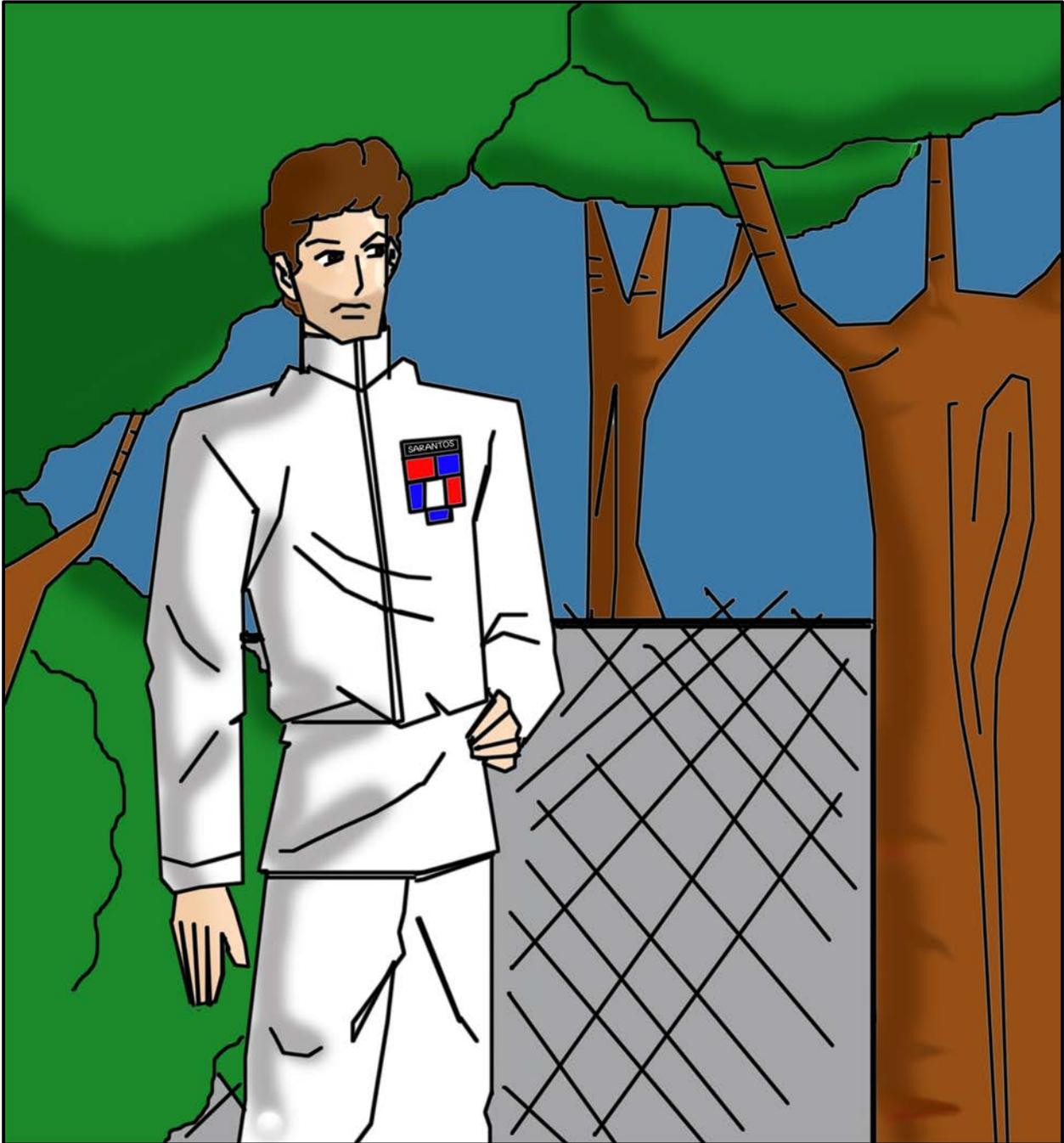


Chapter 8

“Tonight”



Captain Sarantos stood by the tall trees inside the fenced in area watching the dusk sky fill with brilliant color. Tonight the landscape was such a rare backdrop. He felt his face flushed from the anticipation of war but a cool breeze moved gently across

his face anyway. It was a strange affair because for the first time ever, he was captain of a group of soldiers and he was leading them into combat.

“Captain?”

“Yes, Lieutenant Stuart?”

“I’m going to assist Private Sally Mann on the other side of this incoming group taking them out as they move through the trees. Brel will be able to communicate with all of us at all times. He’ll let you know if we need any assistance down on the front line. Private Bonnie Day will also keep Brel informed of any other pertinent activity. That way, if another group moves in without warning, the Private and I can easily split off.” She smiled. “Be safe, Captain.”

She then moved confidently to the gate, opened it and was gone.

“She’ll be fine, Captain.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right, Matt. I pray you’re right.”

Major Cleary moved to position next to the two of them and breathed in, then let out a long sigh before speaking. “Well, looks like we’re the only ones left holding down the fort. When I went into the tunnels to eat, I located a medical room. It’s amazingly clean and hospital ready - beds, sheets, blankets, medicine, medical devices, scanners, everything I have on the ship and more is here for us should we need it. The more I learn about the OKurian race, the more impressed I’m becoming.

It’s probably not a great idea to use the ships against these small groups. We might want to save them for the battle tomorrow. If we need to, we can recruit those on

board to assist in eliminating these small skirmish groups. It's just a thought, Captain."

"And a good one, Major. You're absolutely right. We would draw too much attention to us by lighting up the skies too soon. We might need the ships later and their fuel and limited arsenal as well. Matt, retrieve the crews of the starships; however, leave Private Opal and Chief Drake on stand-by and ready for flight at a moment's notice. You never know. If the army comes in early, we could suddenly find ourselves in way over our heads. We don't know that our prisoner didn't lie when interrogated. Matt, also have Cadet Petty on prisoner guard duty. Next, see if Sargent Cam can locate the lock-up in the tunnels. That'd make our life a little easier I think. I'm sure they have one."

"Yes, sir. Consider it done."

They watched as he left.

"I feel kind of helpless, Cleary. The night before we left the ship, I went to bed annoyed and moody. Today, I woke up feeling kind of groovy, with a weird sensation inside of me, if that makes any sense to you? I suppose it's because I'm enjoying the privilege of being a Captain, but I'm actually scared too. I'm worried I won't make the right decision and someone I care about, or even someone innocent I don't know, will die because of me. It's moments like these, I think I'd been better off staying home and singing in a band. No one would be killed because of my singing!"

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Captain. No matter what choices you made in your life, you'll always find occasional blips of weakness and the burden of doubt that pops into your brain and probably makes you wonder just what the hell you're doing. So be okay with yourself and your choices. Trust your instincts. Just make the best of the situation in front of you, Sarantos, that's all you can do. As Captain, you care for all and in that caring alone, you'll in fact prevail. War is ugly. Some die but

others don't. It's just the way it is. Besides, you still sing in a band but not tonight my friend. Tonight, we're on the road and the music we compose is the sound of war."

"Yes, of course, I know you're right."

"I'm right most of the time, or haven't you noticed?"

They both chuckled.

Sarantos said, "Yes, for pity's sake, I've noticed you arrogant baffoon!"



Matt, Ensign Born, and Major Flint walked out of the door of the small outpost and eagerly approached him and Cleary.

"Captain, Sargent Cam went to search for the prison cells. Petty and the prisoner rightfully accompanied him. They thought it'd waste less time if they searched together. Sargent Cam told me to inform you that once they've secured the prisoner, they would return to the

surface," said Matt.

"Thanks, Matt. Does anyone have any idea how fast Chief Brel Doran is? I've never worked with a Blad, but I'm on board with his taking the lead. We could use about ten of his kind right now so that the rest of us could go back home. Oh wait, I am home!" He laughed.

“Yes, sir,” said Ensign Born.

Sarantos patted the Ensign on the back and said, “I’m over exaggerating of course but, they are quite the handiest of soldiers.”

The wind whistled crisply as the fading sun set further into the west. He stared off, deliberately pacing around the yard, studying the trees like an observant hawk. He noticed the rest of the group were doing the same thing - scanning the area for subversives.

He stopped and allowed a probe to enter his mind. Sarantos was searching for hope.

“Captain, I’ve dispatched my small army and have collected the bodies and piled them out of the way. I checked in with Private Mann and Lieutenant Stuart.”

His heart fluttered down to his gut causing him to feel feeble. Please let them be all right.

Brel continued, “Captain, they’re okay. Private Mann suffered a few minor cuts and bruises with her last opponent. He was a mean Bendarian and didn’t go down easily. Stuart came in to assist and the two of them took him down together. However, I’ve been informed by Private Day that three more groups are moving in rather quickly as we speak. Hold on, sir...make that four coming in. We still have three unaccounted for.”

“Chief, where’s the fourth group. We might have to deal with them.”

“That group is lagging behind. I’ll get coordinates from Day and you can set up an attack from the rear.”

“Thanks. Will do,” said Captain Sarantos.



Cleary moved next to him and said, “So what’s going on?”

“Okay, crew gather around. They’ve dispatched the three groups out there, but Private Mann has taken some damage and now four groups are moving in. I think Chief Brel thinks they can handle all three, but I’m concerned about Mann. What’s taking Cam so long?”

“Captain do you have the coordinates for the

fourth group?”

“Yes, Matt, just received them. Ah, there’s Cam and Petty, perfect.”

“Captain, what’s the word?”

“Sargent Cam, I’d like you to take Petty and set yourselves up at these coordinates. So far, they’ve dealt with three groups and four more are coming in as we speak. You and Petty can take them out one by one from behind.”

Sarantos wondered. What if Mann has a real problem though? I should send in someone else to assist her. I wouldn’t want her to fall tonight and I can’t judge her injuries for myself. Better to be safe than sorry.

“Ensign Harry Born, I’m going to open a link with Brel and inform him that you’ll be heading in Mann’s direction. She’ll link in with your mind via thought waves, so please stay open to her approach. She’ll direct you to her location.”

“Yes, sir.”

Brel had already picked up the transmission and Born was listening intently and moving off in Mann’s direction. He was young but he had an incredible military sense and obvious combat efficiency. He ranked highest in his class at the academy even under the most horrible stress factors. That was something he’d never forget going thru himself as a young cadet. Born actually ranked better during those tests than his own captain!

He stood beside Cleary watching Sargent Cam and Petty abscond into the woods. He wasn’t worried about anyone getting lost. They had Private Bonnie Day in the trees and Brel on the ground coordinating information to all soldiers.

“Great job, Captain. I’m sure the mission will be successful,” said Dr. Major Cherrie Cleary.

“Yes, I’ve supreme faith in our group of soldiers. Our moves will be swift and smooth. I think we’re going to have some fun tonight. We won’t be denied this dance under the last upbeat light of a long day.”

He was basking in confidence, but not so much that he wasn’t worried for these people he oversaw, like Addie. When he last saw her, it felt different. It was insane. Something had changed. Her aura was more defined, maybe even divine? She was confident, professional and yet, at the same time a loving delicate woman. He smiled. How in the world does she always do that? She keeps impressing him with how easy she makes things look. She’s mastered her life that’s for sure. Unbelievable woman, and more incredible was that she loved him just as he was, a normal man far weaker than her.

He continued pacing excitedly with Matt and Cleary keeping an eye on the surrounding camp. Brel let him know every time he took out an enemy, and kept him informed on what was happening with the other groups as well.

Their battling had been going on for hours now, surely his crew must be exhausted.



He turned quickly when he heard the door from the outpost swing open.

The OKurian facing him had a huge grin on his face. Sarantos grinned back. He could hardly contain his excitement. There stood Sargent Sam Toner. He’d returned from the city.

“Captain, what can I do to assist?”

He loved the Okurians because that was always the first thing that bellowed out of their mouths. How can I help? Along with that was a positive outlook that immediately charmed anyone they encountered. He didn't need to ask if he was able to fight, if he was strong enough, tired enough, needed a moment to catch his breath, or ready? Of course he was! Their race had incredible fortitude. They were always ready.

Sarantos patted Toner on the back. "Go in from the side and help take out whoever you can by Mann's group. She's been injured and there are three more groups coming, unless they were dispatched by another group of OKurian. Once that group's dispatched, please relieve her and send her back in. You can stay with Born and finish off one of the other groups, unless you want to send him off to Stuart who's been fighting herself for hours, in the hopes of assisting her. Check in with her too please.

"Sure, Captain."

With that he was gone in a flash. He didn't really have to worry about Addie being tired, after all, her stamina had already been demonstrated to him over and over with white dreams and wild lights on many nights. He indulged his momentary fantasy of her to help relax and soothe his nerves as he continued to tread the fence line.

Out of the darkening woods, he saw the outline of a figure. Damn, it was a Bendarian. It must have been way out in front and went unnoticed by his own soldiers. One fighter moving on his own was less likely to be noticed by Private Day.

He motioned to Matt and Cleary who hid themselves behind the trees. Sarantos quickly moved to the closest tree right in front of the gate. The closer the Bendarian got the more confused his expression. He paused in front of the gate and looked around the yard with confusion. Of course, no guards! He must be wondering where the other regiments were, as well.



He had to dispatch of this female Bendarian as quick as possible, no screams, no mess. He chose the laser and knew he must disintegrate her and fast.

He jumped in front of the tree and shot, but the little Bendarian was ready and cautious. She rolled to her left. *Hell*. Sarantos somehow had enough time to take another shot. She looked at him with eyes of steal, daring him to take her out. But, as the laser light aimed directly at her chest he thought he saw a look of fear reflect off her eyes, if only for a second. Then she was at once, nothing. Gone. Eliminated off the face of the planet, like she'd never existed. No body, no ash, no residue.

Did she have a family? What made her get up every day? Fear, anger, love, children, or nothing at all? Maybe, her life was robotic, as she drifted through the hours of service just following orders? He'd never know and her family, if she had one, would assume she was missing in action. There would be no body to morn over, just the uncertainty of what happened to her during the war. No one could tell her family that she'd made it through enemy lines and found their base now occupied by the enemy who shot her into oblivion. They'd never know that she never gave up, moved smoothly out of harm's way with agility and speed only to then succumb to her fate a mere second later.

War was ugly. Maybe, they could have been friends or he might not have liked her at all. Who knows? He didn't know much about the Bendarian race but he wasn't sure if he would've been able to tolerate their foul temper. At least, that's what he'd heard about them. Maybe she might have been different and even enjoyed jokes.

Yes, that's how he would picture her; a Bendarian woman who had a sense of humor and liked things tidy. She would appreciate her ending - no mess, no fuss. He suddenly felt sad at her untimely passing, and in that moment of silence he paid her a tribute as a living, breathing, entity that'd just left this world for another on a new journey although without having notice to even pack a suitcase.

They were all exhausted by the time the last of the groups were eliminated. The Bendarian female had been the only one to make it past his fighters. He could have used her on his team. She proved in a weird way that her race was indeed fierce and not to be underestimated.



It was almost 03:00 by the time his comrades walked back in through the gates of the outpost. They had small injuries but seemed in good spirits. Brel and Addie were the only ones walking in like they'd just woken up after a wonderful eight-hour rest. He had to control his enthusiasm to race up to Addie and kiss her passionately. She nodded at him; his heart fell to his stomach. She was alive. And so was he.

“Major, get everyone into the shower area and please set up your hospital room to properly look them all over. That includes Brel and Addie. I want everyone clean, fed and examined before you tuck in for the night. No room for discussion.” He looked at Brel and Addie when he made the last comment.

“Captain, sir.” They all spoke in unison.

“Now move it. I don't know when the real army is coming. We know they're due in the morning but what time is anyone's guess.”

As they walked into the outpost, he heard Major Cleary speaking with Major Flint. “Flint, you want to shower, eat and then join me in the infirmary? We can get them all checked out quicker...”

He listened as their voices faded away into the distance as they continued conversing.

The stars were bright tonight. He always found the 03:00 hour the absolute best for star gazing. Watching the universe that never slept a wink, even for a few minutes before he headed off, helped him forget about the terrible events of the day.

“Opal, Drake, are you in there?”

He waited until the door slid open.

“Yes, Captain,” said Chief Stone Drake, as he peered out at the Captain with well rested eyes.

“You guys get enough sleep?”

“Yes, sir. We took shifts. Opal is snoozing as we speak.”

“Okay, get him up and make sure he eats first. I want everyone well rested and well fed. I’m afraid our time may be short. You get something to eat and report back to me as soon as you can.”

“Yes, Captain.”

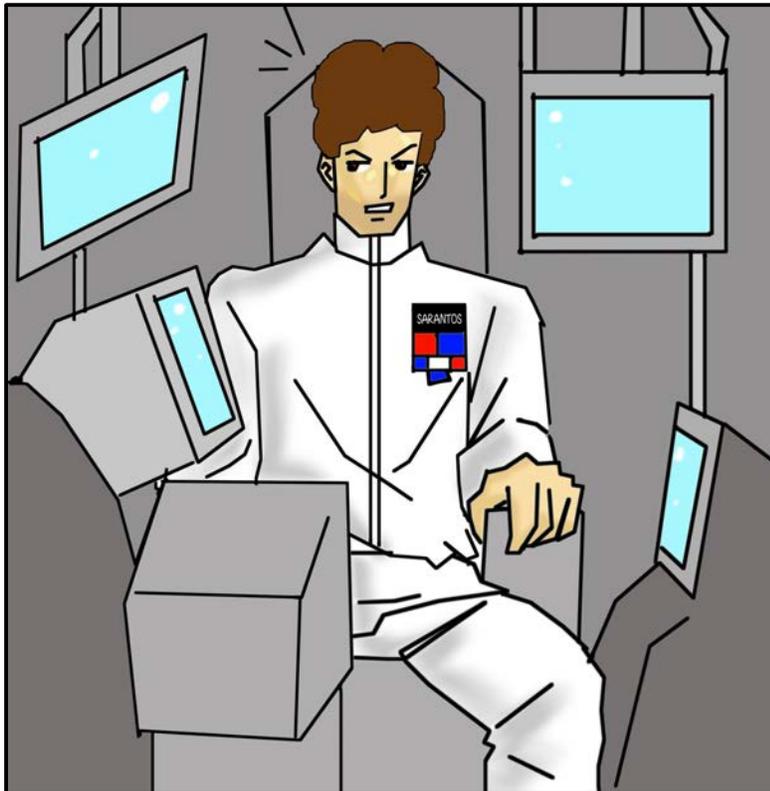
Stone disappeared and soon both him and Private Opal stood on the deck in front of Captain Sarantos.

They both acknowledged him and left. Stone hollered over his shoulder. “Captain, there’s a screen on the ships that scans the whole perimeter of the outpost if you want to keep a watch.”

“Sure, then come find me over here upon your return, Stone.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Sarantos listened to the fading sound of their footsteps and then climbed aboard the mini war-craft.



Each sound felt more real than ever before, an intensity that could only come from someone who thought he might never hear it again. The smells on the ship brought him back to his days at the academy. The fresh clean spice wafted into his nostrils as he sat at the helm.

Several screens were monitoring the surrounding location and he could now see all around them. Nothing moved. The lights from the outpost barely reached out

past the perimeter about 50 feet before conceding to utter blackness. Even the stars couldn’t infiltrate the heavy tree lines. He wished Day was back up in that dang tree.

He didn't feel tired but felt thankful as he sat there thinking about his life and the how the day unfolded. After a few moments, he thought he saw something move across the screen to the west. Please, not now. He looked again and tried to focus his concentration but the more he focused, the more he started seeing things move that weren't really there. Certainly, the incoming army wouldn't approach cautiously unless they tried to contact their ground command leaders and couldn't contact any of them, making them suspicious.

He closed his eyes and looked again. Nothing there. He hoped his eyes weren't too strained from staring into the darkness for hours. He knew what nerves could do, combined with eye strain and fatigue. Hallucinations were inevitable. Taking his eyes off the screen and looking around the ship helped a bit. He needed another target to relax his eyes and that gave it to him.

It was amazing. The whole time he lived on Okura, he never knew about these tunnels. They were an organized race and even though they lived outwardly in humbleness, compassion and peace, they weren't that distracted by their own beauty to understand the rest of the world wasn't prepared to feel the same nonviolent way they did. They weren't ready to lay down and go belly up. They were prepared.

The craftsmanship of this little war bird was fantastic and very modern. It would serve well in combat if it was needed. It even had an EM-hand. This was a handy piece of equipment, standing for emergency medical assistant. The small computer was placed on the stomach, right by the life force of the victim. It gave a complete read out of the condition of the person, along with possible cures. This unit had an attachment that could fix many ailments from A to Z, making it usable by anyone who needed medical attention. He glanced back at the screens, focused for a few moments and when he saw no change, returned his thoughts to the machine he stood in.

Wow, it even had two stasis beds. If the pilot and co-pilot were too injured to return home without passing out or were in the process of dying after combat, they could

press auto-pilot to take them back home while climbing into these beds sealing themselves inside until their doctors at their home base could attend to their health and resuscitate them. If the ship became too damaged it would put a shield over itself and float back to base with the assistance of a tracker beam. He shook his head, way too cool. He'd seen some of these gadgets at the academy during training, but they were very costly and he never had the chance to investigate one that worked. Seemed simple enough though.

There was a noise in the building where the ship sat. It was awesome being underground and when it was time for takeoff, the fake roof would open and straight up the ship would go like an elevator. The noise was getting louder.

“Captain?”

It was Chief Stone Drake, returning from dinner.

There was a replicator on board for food, but he knew the man needed a break. That was vital to a soldier's function, a nice change of scenery, even if it was only a temporary reprieve.

He opened the door.

Drake looked refreshed and cleanly showered, ready for action.

“Captain, do you need a break?”

“Well, I thought I saw something move through the woods to the west a little earlier, but I think I was mistaken.”



“Yeah, the eyes play tricks. I brought you back some protein packs.”

Before Sarantos could say another word, the packs were airborne and aimed at his head. His reflexes were on target though, grabbing each of the packs out of the air. Though they were hurled to him one at a time, he managed to place each one on small table before the next one arrived.

“You thought you had me, Drake? Can’t happen. I’m so on.”

“Yes, sir, I did mistakenly think I had you. You proved me wrong.”

“That’ll teach you to second guess your Captain.”

“Sir, never would I second guess you, but I did want to see how your reflexes were when you were on the brink of exhaustion.”

“Oh, Drake, now I get it. Major Cleary put you up to this, am I right?”

“Yes, indeed sir. She told me to check on you, that you were still fit for duty and make sure you were still on. I hope you didn’t mind the game, Captain. It was the only thing I could think of short of trying to overtake you when I came on board.”

His head jerked around and he grinned at Drake. “That, Chief, you could never do.”

“No sir. I’d rather face the wrath of Major Cleary.”

He chuckled. “Drake, be careful what you wish for because I’m sure you’ve no idea what the wrath of Major Cleary entails, am I right?”

Drake’s face lit up. “I’m sure you’re right, Captain.”

“Did you see the beds?”

“Yes, Captain, I did. We were very impressed when we came on board.”

“Not to mention, everything appears to be in top working order, ready to be used at a moment’s notice.”

“That’s right. Major Cleary told me to let you know there were no major injuries and she was able to clean up a few minor cuts and bruises to put your crew back in prime working condition.”

He patted Drake on the back. “That’s good news. You married Drake?”

“No sir. Thought about it a few times, but could never take the plunge.”

“I get it. We’re so busy all the time. It’s hard to find the time in this line of work. I guess you’d have to find someone who shared your passion for sailing off into the wild blue yonder?”

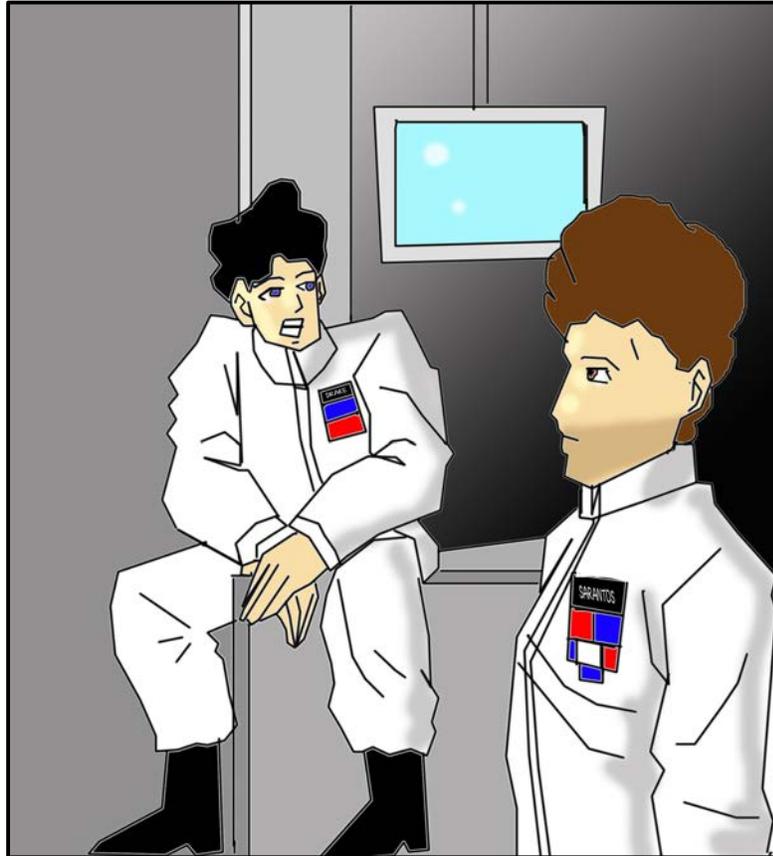
“Oh, I found several girls that would do that but I suppose you could say I’ve never found the one. You know what I mean sir?”

He thought of Addie and until now, he’d never even considered being attached to one woman for the rest of his life. The longest relationship he’d ever had was maybe two weeks. He’d start feeling restless and trapped, until he’d just fly away and never come back. Oh, he’d be kind enough to send a note or contact them from the space station or ship he’d find himself on to say, ‘Sorry I left so abruptly, but I was commissioned elsewhere and duty calls.’ They always thought it was his job that was the problem. He’d always felt like a coward doing that, but the alternative was not worth the hassle. What was he supposed to say instead, ‘Sorry but I can’t be with you anymore because you’re making me jittery, or I really want to go to have sex with your friend because I’m bored with you now?’ Right now, he realized he probably sounded like a pig, which is exactly what so many of the woman who knew him said.

He looked at Drake. The chief was in his early thirties, dark wavy hair and deep blue eyes. He had an Elvis Presley look. That famous rock guy he’d read about that all

the girls thought was so dreamy. Yeah, Drake was indeed the modern version of Elvis. He could have any girl he wanted.

“Drake, you know I do know what you mean about finding the one. It’s not easy, but when you do, it’s dynamite. Hang in there, it’ll happen for you.”



“Sir, if you don’t mind me saying, you mean like you and Lieutenant Stuart?”

“Is it that obvious? I thought we were being discreet?”

“It’s never discreet sir when you feel the love. It flows outward and others take notice.”

He smiled, but wanted to choke on his own bile. That’s not what he wanted to hear. He was a Captain for pity’s sake. He wasn’t allowed to express love or show emotions of that sort. Why couldn’t he just control himself around Addie? This was war they were trapped in and he couldn’t allow his unit to see him drooling around her like some half-assed school boy. Love or no love, he had to get himself under control. He’d need to focus on something else when she was around. But, what? Maybe the war would give him something else to think about?

“Captain, are you okay? I didn’t mean to imply you were not being a capable Captain. Sorry, sir. I was way out of line.”

“No, Drake, you weren’t. Man-to-man, I just can’t seem to stop thinking about her. I’ve never felt this way before and quite frankly, it scares me to death. I don’t want to be blubbering over her while I have an army to attend to and a war to win.”

“Sir. I never said you were blubbering over her, just that you can see the obvious feelings between the two of you. I find it wonderful and refreshing. After all, that type of love keeps us all alive, keeps us fighting for the future and guides our hope for humanity. If you know what I mean? Otherwise, what are we fighting for, if not for love?”

He couldn’t stop his head from bobbing up and down. “Yes, I think you’re right Drake. You’re quite the sage soul and I thank you for putting me straight.”

“Captain, if I may say so, she has a lot of men blubbering.”

He felt his face redden as he laughed. “Yes, Chief, I do believe she does.”

“Do you need rest, sir?”

“You know what, I think I’m going to kick back on this comfortable chair and catch a few z’s now that you put that thought into my head. You’ll wake me if you need me?”

“Sure, Captain.”

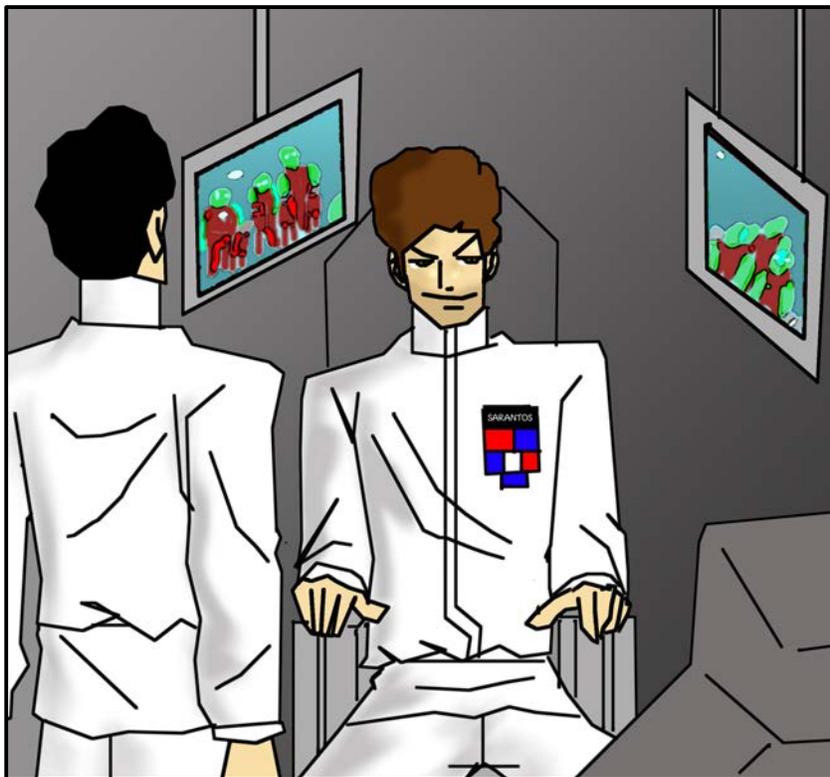
He sat down and looked at the screen once more before drifting off into dreamland.

He knew he was having white dreams about him and Addie turning everything around them into wild lights charged with crazy passion...

“Captain, Captain, wake up.”

“Oh, no, what’s up Drake?”

“There are two large armies moving slowly through the woods. I spotted a couple of strange looking machines behind them. I think they know we’ve re-taken our outpost. I notified Brel. The group is coming forward and you’ll be happy to know that Sargent Toner is with them. He’s returned from your ship.”



“That’s good news. What time is it?”

“06:00 hours sir.”

Captain Sarantos looked at the screen. There were too many of them. It was hopeless. He gathered his composure and smiled. Tomorrow is a mystery, but tonight, he won’t be denied. Tonight, he could do no wrong, it was insane, the way he felt,

but there was nothing he could do but hold onto this outpost. He had to make it happen.

Tonight, he truly understood what Sam Houston, James Bowie, and Davy Crockett felt like when they defended the Alamo. The odds were impossible!