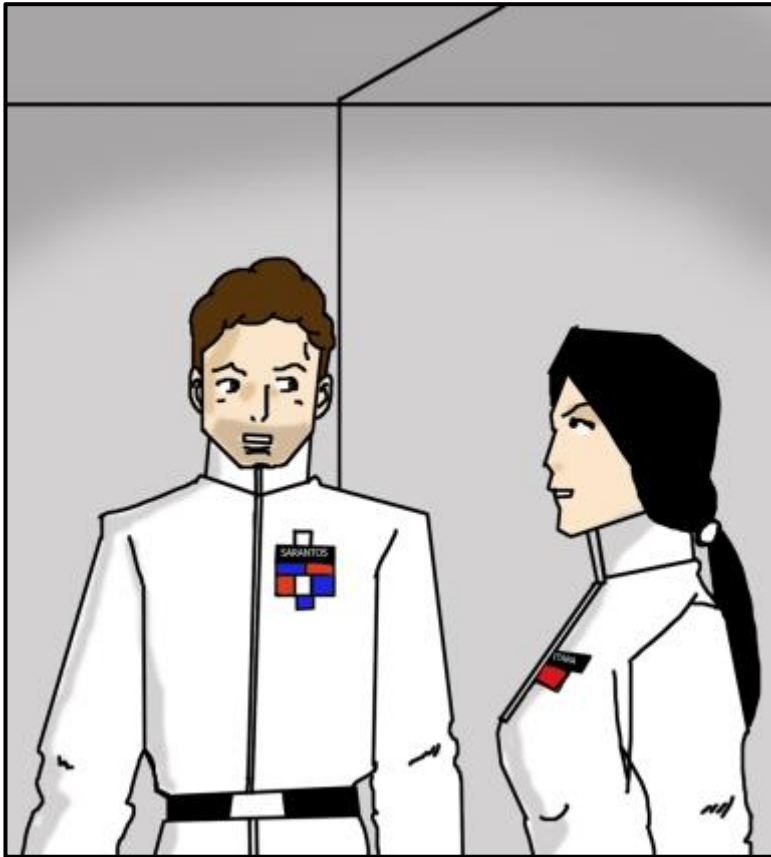


Chapter 1

“Your SMile”

The sound of their footsteps echoed off the blank walls adding hollowness to the already forlorn and cold corridor. This part of the space station always smelled of disinfectant.



“So Lieutenant Kitara, will you be joining me in the conference room with Admiral Bane, or were you just sent to retrieve me?”

“Yes, Captain Sarantos.” Her voice was stern and focused. It always drove him crazy.

Her scent was soft though and fresh, just like the days he’d spent on Okura - the planet he grew up on. The memories of rash youthful summers running around the flowering hills of rural Pendash, day-

dreaming of one day captaining his own spaceship and devotedly helping his grandparents tend to their four different gardens played inside his heart whenever he was next to her. There were times when he truly missed the simple life but the excitement of overseeing his own spaceship was very much in his soul. If she’d only smile! He knew that smile would immediately take away the grey of these dismal walls.

Kitara was human, born and raised on the main planet of Antora. She was slightly taller than him with shoulder length straight black hair that hung wildly around her face with thick curls bouncing uncontrollably as she walked. When she was in uniform, it was usually pulled back showing off flashing blue eyes and luscious red lips but today they'd been summoned to an unplanned meeting of secrecy and great urgency.

He was intoxicated with her. He never told her this though. One night in his private quarters he even wrote a song for her, but she would never find out from him. They had worked together since they'd been ensigns for about ten years, but the admiral frowned upon internal relationships among his field officers. It was very hard to control his overzealous emotions for her but he managed to contain it. Every minute, of every day. He was a Captain and a highly ranked professional. Sarantos belonged to The Federation of Antora.

Antora was a planet comprised of humans until space travel introduced them to unusual races from various types of planets. Some were friendly, some hostile. One thing led to another and wars eventually broke out inspiring many races to join sides in a federation for freedom. Now, decades later Antora was inhabited by many species creating a federation of peace between the joined races. They shared a united purpose.

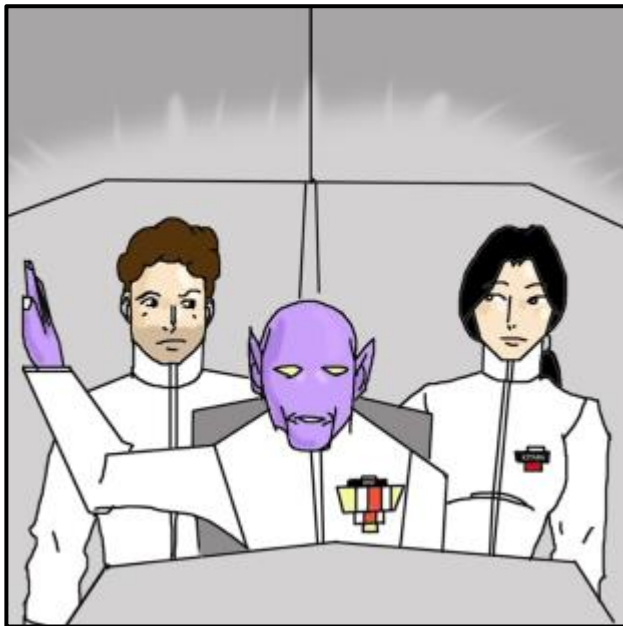
At that time, many humans left their home of Antora and opted for a different way of life. His own ancestors had relocated to Okura, where his grandmother and grandfather met. He hardly knew his father, because most of his time was spent far away from home as an officer of the federation. His mother had nurtured him from a very young age, teaching him a wide variety of skills. She made a point of making sure he was highly educated. She was a linguist as well and shared different languages with him. However, new equipment attached to his uniform and hooked up on the space station, including his ship made the need not as necessary. But, in civilian clothes in a bar there were times it'd come in handy.

His father had died when he was ten years old and his mother had remarried an Okurian.

The Okurian's were a soft-spoken race with some telepathy and a Zen-like approach to life. Brackish was no different. He liked his step-father. His species was also one of the more pleasant races to look upon; human in appearance except for a larger skull and spots down the center of their forehead continuing down the bridge of the nose. The spots were dark brown in color with a tattoo-like appeal. His mother was happy and that's what mattered the most to him.

Kitara had never said a word during their walk. Now they stood together in front of the door. The buzz automatically sounded and they heard the Admiral's familiar voice. "Enter."

The door slid aside with a whoosh.



Admiral Bane sat behind his desk tapping his fingers in an annoying manner. He was agitated. "Come in and sit down." He raised his hand from the desk and for a moment, the silence was gratifying.

No matter how many times he'd looked upon the Olivian race, it still bothered him that they had no noses. Their large ears made their hearing keener than humans, but they also breathed through them, needing no such structure on their

face. He tried not to chuckle at the large droopy mouth that hung down on both sides, more than what humans considered normal. It routinely became poutier when he was upset.

Admiral Bane was a brilliant strategist, highly decorated and admired among his peers. He stared at them with large round eyes, the color of which matched the purple blue tint of his skin and the spiked tuft of hair that protruded behind his ears.

“Good morning. I’m sorry to disturb you on your day off, but it couldn’t wait.” He shook his head and leaned back in his overstuffed chair. “We’ve a delicate situation that needs you, Captain Sarantos and your crew. As we speak, they are checking and refueling the Starship Chicago. You need to be ready to leave at 0700 hrs.” He stopped and took a deep breath, as his ears twitched and moved restlessly. “There’s been a break in the treaty. The Satorians have aligned themselves with the Bendarian and have taken several of our bases on Okura. Currently Captain, we believe they’ve not yet entered the area of your homeland. However, they’re on the move. They’ve also infiltrated our mainland, Omain, Stark and Veltar.”

“What? How’d this happen?” Sarantos anger and fear could not be easily contained and reflected in his voice.

“I understand your anger, Captain Sarantos, but it’s not going to help the situation I’m afraid. Right now, we need to react and that’s why you’re both here. I can’t say that I’m surprised at their actions. These two races never liked the agreed upon peaceful agenda and complained from the start, never appreciating the need to work together. They’re both aggressive races and surely want more than what they originally had, although in the treaty they both clearly received more than their rightful share. We still have some on that side that have vowed to bring their own race back to the peace table. One is Lieutenant Addie Stuart. She’s a fine reflection of her race and will be accompanying you on this mission.”

Sarantos had met her on a few occasions. She was quite seductive but he blocked those thoughts out and said, “I don’t like the idea of bringing a Satorian on this mission, sir. I know she’s talented and a brilliant strategist but her race can’t be trusted; they just proved that to all of us!”

“Like it or not, Captain, you will take her with you and allow her in on your plans. She’ll understand her own kind far better than you do and she’s very loyal to the Federation. It’s not open for discussion.”

“But,”

“You heard me Lieutenant Kitara, not open for discussion. Now, you and Captain Sarantos learn how to play nice on this mission, or it could fail and jeopardize everything.”



As if on cue, the door swished open and in walked Lieutenant Addie Stuart.

“Sorry, I’m late sir. I was in the debriefing room with Major Flint.” She nodded at the Admiral and faced him and Kitara. “I’m sorry if this mission will be uncomfortable for you, but I promise I’m committed to the federation and will not tolerate any insubordination against the peace treaty and the alliance of our great people.”

Sarantos tried to study her face, but found himself drowning in her violet eyes. She was pure magic. She smiled at him. He'd never seen her smile before. Her smile painted the room. He felt his body swell up like a peacock. At that moment, he knew she'd drifted into his life for a reason and he'd never be the same again. He smiled back. Good God, she drove him wild from the first time he'd met her and didn't know why. After all, her torso, front and back, was covered in greenish-blue scales with a purple incandescent color shimmering through it, though her breasts were quite defined and very perky. Her muscles rippled when she moved and her long purple hair sparkled down her back. He felt weak, intoxicated and suffocating when she sat in a chair and crossed her long legs slightly, accidentally touching his in the process. Her physical presence was strong and she possessed a fierce personality that radiated confidence around the room.

Of course, he wanted this powerful, beautiful woman on his space ship. It'd be a long journey. He heard Kitara next to him give out a long sigh. He looked casually at her and she narrowed her eyes, clearly letting him know he was being unbelievable. He didn't care though. This was an important mission and they needed to do their best to stop these war mongers. Of course, it had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. Having her along would satisfy him somehow, even if nothing ever happened.

He glanced at the Admiral and said, "I understand sir. We welcome Lieutenant Addie to our team."

"I appreciate the three of you understanding the dire situation and agreeing to work together as a unified force. I expect Lieutenant Stuart to head up the security team on board the Chicago. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir."

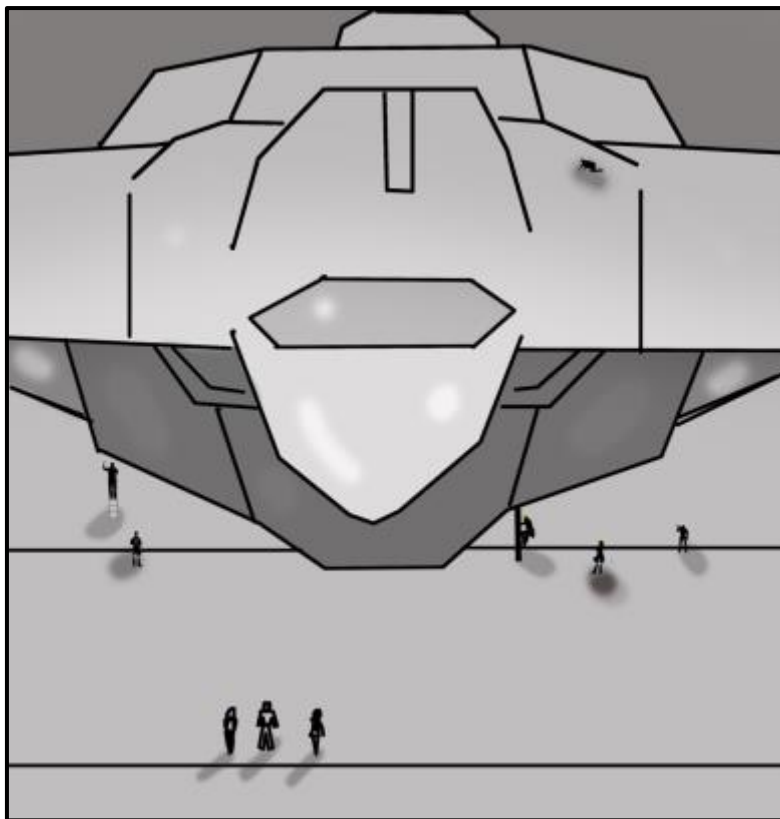
"Yes, sir."

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, now get ready. I’m not sure when you’ll return. Lieutenant Stuart, will brief you on board the ship about his discussion with Major Flint, as soon as possible. Captain, your team has already been chosen for this mission and will meet you on the ship. Some are familiar comrades, others are newly added. You’ll want to look over this list as soon as possible and become familiar with them. Lieutenant Kitara, you’ll be second in command, the Captain’s first officer.”

The Admiral stood up and shook their hands. “Good luck and we’ll stay in direct contact from this space station. Do not contact any of the mentioned planets, the enemy doesn’t know we know. They believe they have time to move forward taking control before they’re noticed.”

With that last comment, the Admiral walked out of the room leaving them all standing there as the door whooshed behind him with a finality that sent chills down Sarantos spine.



He loved the moment he walked onto the docking area. His heart raced with the excitement at seeing his ship eagerly waiting for his return. It was like an old friend who held part of your soul intact until they’d meet you again and renew fond memories, quickly becoming

reacquainted. His face must surely be beaming with the anticipation of standing on the bridge, guiding his crew to win this war.

Suddenly, that thought scared him; war. It was the first time he commandeered his ship during war time. The crowded area full of noise and people running around in preparation suddenly became lonely and quiet, as he moved towards his friend with the understanding that this was now a different type of relationship. He and his ship were at the top of the chain of command. It was invariably lonelier there, waiting to win or fail. His crew would anticipate his decisions, while depending on him to make the right choices between the possibility of life and death of the hundreds of living entities on board the Starship Chicago. The ship would stand strong with his command or buckle and collapse into oblivion. The friendship could die in space like so many stars before them, but maybe not go out with a loud explosion. Maybe only a whimper and it'd be over in a flash. Maybe history would remember them, maybe not.

“Captain?”

The world around him sprung back to life, as Kitara's voice stopped his melancholy thoughts and refocused him. Sounds of banging, laughter and talking almost became deafening. He shook his head.

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Just wondered if you were okay? You appeared to be drifting, can I assist you sir?”

“No, thanks.” He slapped her on the back and grinned. “I was just caught up in the moment, after seeing The Chicago. You know, captain stuff?”

“Sure. I was involved in a small skirmish outside of Deadpan before I met you. A sergeant took me and his team into a bad sector where violence was a dominating factor. Explosives were used on a daily basis. To be there meant your life was in jeopardy twenty-four-seven. I was a young cadet and soon fear turned into a three-faced enemy; with it you could die, cause a comrade’s death, or lose to evil infractions that could possibly cause the death of millions. I chose anger.” She was silent for a moment as their footsteps competed with the surrounding sounds. She looked at him and grinned. “Oh, don’t get me wrong, anger also had three-faces; destroy or be destroyed, the threat becomes clearer, and intense emotional determination that frees our personal boundaries.”

Her words bit into him and brought clarity. She knew what he was feeling. That could be beneficial on this mission.

“They were Belocks,” she continued. “It was easy. I loathed them. They were responsible for my parent’s deaths. They were murdered 17 years earlier when I was two. They were part of the Freedom Fighters at the start of the great war. Years later the Belocks were still running around causing trouble and instigating revolutions all over Antora. That’s when I learned that fear kills you. So yes, for me, it’s personal.”

He looked at her for a full second. She was both beautiful and sad. Her hair was pulled back allowing for the pinpoint determination to show. She held her chin high. She’d be an asset in war for sure. He never knew this about her before today.

“I hate to disagree with the Admiral, but I’m sure that the Belocks had something to do with this outbreak of war. They must be behind it all. I wouldn’t put it past Admiral Bock to head it up. He had ties with the Satorians and the Bendarian. I heard his son even married a Bendarian.”

“I’ve heard of him described as a ruthless character. How’d he get transferred? I thought he was in the war prison on Keesh?”

“Sometimes we’re too soft Captain. Good behavior and as an admiral, of course, they went easy on him. Good behavior, my ass.”

Her face turned red with anger and her fists were clenching and unclenching. The door of the ship opened as they entered The Starship Chicago.

He was glad she was on his side.

The familiar sounds of the ship felt good. They’d installed a new lighting system in the corridors, much more efficient and softer on tired eyes. He was hungry.

“Let’s have our meeting in the Diamond Room.”

“Yes, Captain.”

She lifted her bracer to her face and said, “Open link, Lieutenant Addie Stuart.”

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“The Captain would like us to attend to the briefing in the Diamond Room. We’re on our way there now Please make it happen.”

“Hungry, is he? I’ll locate a secluded area so we won’t be interrupted.”

“The Captain nodded. We’ll see you there.”



Kitara's look was one of exasperation. She would never say it but he knew that she didn't like Addie Stuart. She found her too abrasive and assertive, not unlike herself. He chuckled.

"What's so funny, Captain?"

"Nothing. Did you notice who our doc is?"

"Yes, Captain. She's sufficient."

"Sufficient? That's your word for Dr. Major Cheri

Cleary? She's a brilliant medical officer, renowned scientist and super aggressive with her treatments. I heard she's made sure they've packed everything in the way of modern medicine on board. Her staff is well picked by her personally."

He couldn't say it, but he liked being surrounded by gorgeous woman, especially ones that were more than capable of doing their job. He was lucky.

"I suppose, you're right about her. This is certainly going to be a different mission than the ones we've done previously. I heard Lieutenant John Baker is heading up engineering. He's knowledgeable and likable. His crew will work great with him."

“Yes, I like John. I’ve known him quite a few years. This is unquestionably a different mission. It’s one I’ve looked forward to my whole life but never actually expected. Not that I’m a war monger but to captain a Starship that was built for the purpose to preserve peace, well...it’s both a challenge and an honor.”

“I understand, Captain.”

“I was informed the three of us are the only ones to share information about our mission. I don’t like it, because this is a Starship of peace but is quite adaptable for war, one that can hold up under the fiercest of attacks. Everyone on this vessel will expect a peaceful mission, except Cherri and John who’ll notice the improvements made to the ship and maybe some of the other Lieutenants on board that are more equipped in the lessons of war than a hand holding expedition. This staff is not stupid. Others will figure it out. Gossip will spread. I’m going to send a message to the Admiral, explaining my concern for my staff not being alerted to the true purpose of our voyage.”

“I agree, Captain. Hopefully, he’ll see it your way.”

The corridors were quite empty. Everyone was in their quarters or on deck getting ready for the mission. It felt like a ghost ship. It always did when he first boarded, but this time he didn’t like the feeling.

Several Ensigns approached them as they reached the door to the Diamond Room.

“Ensign Harry Born and Ensign Judith Equip reporting, Captain. We’ve delivered all your belongings to both your quarters and Lieutenant Kitara’s as well. Is there anything else sir?”

“No. Thank you both.”

They saluted and left.

The door in front of him swished open. No Addie. He spotted a table at a private corner in the back. They could have done this in his quarters, but he loved the atmosphere of this room. It wasn't as cold either. The lights on the tables and the twinkling lights around the darkened room made him feel more comfortable. He enjoyed eating his meals in an elaborate setting. When he was a kid, his mother and grandparents used to have a fire going most of the time, or at the very least candles on the table. They made sure the table was nicely laid out. It was an area used for conversation and not just eating. He still carried that feeling with him today.

Matt Blume was behind the counter. He was a jolly guy that enjoyed conversing with people, making this an ideal place for him to work. He'd always joined them on their peace missions, until now. He couldn't stop himself from frowning. Matt didn't know.

“Hey, Captain, why the glum look?”

He forced himself to smile. “Just thinking Matt. Glad to see you. It's been a while.”

“Yeah, what'll you have?”

“Can you bring me one of your breakfast specials and a pot of your finest coffee. They'll be three of us.”

“I'll just have a bowl of fruit and a hardboiled egg, Matt. Thanks.”

“That's not enough food Kitara, you'll waste away. Glad you're here, this place is a tomb on the first day.”

He cringed when Matt used the word tomb. Today, everything was bothering him. It made the appeal of being a captain less exciting.

They'd just sat down when Addie walked through the door. She looked serious but once she arrived at the table, she sat down and smiled.

He needed to concentrate but her smile was a sight to behold. How could he feel this way when he'd written a song for Kitara? He was a strong man, disciplined even, except when it came to women. Maybe, he'd be better off with an all-male crew.

She looked directly into his eyes and smiled. "Good morning, Captain."

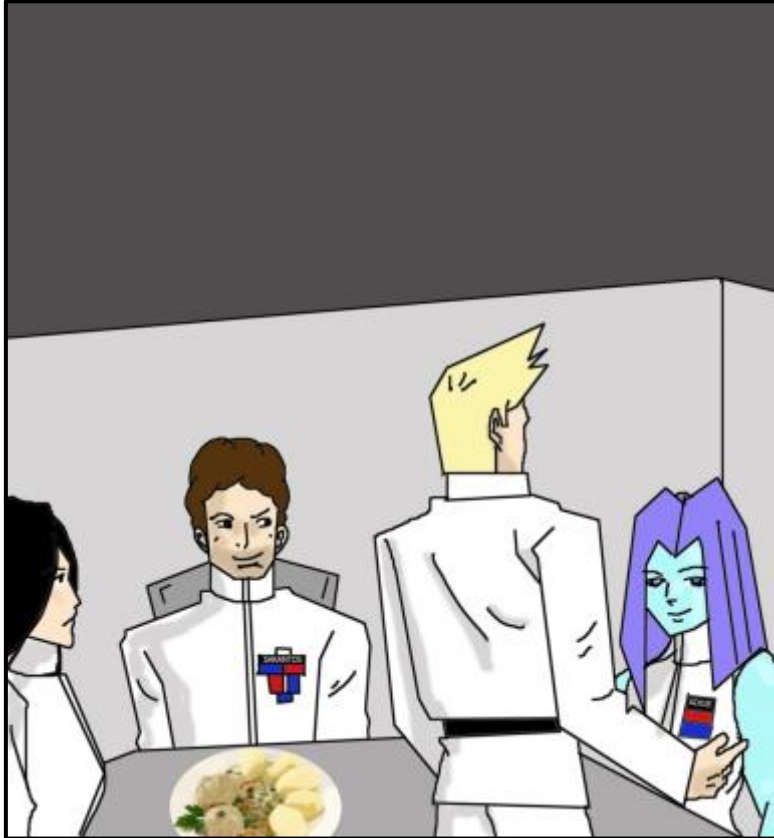
He smiled back at her endlessly with the grin of a silly school boy captured in the claws of love. What was wrong with him? This woman could change his life for better or worse on this mission. It was crazy but true and it killed him he'd never be able to act on his suppressed urges. He wasn't sure but a part of him thought she knew exactly what she was doing; teasing him with the warmth of her energy that cut through him like a knife cutting effortlessly thru butter. All of this random confusion flashed thru his mind in the blink of an eye.

Matt delivered the food and sat his in front of him allowing the stupid smile to fade. "Thanks, Matt."

He nodded at him and turned to Addie. "What can I get you Lieutenant?"

"I'm good. I already ate, but you could bring me a cup of that stuff you call coffee."

"Will do," he said and winked.



Obviously, her violet eyes had no effect on Matt. What did she eat, anyway?

“Addie, I didn’t know you knew Matt.”

“Yes, I met him on the station. He worked in a little café on deck 10. I like him, he’s pleasant.”

“Okay. Let’s get started. Where’re we headed?”

“We’re going to Okura first. Sorry Captain, but that’s one big reason you were chosen. The rebels are sweeping the land. Okura is too important to lose it to them. There’s about ten resistant camps surrounding the location of the rebel’s main outpost.”

“Oh god. I didn’t know it had gotten that bad. This isn’t good. What area are we dealing with, Lieutenant?”

“A place called Olive, I believe it’s on the outskirts of Omain the capital.”

“Yes, that’s on the eastern side of the planet. There’s four capitals on the planet. Do we know if they’ve set up a perimeter around the other three, as well?”



Kitara popped a grape in her mouth and said, “That’d make perfect sense, Captain Sarantos. Why do only one capitol? It makes more sense to gather around all four taking them at the same time.”

“If you’re both right and I think I must agree it makes the most sense, then the other locations may not be prepared and will have no infrastructure in place.”

“Well, it’d make sense, two of the four are nothing but farming communities with the capitols used for political rallies and government deliberations. The Admiral said not to communicate with the planet, but we have no choice.” His head dropped as his mind raced. “He’s right. We run the risk of some of the rebels already being inside the capitols working from the center core. What do you think, Lieutenant Addie Stuart?”

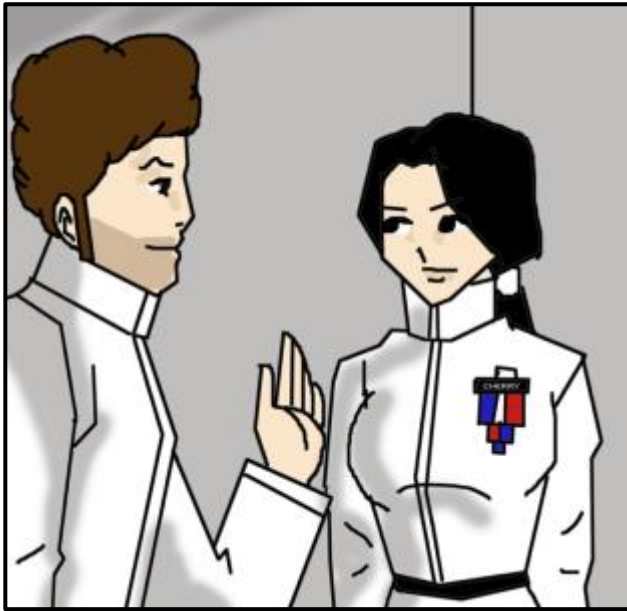
“Being the Chief of Security, I’ve already informed my officers to prepare the armory for war. I had no choice, Captain. I’d suggest we transport to the outskirts of Olive first, locate the resistance and find out if they know of any other outposts either for the rebels or the resistance. Then we can go from there.”

He nodded his head up and down. “Good. I like that. It’s settled then. Let’s get this ship out there in space.”

He stood up and left the room taking his coffee cup with him after filling it up to the brim. His lieutenants followed close behind.

The door opened and he faced the face of his friend. The three of them stepped out of the elevator.

“Captain on the bridge.”



The Major Cherri Cleary stood from her position to the left of the captain. She was smaller than he remembered and stood only to his chin. Her human traits were simple, fresh, and youthful for her ten years his senior. She wore her uniform well and her dark black hair was braided down her back. With her sparkling dark eyes she moved towards him and shook his hand. Her grip was strong.

“Good to see you, Captain.”

“You too, Major. How’ve you been. I think it’s been about four years since we’ve spoken?”

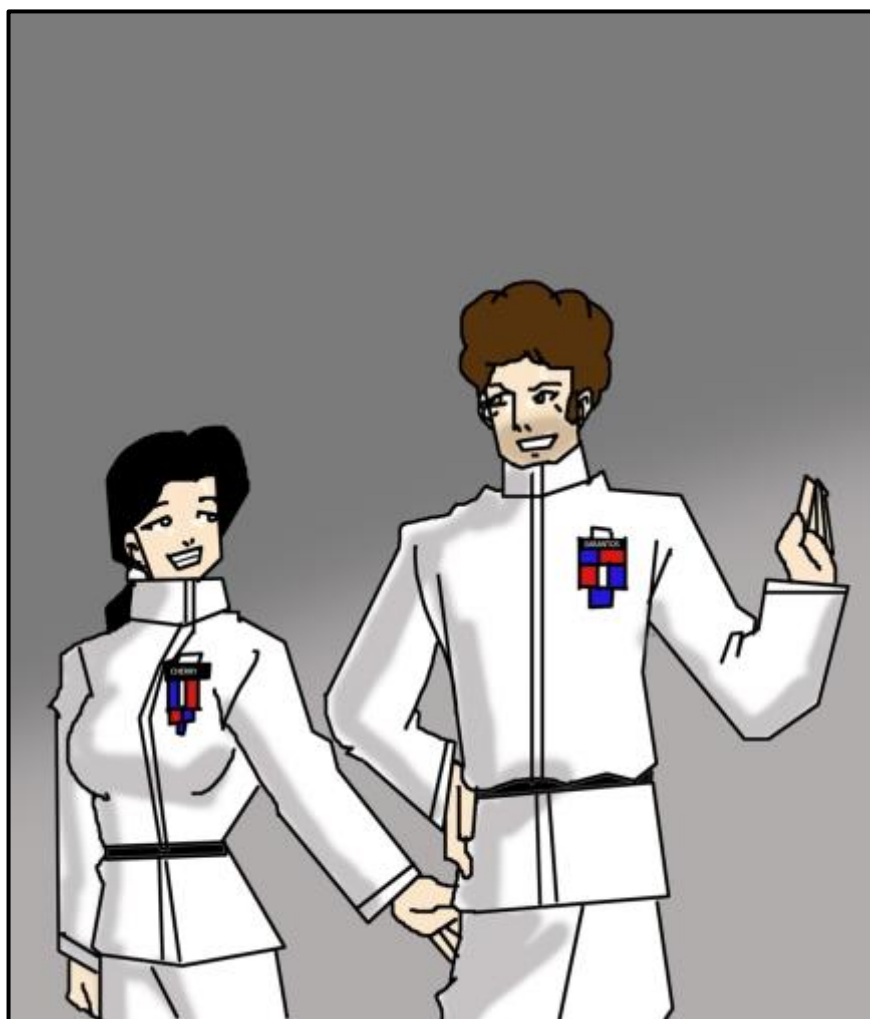
“Yes, Captain. That was some party. It’s good to be serving with you aboard The Chicago.”

Her look told him she knew. She knew about this mission. He was glad because it was important they had enough medicine on board if they’re indeed going to war.

“Captain, your office please.”

“Yes, Major.”

The door shut behind them and she quickly moved around to stand next to him. “Okay, Sarantos I hate the formalities.” She hugged him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Good lord, it’s good to see you again. I’m glad to be serving on this mission. The Admiral told me about the war. He knew I’d have to prepare. I just wanted you to know. That changed my mind on who I brought along with me, as well.”



He grinned. “You haven’t changed Cheri you’re still a little spit fire!”

“That’s right, and don’t you forget it, Sarantos. We’ve had some great nights together but this is business. But, what the hell, if you need a little fun before we arrive, you know where my quarters are located.” She winked at him and smacked him on the ass. “Okay, let’s get back out there. You have a ship to run.”

She left. He stood there grinning, shaking his head. Finally, he went to join his crew.

There were some new crew members on board, but he didn't have time to make all of their acquaintances just yet. This ship had a mission and it was his responsibility to first get this ship out there in space. He was feeling anxious and couldn't wait to see the stars, the nebulas and the blackness that was so vast...it took his breath away just thinking about it.

He noticed one young cadet, Tom Flann. He read about him; he graduated at the top of his class and had 40 consecutive successful days in the starship flight simulation. He still had never failed a test in flight simulation. Impressive.

He went and sat down next to the major, in the captain's chair. Kitara sat to his right. Chief officer Greg Petty was at the helm and next to him was Chief Candy Storm, they were both efficient and well known as masters who knew how to bring the ship around with the smoothness of a gentle breeze. They turned and looked at him.

"Ready, Captain," said Chief officer Petty.

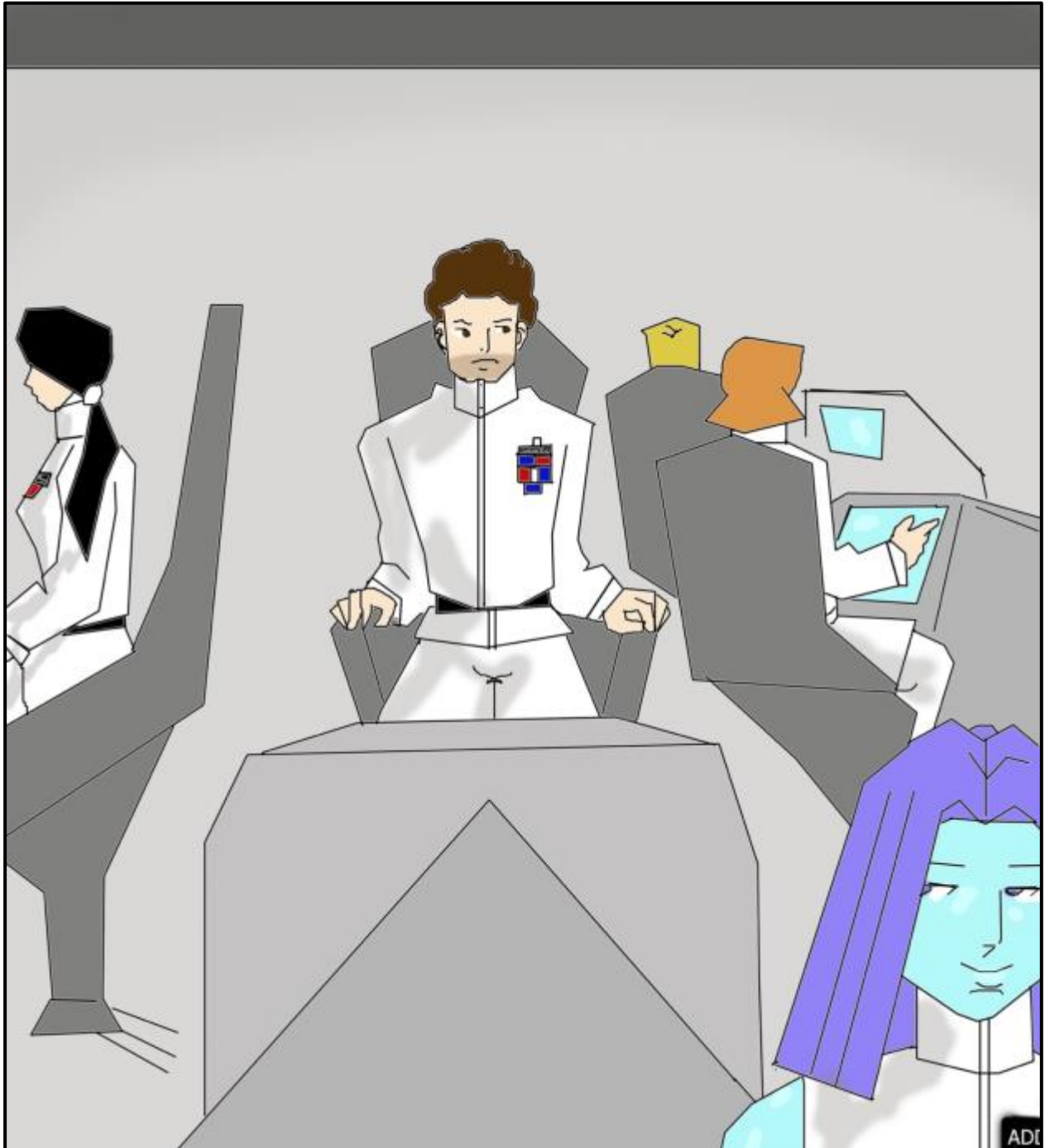
"On screen. Open a com to engineering room."

"Engine room live, sir."

"Captain, welcome aboard. We've got the engines at full throttle and powered up, ready to go."

"Keep it at ½ impulse, and take her out slow. Come about and keep the port thrusters at 14 degrees."

He felt the ship easily lift and move into position. His stomach sunk to his feet. That'd never happened before. This time, he felt shaky. He needed something to calm his nerves.



Then he saw her smile at him. Lieutenant Addie Stuart could set him free, fade away the blue and take away the grey. She made him forget all about the misery that belonged to this mission. She was glorious like the ship itself. On this journey, he felt like she was part of him. She belonged to the ship and maybe even to his heart.

“Stand by for warp.”

“Ready, Captain.”

He grinned at Addie and sat back in his Captain’s chair. “Engage.”