

Chapter 6

“Above The Clouds”

He sat in his Captain’s chair and stared out into the silent void that was space. Well, it really wasn’t a void, sometimes it just seemed that way. The vastness of it complimented the reality of a system that only touched what could be seen with the eyes. Scientific equipment allowed us to view deeper into this private world. Space has always been mysterious but is a puzzle slowly being solved. Every day, new discoveries are being made. Just yesterday, he’d read a report about the discovery of a completely new solar system that was masked in blackness. In fact, the system was so massive that it didn’t fit into any known equation that would allow the actual size of it to fit into the apparent space available to it. Science couldn’t explain this.

He loved playing with thoughts that boggled the mind. How could we be sure it wouldn’t fit, after all, space is empty. The only time we can contain space is when we put it into a container. We are then limited by that object’s allowance to hold a certain amount of space, like a glass. Once that space is exceeded, it spills over and keeps going, finding cracks and new locations to be absorbed into; so long as the liquid keeps flowing, it would continually try to find a space to fit into. He grinned at the thought that everything we could see from our point of view could ever be inside a giant vault located in another world – maybe in an ancient underground tunnel structure that had been long forgotten? Our universe could be sitting in that vault with an open lid and everything we haven’t noticed could maybe be the star systems that exceed the allowance and flow outside of the vault. There could be zillions of vaults. Well, his mind had certainly taken off in a weird direction tonight...



Just then, his homeland came into view. His heart fluttered with the familiarity of its beauty as the many oceans and lakes that breathed on this luxurious creation slowly filled the global surface. Dark healthy patches of plush hills, forests and greenery ran alongside the waterways adding a majestic

depth to the canvas. He could almost smell the land. Okura never looked so glorious as it did at that moment.

“Captain?”

“Yes, Kitara?”

She knew him well enough to know he'd been daydreaming. The rest of the crew must have thought he was planning and preparing for a great battle, but not her, and that bothered him for some reason.

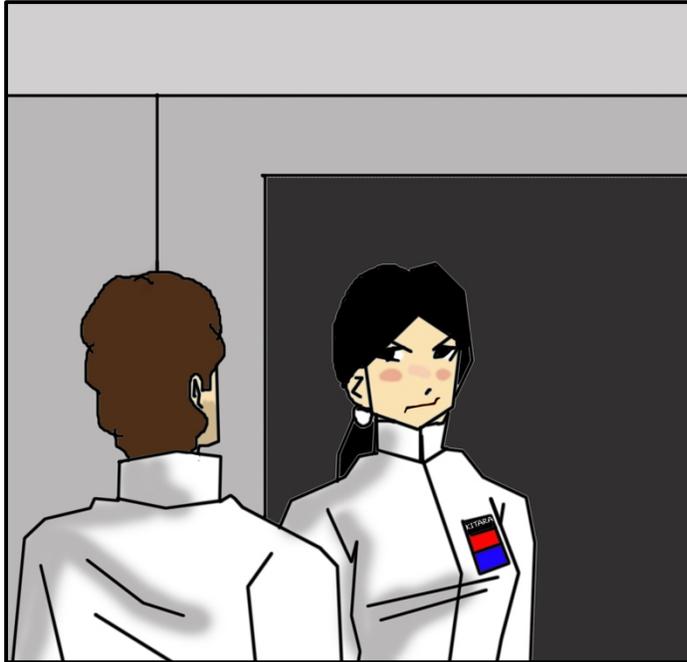
“Admiral Bane would like to speak to you. A message just came through.”

“Yes, Lieutenant, I'll take it in my ready room.” He wanted the privacy.

“Sir, should I accompany you?”

He knew Kitara wanted to know what to expect but right now there were few on his ship that he fully trusted; Lieutenant Baker, Major Cleary, Matt Blume and Chief Greg Petty at the helm, to name a few. As much as his life needed Lieutenant Addie Stuart in it, at least for one major obvious reason, he couldn't bring himself to commit that type of trust to her just yet. However, she was head of security and if he felt that way about her, by legality, as Captain of the starship he should remove her from her position pending further investigation. But, she was tough, intelligent, good at her job and until he had actual tangible proof of treasonous behavior, there wasn't anything he could do about it. Her connection to her renegade sister was drained of any sort of affection as far as he could tell. He would've liked her to join him in the meeting with the Admiral. Now was the time to test her. He needed to trust his security officer. He wanted to trust her.

“Kitara, get Lieutenant Stuart and Baker in my ready room on the double.” He knew Kitara would be angry but it couldn’t be helped.



Her face turned three different shades of red and her eyes penetrated his with disfavor. Kitara’s bottom lip curled up in one corner before she spoke. “Captain, if I may speak openly?”

“I know, Kitara, you’re my number-one, but right now I have no time for egos. I need you watching everything diligently and be faithfully in charge of my ship. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When I give an order, you follow it without question. Is that also, understood?”

“Yes, Captain.” She turned away from him to carry out her duty, or maybe to hide her resentment. He couldn’t be sure.

He liked being in his ready room. It was quiet and had a personal touch that made him feel comfortable. “Boravian coffee, black.”

The sweet cherry blend of a dark rich coffee bean filled the room. This was just what he needed.

He sat down and pulled up the screen, ready for the Admiral as the quiet hush of the door slid open. They came in together, his two Lieutenants.

Inhaling deeply when he saw Addie was always a necessity for him because she was so unbelievably delectable that he needed to gain control over his senses and suppress the urge to run to her, pressing her close to his body and kissing every inch of her flesh. Why was he like that around her?? A Captain losing control like a helpless teenager by a woman, but oh, she wasn't just any woman by no stretch of the imagination.

Just to look at her took him to a tranquil spot above the clouds and it's always sunny above the clouds, isn't it? She possessed the power of the sun, a power that never ended.

“Come in, have a seat. I'm just about ready to contact Admiral Bane and I wanted you both present for this conversation. We'll be leaving the ship momentarily and preparations will need to be made.”

“Captain.” They both said in unison to acknowledge the Captain's intentions.

“Locking in now.” The Admiral's blue head appeared onscreen with his usual stern and very droopy mouth. As his large ears twitched, the tiny pupils inside the round orbs he had for eyes shifted from him to his Lieutenants.

“Admiral Bane, it's good to see you.”

The Admiral's mohawk on top of his head shifted as his eyebrows moved up and down. "Yes, yes. Good to see you, Captain Sarantos, but let's forget formality and get down to the urgent business at hand. There's a base set up north of Olive and that's where your land party will start. You'll need to take a small crew of 15 down to secure the outpost and check for any suspicious activity. We've lost contact with Captain Henry Filber since late yesterday. He never had much to report. You'll need to be our new eyes and assess the area carefully. Proceed with extreme caution! Here are your coordinates for the location you'll teleport into. Sarantos, I'm depending on you to get information back to us about what the hell is going on there. Don't use ground contact. Send someone back to your ship, and for God's sake your ship needs to be invisible and under radar, immediately. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Admiral. Consider it done."

"Out." The Admiral was abruptly done talking.

"You guys heard him. Notify the group to conference room 3, Lieutenant Stuart. Pronto."

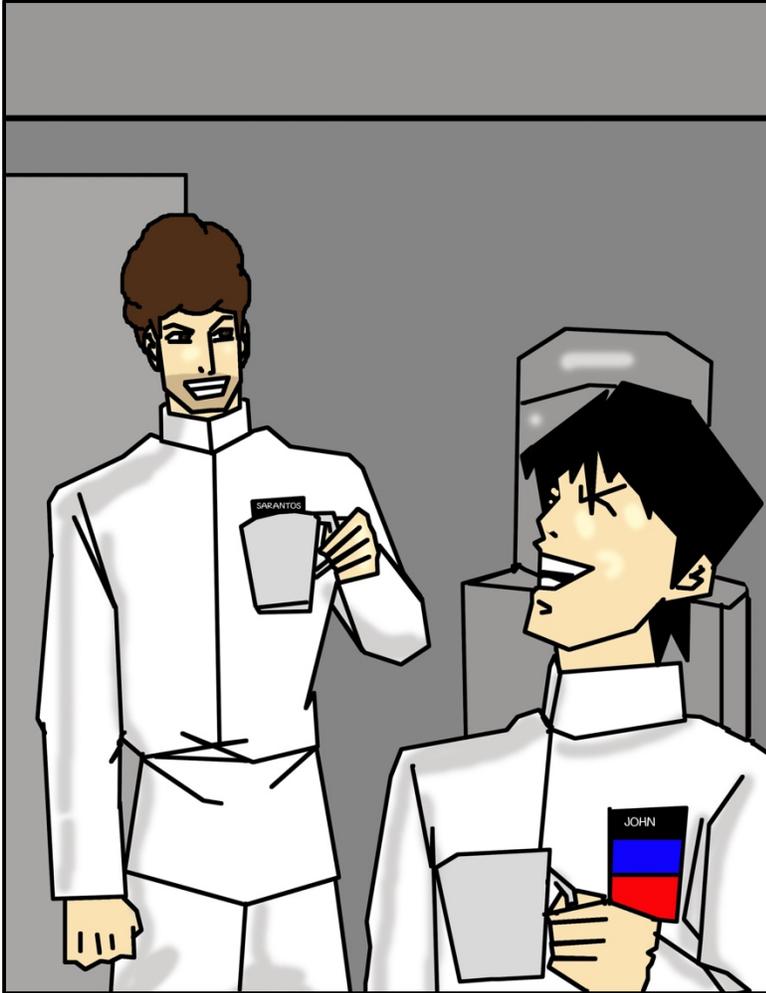
"Captain." She turned and left the room. No questions whatsoever. He loved that about her. She just did her job.

"Captain, what about me. Will you need me on the away mission?"

He looked at his longtime friend. "Sit for a minute John. Want some coffee?"

"Sure."

He watched his friend move to the replicator and order Boravian coffee, black. The same way he just did moments ago. Smiling at the memories of the two of them up



late with their studies at the academy downing about 10 cups apiece, he said, “Remember the early morning coffee binges cramming for exams. Crap, we couldn’t sleep for two nights after all that coffee.”

They both started laughing. The glee sounded good to his ears.

“Yeah, we were something. I don’t think I could do that today my friend. Well, I suppose if I had to, you know, if you needed me to be there into those wee hours of the morning, then I could do it

only for you. But, I don’t suppose you’ll have time anymore for boisterous things like you did back in those days. You were incorrigible, running after those twins and then showing up in our room for more studying and then running off again as soon as one of them stuck their pretty head in the door batting her sultry eyes at you.”

“You could’ve joined me, you know.”

“Nope, I was in love and still am, my friend.”

This was like old times, but he knew he had to change the subject, though he didn’t want to. “I want you to stay on the ship, my friend. You’re one of the few people I

trust. I need you alert and awake. Watch diligently for any type of conspiracy or foul play. Do you catch my drift?"

"Yes, I do. Would you want me to run the ship? I've several crew members in engineering that've been with me forever and I trust them with my life. They could run that part of the ship while I'm up on deck. I'd put Lieutenant Margaret Stone in charge of engineering. She's my number one and go to person if I'm ill, or unable to run that part of the ship. I've known her since I was a boy and she's Okurian, as well. Highly intelligent woman and she works extremely well with all of my crew members. The rest of them will follow her lead and do exactly what they're told. They respect her."

"Sounds great to me. Just be careful and watch your back."

"Anyone in particular that you think might be carrying a large knife?"

"It may sound crazy but I'm not sure anymore. I think I'm leaving Kitara on board, as well."

"Ah, you suspect her, my friend?"

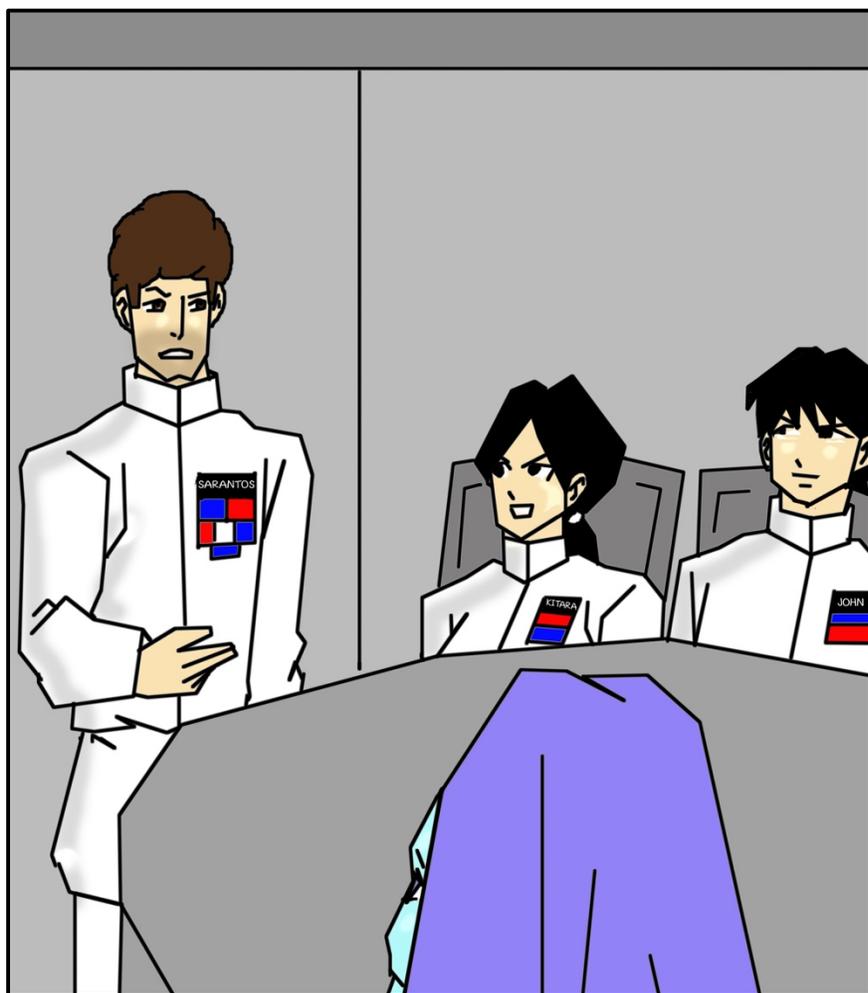
"No. Well, maybe, I guess I'm not really sure. I feel something, weird, I think, but can't quite put my finger on it. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do. Do you want me in the meeting?"

"Yes, and bring Lieutenant Stone, as well."

"Okay, Sarantos, you got it. See you in ten."

John Baker never said another word but stood up, finished his coffee in one large gulp, and left. He sat there alone with his thoughts and they weren't good ones, but ones filled with fear, dread and death. He was the Captain of a Starfleet. What had he been thinking? Why did he make this covert mission more complicated than it needed to be?



Everyone else was already at the table by the time he arrived.

“Sorry, if you had to wait long. I had some planning to do before this meeting.”

“Captain.” Everyone acknowledged him and waited for him to speak again.

He went to the replicator and grabbed another coffee before taking his place at the head of the long conference table. His coffee addiction was starting again, but of course he wasn't sure if he'd get any more coffee after this excursion, maybe for a very long time. The situation on his homeland was unknown. Though why they'd waited before moving in, was a bit unhealthy for the residents there, at any cost.

“Okay, I’ve conferenced with the Admiral and I’ll be taking about 15 officers and a couple of Ensigns with me to the planet Okura.”

“Who,” asked Kitara?

He ignored her and continued, “On the ship and in its charge will be Lieutenant John Baker. He’ll be captain while I’m on ground. Any questions or concerns from any department will be immediately brought to his attention and I mean only to his attention directly from the department heads. Please explain to your crew that anything that looks strange or unusual, no matter how small will need to be taken to each of you as the team leader. As that leader, it is not your decision to determine if it should be ignored. Instead it is your duty to deliver it yourself to acting Captain John Baker for his assessment and he will make the final ruling for you and your team to follow without question. These are crucial times and I insist it be done this way. Am I understood?”

“Captain.” Served around the table.

“In charge of engineering in the absence of acting Captain John Baker will be Lieutenant Margaret Stone.” Turning towards her he said, “Lieutenant, I’m sure you’ve been briefed and I trust you thoroughly to handle The Chicago. She’s in good hands with you and Lieutenant Baker.”

“Yes, Captain Sarantos. I look forward to this opportunity to serve the ship and those on board, not to mention the Federation.”

He nodded his thanks.

“Those going with me will meet in the transporter room at 2200 hours. Lieutenant Addie Stuart, please put someone in charge with whom you trust with your life

because you'll be on ground crew with us. Also, grab any essentials you feel are important to this mission. Stuart, make sure that Ensign Harry Born is prepped to your satisfaction as well. He has military experience that is quite impressive and will be joining us. Then Lieutenant I want you to pick 7 of your most reliable security officers who have impeccable military skills. Hopefully each of them can offer us their unique abilities for this crucial mission. Anyone who knows my planet the way I do would be welcomed, meaning, any Okurian.

Dr. Major Cleary, I expect you to attend us. Bring supplies as needed and leave your most trusted person in charge, possibly Candy O'Malley. I want Major Flint with us as well as he has military, wound management and negotiating skills."

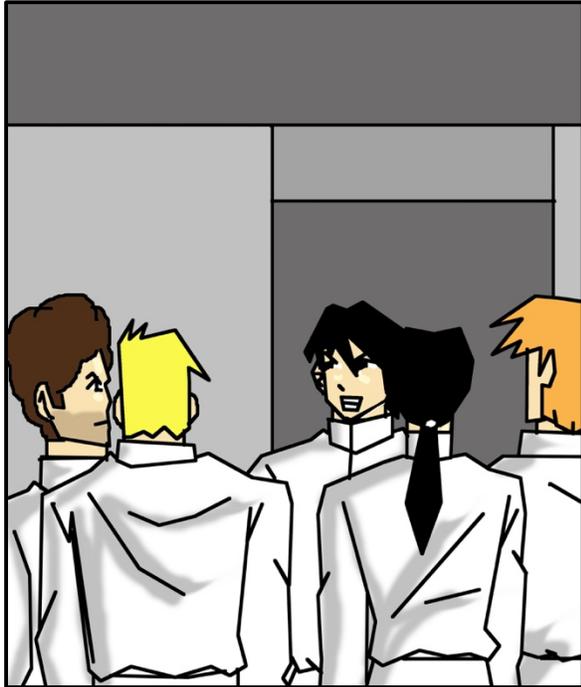
"Yes, Captain, I'll be ready."

"Lieutenant Kitara, you're to assist Captain John Baker. He'll need you." He hurried on not giving her time to respond. "Chief Greg Petty you're with me as well. Please put Chief Mark Beady on the helm. He's a good man, genuinely experienced and honest. Matt, I've asked you here because I understand you're quite the military strategist and you can also find food. I'll need both of those skills on this mission. Get someone else to run the kitchen. How about Donny Frame, I heard he was quite the chef in his day and he's smart enough to handle it."

"Yes, Captain." Matt responded with a little annoyance which was to be expected. Matt didn't like war but today he had no choice. Sarantos also liked the idea of Donny in the hall, because he was a trustworthy character and very observant. He'd have to speak to him before he left to make sure he keeps his eyes and ears open.

"Great, we also won't allow outward transmissions from the ship. You'll only be able to receive from the ground. I want it set up to lock down transmissions as of now. This is to be kept secret. Lieutenant Baker, you and one other of your choice, will have the code to open the link. Only one link going out will be kept open and that'll be directly to the Admiral. Is that understood?"

“Yes, Captain.” John replied as though it was already done.



“Well, that’s 14, just short of 15 but I think that’ll do. We need discretion. Thanks for your time. Do what you need to prepare yourselves until we meet again at the transporter room. Captain Baker, the lock down commences immediately.”

“Yes, sir.” John stood up and left the room without saying another word.

He’d miss him and hoped that he’d see him again because honestly, he just didn’t know what they’d find on Okura.

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The operation went according to plan and now the fourteen of them stood on the lavish surroundings of his home planet, Okura.

He recognized the dark forest in front of them, the Kurluran Woods. The Okurian race were thoughtful care givers of the land, and everything they named had meaning. The name meant majestic. These woodlands were made up of ancient trees that the Okurian people believed were here long before their race ever existed. The trees were immune to disease and many of them produced a seed that was used in the making of a flavorful wafer. The wafer was said to create intense visions during meditation that would bring to light the truth within your soul, supplying you with an inner understanding so that you could do what was necessary to reshape your existence if you were trekking on the wrong path. They believed that by doing this,

their world would be a better place. This was based on their theory that only until you mastered yourself could you rightly begin to understand and love another being.

He'd never tried the wafer, not even with the constant nagging of his dear friend John. His mother had, to marry Brackish. The event was a sacred one with a party of encouragement before the eating of the wafer and afterwards a very holy ceremony of silence, as the individual walked down a path either in the woods or the rolling hills deep with their own thoughts as their loved ones walked supportively behind them quietly. This was called The Walk of Life.



His mother had been glorious that fateful day. After an all-day party and celebration, she'd left on her own to her favorite hillside where a cushion was placed for her to sit upon. The color that was chosen was usually a personal favorite of the individual. His mother had chosen red. A small vial of water was on a silver tray with one of the delicate wafers. They gave the wafer no name because it's value was unworthy of such a thing. He and Brackish were permitted to accompany her to the site, but then had to leave immediately without saying a word. She'd stayed until the following evening, which was always the case. When the sun

set, she walked to her place where the night walk started and everyone followed behind her until the wee morning hours.

He'd remembered his own thoughts that night. He thought his mother was amazing and looked like a new woman; younger, healthier and more peaceful. She seemed content. He supposed that was why he never took the wafer. He liked what he was doing and where he was at in his life and knew it would change him and possibly remove the edge he had that made him a Captain. Or maybe he just hadn't grown up enough. He wasn't sure.

“Captain?”

Addie's soft and searing voice cut into his thoughts and instantly melted him into mush. Way too much control that she had over him, with just a word.

He looked at the crew in front of him. He only recognized four of the military soldiers Addie had chosen. The other three were unknown to him. Right now, he didn't need to know their names however. It wasn't important to the mission but, apparently, Addie felt otherwise.

“Captain, I know you know Chief Stone Drake, Private Fred Opal, Private Sally Mann and Sargent Todd Cam but let me introduce you before we go any further to the other members of this group. This is Chief Brel Doran, Sargent Sam Toner and Private Bonnie Day.”

They all nodded at the Captain as their names were called out.

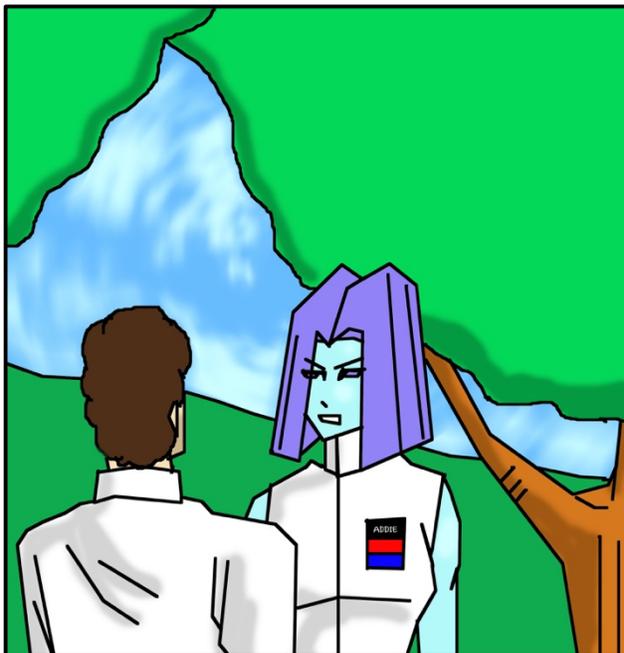
He had to acknowledge them, even though his thoughts were on his family. He had to suppress the urge to race to their home and see that they were okay. “Thanks to all of you for being a part of this team, and to all of you that have joined us on this mission. I understand you've been briefed by your commanders so let's get a move on. I want to be there by morning. I trust that those of you that need night goggles have brought them with you? If so, please put them on, the woods are quite dark.”

“Well, it’s hard to tell how much damage, if any, has been done to this land from our viewpoint but we need to get through these woods to the outpost just north of here. I know these woods and it’ll be a day’s journey. When we get on the outskirts of the forest, there’ll be a hill leading down into the valley where the outpost is located. We’ll probably arrive by morning so we’ll take up places within the trees and see if we can see anything suspicious going on. I’d like to watch the encampment before we stroll in there unprepared.”

“Anything we should know about the woods, Captain? You know, anything unusual or dangerous.” Addie spoke in a firm and professional tone.

It didn’t help much though. Her voice affected him. It was as simple as that. He’d have to get used to it somehow.

“No Lieutenant, at least the last time I was here there wasn’t a problem; however, we should proceed slowly and stay on guard in case the enemy has taken up residence in the forest to hunt humanoids. So, keep your crew on alert.”



“Yes, Captain. You heard him, be on the lookout for any movement or anything out of the ordinary.”

Addie moved next to him and spoke quietly and directly to him only. “Captain, Brel Doran looks human but he is Bladian. Because of this, I’d like to have him up front with me.”

He was impressed with her decision to bring this man on the mission. Not only did people mistaken them for humans

but because of that, it put them at an advantage. Clever woman telling me in secret too. The Bladian were human in every outward appearance, but inward, not even close. They had incredible hearing and vision. In fact, all their senses were heightened by at least 80 percent beyond normal human capacity. They also had incredible strength and agility. He'd be probably, by far, the biggest advantage to this group.

He couldn't contain his smile. "Well, done Lieutenant. As commander of security, you have the lead. I'll stay in the front as well since I know these woods."

"Thank you, sir."

Immediately she started giving orders to the ground crew. Directing the hiking order with perfect precision. Keeping the Doctor, Matt Blume and Major Flint more towards the middle of the group. She mixed up the fighting skills of unpolished and experienced soldiers supplying necessary balance in case there was an ambush. She was amazing and was proving with every passing second why she was trustworthy and why the Admiral had sent her along on this mission. Thank you Admiral Bane, he thought.

The forest seemed darker and scarier than when he played in here as a kid. Maybe, it wasn't darker now, or he'd just forgotten to use the old rhyme that his mother had taught him when he was young. He'd used it on way more than one occasion in his life but now, he needed to go to his safe spot, his secret hiding place above the clouds.

The dark grew closer and closed in on them, feeling more like an oppressive force than just the evening hour. His footsteps sounded like thunder in the quiet still of the night. Addie and Brel were lighter on their feet so they stayed out in front about 30

feet in front of him, while 15 feet to either side of him Chief Petty and Ensign Born moved effortlessly through the heavy trees and tall brush. Several rabbits ran from their hiding places to bolt away from the group that seemed to threaten their existence as they passed thru their homes.

It started to rain but the trees blocked out a large portion of the downpour. Besides he kept the mindset of the poem at the edge of his awareness - no matter how loud the rain shouts, it's always sunny above the clouds.

He smiled, remembering 20 years ago how he'd quoted that line with his childhood friend as they ran through a different group of woods in a storm where the lightning and thunder were a constant companion. They'd screamed it out so loud. It did drown out the thunder, or maybe their laughter did, or perhaps it only appeared to drown out the noise that scared the wits out of them.



Addie suddenly stopped in front of them, holding her hand up, as Sarantos and those that saw her did the same so it would travel to the rear of the group via the person in front of them. She pulled out her rain gear and everyone did the same. It wouldn't do any good to be soaked if they didn't get a chance to dry out.

She dropped her hand and he started forward again, making sure the rest of the group did the

same. Just in time too, because the rain became relentless and mercilessly pounded the ground creating small puddles that splashed mud up onto his finely polished boots.

The winds were picking up steam and it was creating enough noise to make him walk like only a whisper in the breeze.

He was chilled to the bone. ‘Hot or cold, day or night, above the clouds the good old sun always shines bright.’

Instantly he felt soothed. His muscles softened. Just quoting the verse brought him peace. The focus on the words was like a mantra, calming him and relaxing his inner self. Crud, he was starting to sound like John.

That made him think of his ship. He hoped he was wrong about Kitara, it could be anyone really. Why was he focusing on her so much? Maybe, it was his own guilt of leading her on the way he had in the past. Well, he wasn’t really leading her on, so much as he was enjoying her company. He couldn’t help his newfound feelings once he met Addie. Certainly, she wouldn’t hold that against him, would she? She was sexy enough in her own right and could get anyone on board the starship. Well maybe not anyone but most men would jump at the chance to be with her at least once.

She was great in bed and she had some quirky fun little things she did that drove him crazy but nothing that compared to his dream woman, Addie. She had it all. Talented and skilled in the bedroom, in combat and in conversation. A guy couldn’t ask for more but boy did she offer more. He watched her move in front of him with grace, yet, she could be combat ready at the bat of an eye.



Watching her body in motion was a gift to all of those behind her, at least he thought so. She was perfectly shaped and the way she moved drew his attention to each delightful part of her body. It was music, no it was like being above the clouds. Yes, that's what he'd do from now on, go above the clouds hoping to find her standing naked under the sun waiting for him to strip down with her and enjoy the warmth. He'd found the perfect secret hiding

place where the sun would never go down.

Lieutenant Addie Stuart, the best hiding place ever.

Chief Doran had slowed down, or so it seemed in the shadows of the woods.

No one held their hand up but they were definitely moving forward more cautiously. He looked behind him and noticed the group had followed their lead. He held up his left hand once, put it down and lifted it again, signaling to be combat ready. He'd hoped it was nothing to be alarmed about. They still had another three hours to go before they reached the border.

They continued like this for what seemed like days. Nothing happened.

He was sure that Brel must have heard something that alarmed him. Sarantos hadn't known any Blad's during his lifetime. Maybe, because of their keen senses they kept more to themselves. To have one onboard his starship was a welcome bonus. From what he'd heard, they very seldom joined starship missions. They were indeed part of the Federation but served less frequently than most other races.

The intensity of their senses must be hard to contain at times, or maybe all the time. How could they learn to control it? Sarantos remembered a friend at the academy who knew several of them and they were in his classes. One of them told him they practiced restraint from the time of their birth. When he explained that to Sarantos, he remembered just shaking his head wondering how a child could be that disciplined. Human's had enough trouble learning to talk, walk, eat and tie their shoes, much less control their overhyped senses. He'd always admired the Okurian for their self-control but after hearing about the Bladian several years into the academy, he couldn't believe what they endured. Remarkable. And now here one was helping him on this mission. He'd rather go slower if Brel heard something than run into an ambush.

He looked behind him again and saw the ears of Sargent Todd Cam move like he was about to take off. He was an Olivian, like Admiral Bane and the blue of his skin glowed like an eerie light in the black woods.

They stopped moving. He turned and saw the arm of Addie raised in caution. Brel crept slowly forward until he reached a tall Molder tree. The width of the tree wouldn't allow him to see anything behind it. Sarantos watched him signal to Addie. She approached the tree from the other side. He realized he was holding his breath for some reason. Anxiety?



Their movement was swift and he never heard a sound from the 20 foot distance in-between the two of them. She was gone from view. Addie was gone from view!

It was too quiet, just too damn quiet. He wanted to run up there to see if they were okay but his feet were stuck to the ground. He waited. Nothing.

What if something happened to her?

Patience, Sarantos. Instead of running forward until they signaled, he waited and his mind went above the clouds...