in a hurry this morning blurting out take care of the Captain. Usually, she says, take care of the Captain or it’ll be your head!”

Sarantos couldn’t help but smile. “I guess you may allow the voices to take me away to a better place and this time it wouldn’t be in your head. That should make you feel a little better.”

Block sat down again after again painstakingly checking the area. He found nothing. His slow, crooked grin reflected his captain's comment. "Captain, I have no doubt you're right."

His eyes showed concern. Sarantos felt obliged to explain. "She was mad at me. Simply a routine lover's disagreement. I'm sure she'll get over it."

"I'm sure you're right, sir."

"We might as well swing by the doc's and see if I'm having a nervous breakdown or a tumor."

Block turned his head slightly while his eyes screamed disapproval. Nice to know he cared.

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The doc wasn't in, but the medical staff on duty were prompt. As soon as they entered, the staff approached them immediately.



"Captain, are you okay?" Sergeant Shawna Dawn's voice cracked with emotion, showing sincere concern for her Captain.

He was glad she and the other OKurian were on board for this mission. Their species didn't lose their minds often and handled themselves well under the most stressful situations ever recorded.

“Glad to see you, Captain. The Doc’s not here, only us. We just relieved the night crew including Private Walters.” Private Adam Glass took Sarantos by the arm and led him to the nearest bed. “Hop on up, sir.”

Sergeant Dawn followed behind him, closely scanning his body with her hand-held monitor. “Tell us what’s going on, Captain?”

The Captain said, “I’ve heard my name called out. I suppose it’s a singular voice that periodically calls out my name, Sarantos. It’s like they know me personally somehow. It’s spooking me out.”

With the help of Glass, Dawn laid him back on the cot and put his head in a greenly tinted monitor. The screen instantly overfilled with numbers and letters in flight pursuing a diagnosis.

Dawn explained, “Your vitals are good, but we should monitor you for a while. Do you have someone on deck for you? You need to be here at least the rest of the day so we can give you a proper analysis.”

The Captain moved his eyes back and forth and grew worried. “Do you hear that, Block? I’m a guinea pig. How about I give you 10,000 seconds to sort me out? That should do it.”

“Don’t be fooled Glass,” said Dawn, a smile curling her lips. “He’s trying to trick us. 10,000 seconds sounds like a lot, but it’s not. We’re not stupid, Captain.”

Block interrupted the banter. “Sir, you’re in good hands. If you don’t mind, I will go take a shower. I can send in Private Bonnie Day? She’s available for a few hours.”



Sarantos agreed, “Yes, I’m sure that’s fine. And don’t worry about contacting the Lieutenant. I’m sure she’d be okay with it, you know my head being examined and everything.”

“Sure,” Block said with a slight chuckle. “I’ll wait until The Private gets here.”

“That’s fine. Sounds like a plan.”

Dawn still fiddling with the readouts on her state-of-the-art monitor, asked, “When did this start, Captain? Anyone else hearing voices?”

The Captain shook his head. “I’m not sure when it started exactly. It might have been two nights ago. As far as I can tell, no one else in the area I’m in hears the voice except me.”

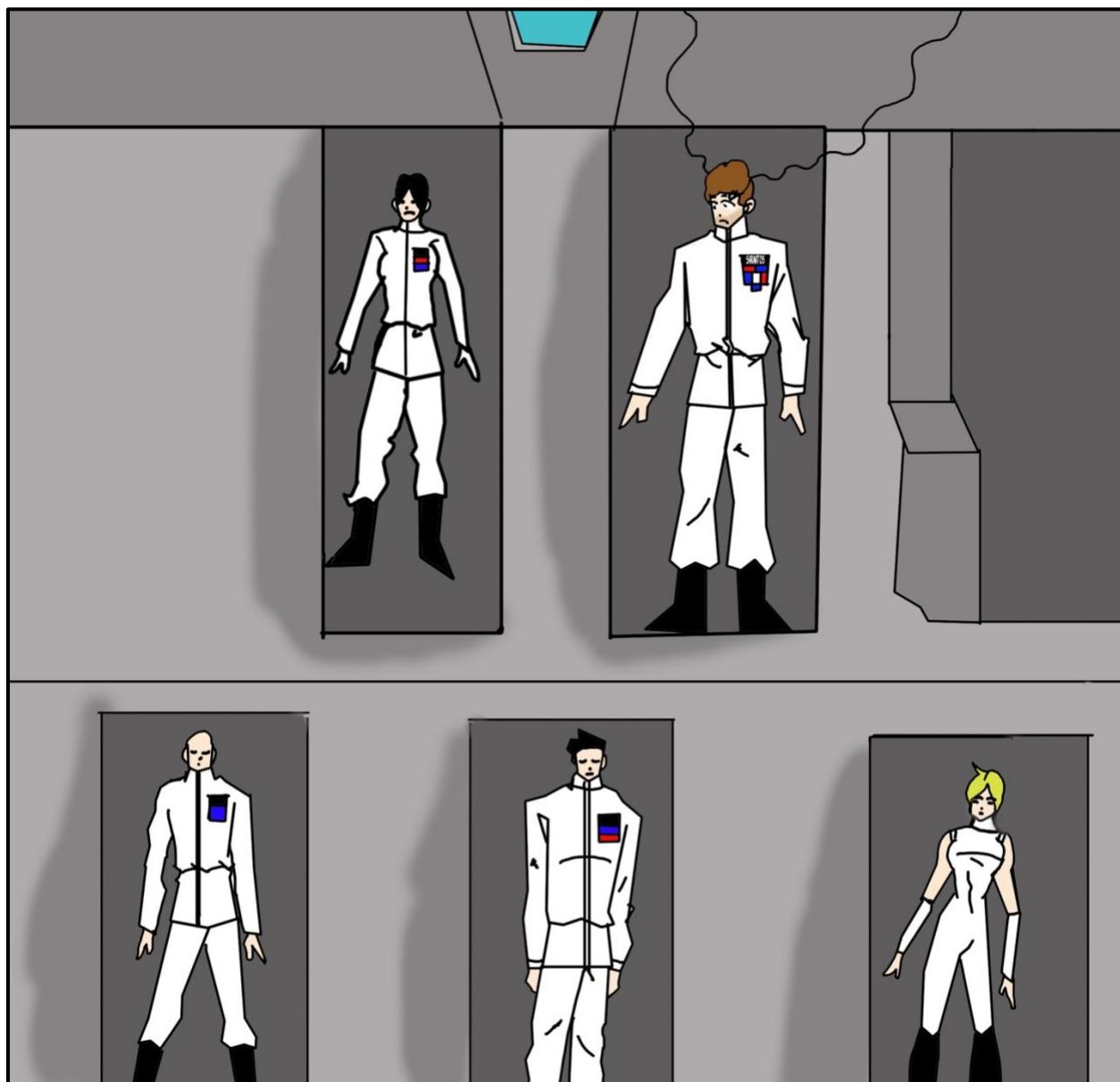
“I’m sure there’s a perfectly rational explanation,” Dawn said.

Glass interjected, “Don’t be so concerned Captain. We’ll sort out this mystery and get you back on the Helm quickly.”

“Block, can you see if John can fill in for me? Sorry, I mean...”

Interrupting, Block said, “I know who you mean, sir. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”



The room seemed smaller somehow, possibly because of the many beds in it and sick people lying in them. Glass moved away from him to assist a woman that Sarantos did not recognize. Even though they had a skeleton crew, it still comprised at least 200 members.

He watched the doctors move around the room tending to anyone that needed it. Where the hell was Cleary? Obviously, she hadn't been on in the evening but didn't make her shift today. Her mental state concerned him, although that was a switch.

She was usually concerned about his sanity; the darkness maybe got to her sunny spirit and broke it down?

“Captain, I’ll sit over here, if that’s okay?”

Sarantos looked up to see Private Day. “Sure, that’ll work. Thanks, and Block before you go can you do me another favor?”

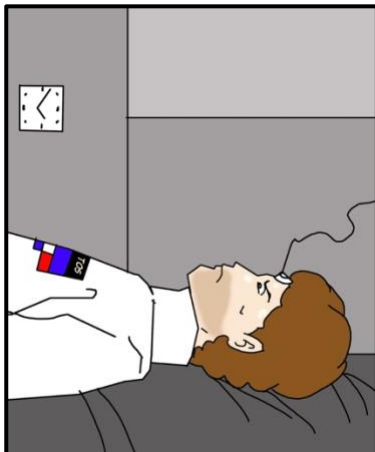
“Yes, Captain.”

“Please check on Cleary. Just make sure she’s okay. You might find her on the creative deck, and you might need help bringing her back into this reality, if you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I do Captain. I’ll take Lieutenant Stuart with me if she is agreeable.”

“That’s a good idea. Keep me informed.”

Sarantos noticed a little more vulnerability when Block left, although he trusted Day. There was something about him that oozed security, stability and attention to detail. He was a man that belonged in security and Addie was right in choosing him to guard him. She knew her people, and she knew him. He wouldn’t stand for someone who made him uncomfortable.



He was not able to fall asleep. Sarantos stared at the clock, mulling over his current situation and waiting for the damn voice to speak again. The sooner it did, the sooner he might leave. His head was itching from the straps on it, but they had instructed him not to mess with

them, as it would disrupt the readings. Maybe, he'd become a scientist after this mission - if he survived - and he'd work on inventing something to wear that was much more comfortable than this.

His eyes grew heavy as the sound of low speaking chatter of the busy room lulled him into a deep slumber.

The peace didn't last long.

“Help.”

At the cry, his eyes popped open. Glass was at his side, keeping him from sitting up. The voice was familiar. It belonged to Chief Candy Storm who stood in the doorway holding her head. Sergeant Dawn was at her side immediately, guiding her to a recently evacuated bed. Dawn's voice was calm, urging her to relax while they checked her out.

“Oh, my god, I'm getting an earful. Someone keeps calling my name, no one else hears the voice, and it's driving me mad. They call my name, as if they're my friend. Candy, Candy, repeatedly, at least ten times a day.”

Sarantos immediate thought was ‘Thank God’ it's also happening to someone else! Next, though, he realized the difference. His voice didn't call him that often. He wondered if it had escalated to that point? Did it start off less frequently?

“Okay, take it easy Chief, I'm here. When did it start?” Dawn lifted her eyes and glanced over at Sarantos.

“It started about a week ago Captain. I tried to ignore it but wrote it in my journal. That’s how I know how often it occurred and when it became unbearable. I thought it was me. I thought it would just go away... but it didn’t,” cried Candy Storm.

Dawn was checking her vitals. Sarantos didn’t like the deep crease that developed over her eyes drawing wrinkles out of the corner of her eyes.

“I want you to relax, Chief Storm. Your blood pressure is elevated. Possibly stress or anxiety.”

Glass was there, explaining to Storm that they would put something on her head to monitor her condition. Candy’s eyes bulged, and she sprang upright, squinting and pacing nervously around the room. Her face of horror stopped at Sarantos.

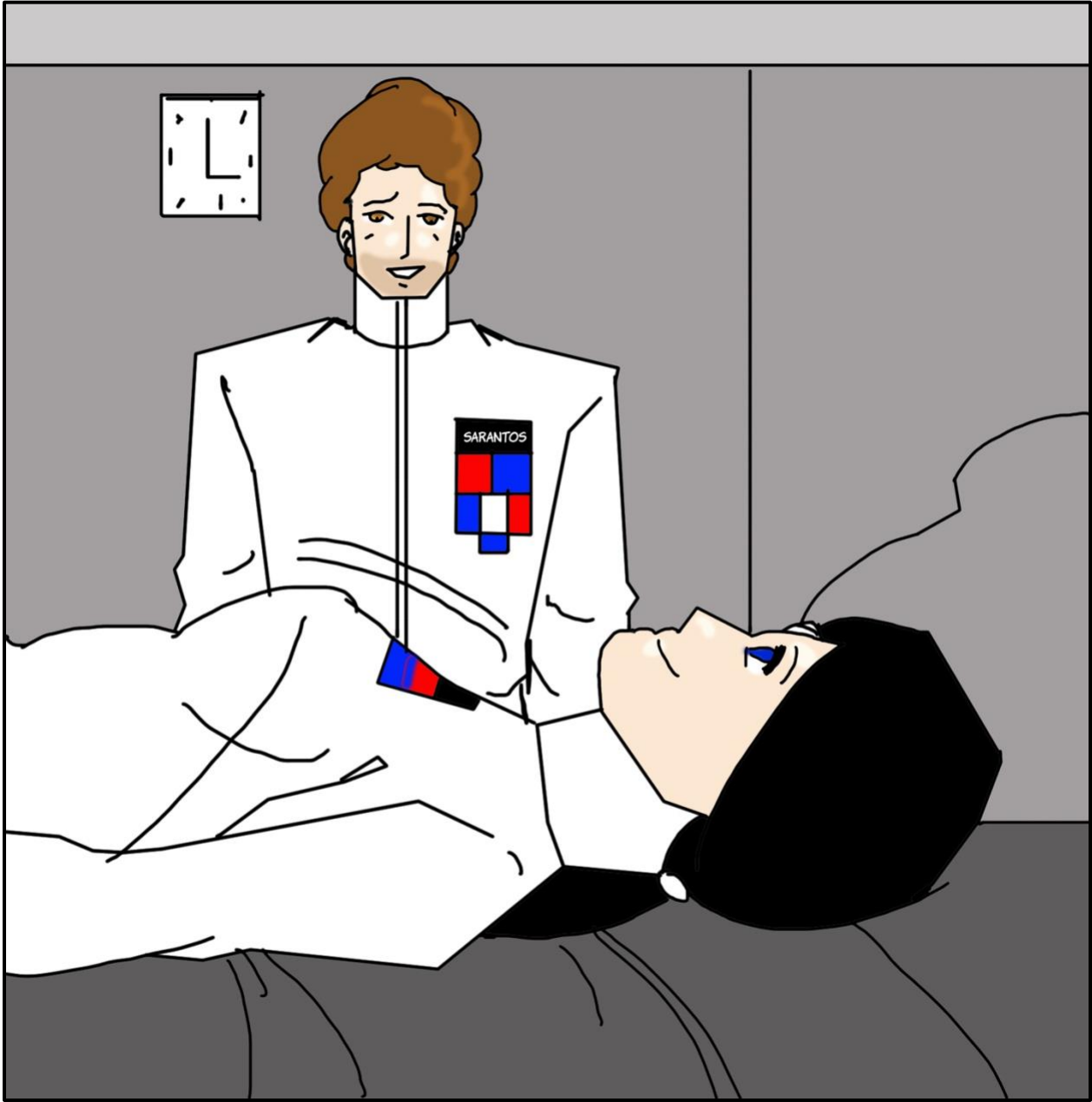
“Captain?” Candy’s voice was snug but strained.

“Yes, Chief Storm, it would seem we’re both in the same boat. Only mine just started. You’re tougher than I am. I came in much sooner, reasoning I’m delirious. At least we can keep each other company.”

Storm’s mouth relaxed and her eyes softened going back into her head leaving the bulge for another time. Her smile was refreshing. Her confidence grew aware that her Captain was also there by her side. It took the sting out of his own self-pity.

She laid back down and allowed them to put the itchy contraption on her head.

Sarantos said, “And now we wait, Chief Storm. Change happens one step at a time, and we need to spend every second the same way, waiting patiently. I’ve watched the clock for 10,000 seconds today hoping to use them all well. Let’s relax, fight, and pray we only need to wait another 10,000 seconds before this is finally over.”



Chief Candy Storm glared at the clock and set free a smoldering smile.