

Chapter 4 “Bankruptcy”

The next few days were something peculiar. Following the eyes on deck of the ship, it was obvious there was a stir among the crew. Nothing had changed except for the constant sound of something hitting the side of the ship as it drifted through the black space.



Addie was on edge trying to keep everyone from going stir crazy. Her primary focus was preventing the crew from seeing and hearing things that were not there. She assigned extra security to the engine room, the ship’s deck and the Diamond Room. It was a good idea and proved useful occasionally.

Although the crew had been hand-picked for their professionalism, that didn’t mean they were exempt from the constant blackness that lingered in the air. Darkness crept into their soul during the

day. No light from the glorious solar systems penetrated this unnerving state they found themselves in now.

Sarantos worried he would go mad from the unsettling darkness, compounded by the constant banging and Block still being assigned to follow him. It also concerned

him that the ship might run into something they wouldn't see until it was too late. Although their tracking locator for preventing such an occurrence was state-of-the-art, it might not be enough in this strange atmosphere.

Sarantos worried that Addie's sister would magically appear on the ship and teleport him to a black hole, one where there would be no escape. He had that dream over and over repeatedly. He'd always awaken screaming because of the weird things she'd do to him that made him uncomfortable. Block would nudge him to stop the screaming and then Sarantos always had to take a shower to get rid of the sweat that gushed down his body. How much more could he tolerate?

He was unable to visit the doc anymore. The crew members overwhelmed her with regular visits. They seemed afraid of madness because the black void outside kept calling them. Cleary was also missing a lot. She was constantly visiting her fake friend on the creative deck. Cleary was recommending the crew do the same escape fantasies to soften their anxiety. Finally, Cleary encouraged light conversation about anything excluding the blackness. She didn't know what else to do.

It seemed to help the crew. However, Addie was getting upset because her security crew were visiting it too often and she tracked them down in the creative room and dragging them, almost kicking and screaming, back to the real world and back to their jobs. The Creative Room was all attitude. It avoided the truth.

One of her crew members was stable in sick bay. Sarantos didn't know the man, but he was still there because he told the doc there were many days he wanted to hurt himself since they entered the darkness.

He was an older Sergeant who when he was younger faced bankruptcy and the fear of not having control overtook him and broke him. Did the darkness play on their fears? Did the darkness within him awaken? The violent rage buried in his subconscious awaken?

Bankruptcy is no longer an issue in most worlds. Money is not an issue. Objects had taken their place. Trade is the way most lived today. They use coins for drinks in the pubs on some space stations, but everything is much more organized and functions on a more rational system.

There were many days that Sarantos existed alone as though someone trapped him in loneliness inside his shell. And that's just it. He resembled a shell of a man. He dared not share his depression with Addie. She had enough on her mind. The doc had her own issues. As the Captain of the starship, he couldn't confide in Block. He had no one to turn to and unable to tell anybody he's stuck in hell inside a black hole riding around on a ghost ship. Well, it had people on it, but they were acting like ghosts or zombies. He couldn't decide which one, but it didn't matter it was the same no matter how he approached the topic.

They were lucky that Sonny's crew were on board, because the darkness-induced paranoia never got to them... interesting, it never got to Brel either. Brel is still a mystery to Sarantos, but a thankful one.

Brel would visit him on the deck occasionally when he wasn't taking over someone's job in security. Someone was always freaking out and ending up in sick bay.

Tonight in this veil of darkness, it only mattered that he was finally getting to see Addie for dinner. Brel and Block were joining them. He hadn't seen Addie since she assigned Block to guard him.

Addie's so busy lately. She rarely slept. She keeps breaking her sleep pattern up according to the needs of the crew. Between her, Brel and Sonny and the rest of his crew the ship ran smoothly because of them. He mustn't forget John. His best friend is always sharp and nothing ever seems to faze him, at least not that he ever shows.

Sarantos sat back in his captain's chair from where he guided the starship and sighed. It's the ripples that change the world.



“Another tense yet uneventful ride through space, except for the banging and lights. Has anyone seen any more lights? Petty? What about you Storm?”

Sarantos regularly trusted the two of them to be observant and focused on their jobs even when they might be as boring as they were right now. It's a challenge to be alert. It reminded him of driving a car on planet Earth at night many years ago. Except nowadays, cars aren't necessary anymore because jet vehicles run by computers and using solar energy are the norm.

Petty said, “Nothing, Captain.”

“It’s been deathly quiet,” said Chief Candy Storm.

“Yes, I it’s been insanely quiet, except for the repetitive banging. I wonder what hits the ship?”

Block stood aside and showed no interest in the conversation. He focused on protecting his Captain.

Petty said, “I’m sure, Captain, that we probably wouldn’t want to know. I hope we’re not bumping into some unknown creature that might bring its wrath down on us.”

“That’s an interesting thought, Petty. A scary one, but solid. Don’t you agree Block?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Chief Storm stared out into the void and said, “Yes, scary.”

Her voice scared Sarantos. It lacked emotion. Storm spoke like a zombie with no inflection, just a monotonous sound that bounced off the ship’s lifeless walls. He heard absolute death whispering to them, a reflection of the ghost ship as they now moved through space. It reflected a prison holding prisoners in a controlled environment lost in space. One day they might return to the world of the living if they passed the true test of survival. We all have to die someday. Why not do it painfully and with meaning?

The Captain wasn’t sure how many would make it, hell he wasn’t sure he would himself.

The aggressive noiselessness on the helm continued as the gloom swallowed them whole enfolding them in its deadly grip. Just the occasional bang on the side of the ship's hull brought them back to life. It was only a slight spank, a shift in their seats that left them eagerly awaiting the larger impact that never came. They needed something to talk about. Everyone longed for closure.

They all sat there staring into the darkness until the shift ended. He needed to pick up the pace and get the crew involved in discussion, but he didn't. He appeared hurt and ashamed. As a Captain he continued on unable to offer more than he did especially when the crew needed it most.

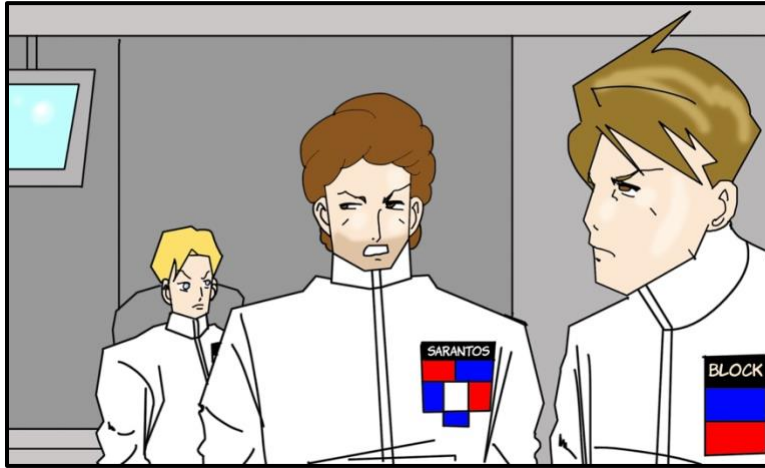
The hours passed. He sat there lost in anticipation, lost in his own shadow needing a solution, but none came so he sat there with the rest of them... thump... thump... thump... in a pure state of confusion.

Stuck somewhere in his head, again, Sarantos seemed oblivious to his surroundings. Block broke his brainstorm and the lull of the room.

“Captain, we need to leave or you'll miss dinner.”

Nodding like a supervised puppet head, Sarantos stood up and stretched.

“Good night everyone. Enjoy your evening. Please inform the next shift they will need to inform me of any changes during their watch, and I mean anything at all unusual.”



“Yes, Captain,” said Petty.

Sarantos left with Block. If aliens were watching and knew nothing about them, they would wonder what they were doing staring into a black hole. Thunder’s loud when it runs

across the sky but there’s no sound in the depths of a black hole. Their own heartbeats and sad truth about their own lives was that thunder. As it ran across their minds, it scared them into a deeper sense of loss and the deeper they hid, the louder the thunder.

Walking down the empty corridors of the ship, Sarantos grew sad. The walls were lined with loneliness. Gone were the sounds of laughter and chatter of later rendezvous for a friendly drink or sharing a quiet dinner.

“Block, what made you join the Starship Chicago as a crew member?”

“Captain it was something I’d thought about for years during my academy days. I met Lieutenant Stuart, and I liked her as a person. She was genuine and hardworking. A noble person unafraid to take charge. She never put her crew at risk without her being right there in the mess with everyone else.”

“Yes, that’s the Lieutenant, all right.”

“Yes, it is. When I heard she was going to the Chicago... well, it made sense I would follow her. Excuse me for admitting this sir, but she’s also easy on the eyes. It makes combat more manageable.”

Sarantos smiled.

Addie is one of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen and there were many times he didn’t accept she is now his... he is one lucky man to have found her light. She is the closest to heaven he’ll ever be.

“That’s okay Block, I understand entirely,” said the captain.

“Thanks, sir. And having you as Captain of this Starship is a bonus.”

“You’re welcome,” said Sarantos.

“I enjoyed the security end of the detail as well as protecting and fighting to keep others safe. I had three sisters growing up in Chicago on Earth and trust me, there were many times that came in handy. So Captain I needed to join the security detail. I have flying and mechanical skills along with computer programming dexterity, but they’re my back up assets.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. I always loved flying and dreamed of being a Captain of a Starship for as long as I can remember. Between you and me, there are days like these where I wonder what I was thinking!”

“I understand, sir.” Block looked glazed over for just a moment. “I completely understand.”

The dining hall being empty wasn't unusual these days. Block was standing by the door looking like a changing guard from the Buckingham Palace in the old English movies.

Sarantos sipped on a glass of wine Matt brought him to drink before disappearing behind the counter to prepare dinner.

Addie's late. That wasn't unusual either these days.

There was one ensign sitting at a table by the door eating a salad and sipping on a dark drink.

He wanted to yell for Block. Then he did anyway.

“Block.”

Block looked at him as Sarantos waved him over.

“Captain, what can I do for you?” Block stood in front of him looking concerned.

“Block, sit down and share a drink with me. It's too quiet over here and the silence on this once busy ship is driving me mad.”

Block nodded.

“Ok, yes, sir. Thank you.”



Block pulled out a chair and sat down. He poured himself a glass of wine with the extra glass that Matt had left on the table.

“Block, didn’t the Lieutenant appoint several of her team to man the Diamond Room?”

“Yes, Captain, but they...” Block abruptly stopped and pointed to the bar area. “Here they come now. They messaged me they were grabbing lunch. That’s why I was standing at the door, Captain.”

The two guards sat with drinks and sandwiches.

“Sure, Block. They need to eat, and it’s not busy at all. Perfect time for a slight break.”

The only guest continued to be the ensign, and she finished, stood up and nodded towards the two guards before exiting the hall.

“I’m hungry, Block. Where are those two?”

“They’re running about another half hour late, sir.”

“Okay.”

John entered the hall. Thrilled to see his good friend, Sarantos stood up and waved him over to their table excitedly.

“John.” The Captain remained standing until his friend approached so he may shake his hand.

“Good to see you, Captain.”

“John, this ghost ship is driving me insane.”

Both men sat down in unison.

“Yes, it’s making us all a little mad, Captain. Block, good to see you.”

“Yes, you too, Lieutenant.”

Matt looked over then joined them at the table, bringing more glasses along with an interesting appetizer.

“Sorry, I took a few minutes Captain. I’m working on a special dinner for you. John and Block, will you two be joining them for dinner?”

Before they answered Sarantos said, “Yes, they will. Let’s make this more interesting.”



John and Block both nodded in agreement.

Matt quickly took their orders and poured out more drinks.

“I hope you all enjoy the melted flavorian cheese wrapped in spinach dough. My new specialty,” said Matt.

Before they answered, he went off to check on the rest of the dinner.

Sarantos took a bite. “Wow, that’s packed full of flavor and spice. Most enjoyable. I needed that burst of flavor and aroma. Awakens the heart.”

“Right, Captain,” said Block after trying one.

John picked up one and threw the whole thing in his mouth in one go. “Nice,” said John.

The men laughed, causing the guards to glance over and verify everything was ok - they weren’t being driven mad by a strange entity peeking in through the blackness.

Suddenly a light breeze floated into the room. Addie had apparently showered and dressed for dinner. She, as always, defined elegance. Every man stood up when she entered with Brel on her arm.

Her smile undeniable as she waltzed across the room like a princess knowing she commanded the full attention of every eye in the place.

“Captain,” she said smiling as Brel sat her at the table.

The guards stood up. They placed themselves on both sides of the door.

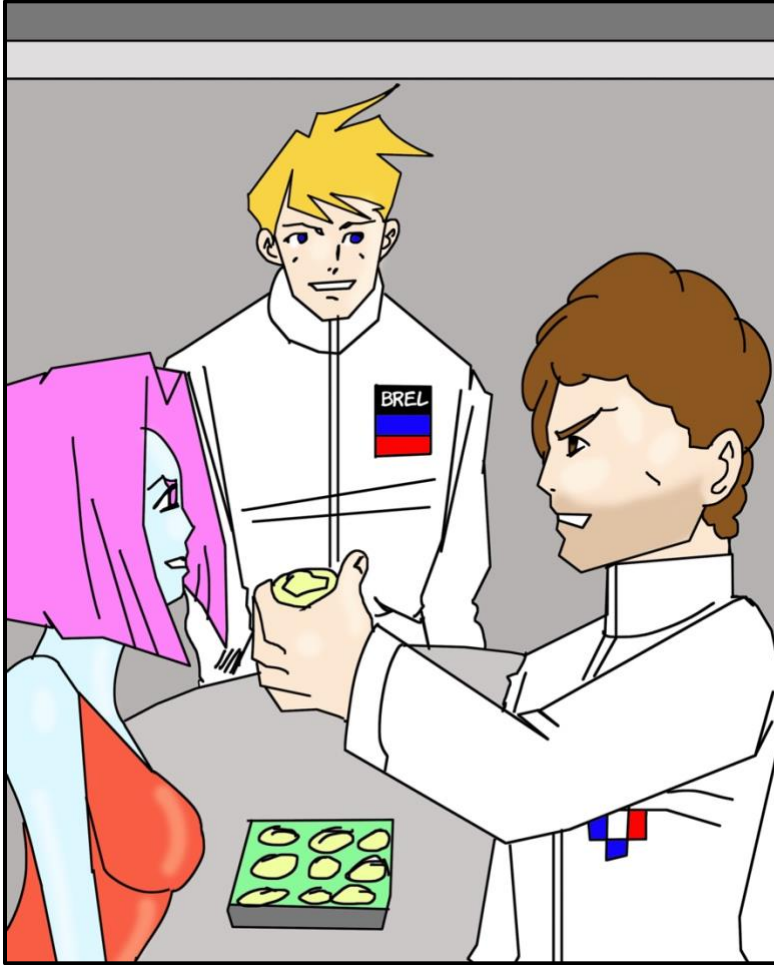
God, she is incorrigible. She knows you can't top her. The breath escaped between his teeth as he sat back admiring her. Funny how life goes. You think you're in charge, but you're not.

“So, how's the security detail going?”

Good grief, that's what came out of his mouth? She had a talent for making him ordinary.

“Fine,” she said. Brel poured her a drink.

“Brel, it's fantastic to see you. I'm glad you were able to join us for dinner.”



“Thanks, Captain. I’m glad to be here.”

“You all have to try one of these appetizers. Delicious,” said the Captain.

Sarantos picked one up and put it in Addie’s mouth.

“Mm...,” she intoned drawing out and licking her lips.

Everyone within earshot sensed a quiver as they delivered an uncomfortable scene.

How does Addie do that to him? She can’t help it. She’s just too damn sexy. There’re holes in his soul without her.

Watching her made it easier to let any fear go he had about the unhappy people on the ship and the darkness that surrounded them. When he looked into her eyes, he lost the urge to obsess on the fear and instead grew captivated with the vision of Addie sitting beside him, almost drooling. It’s great not to be dead.

He couldn’t stay in that idle world of contentment.

“So, now I have everyone’s attention. I want to bring something up.”

“Oh, Captain. Really? I hope it’s personal, this moment is our only time away from the madness,” said Addie. Something irritated her voice.

She knew him too well. Her voice made him blush, like a child just reprimanded for speaking out of turn. He hadn’t felt that way since he was at least nine.

“Sorry, but it isn’t personal.”

Brel said, “What is it, Captain?”

At least someone’s willing to listen to him. He knew the situation stressed Addie like the rest, but they should give him a break, after all this is important.



“Thanks, Brel.”

Addie looked perturbed sipping on her drink.

“Well, I’m thinking, what if, and it’s a big what if, we are not seeing everything in a proper perspective?”

John jumped in and said, “What do you mean, Captain?”

“Suppose we’re being blocked from viewing what’s really out there? You know what I mean? Perhaps they’re toying with us.”

“I’m not sure I follow you, Captain,” said an agitated Addie.

“We base our perception here on what we’ve been told, but what we’ve been told is not much.”

Brel said, “I think I understand what you mean Captain. We’re seeing what we think we should see in a black hole. For all we know there might be creatures attached to the sides of our ship draining us of our energy.”

“That’s exactly it, Brel,” said Sarantos. “Suppose the creatures are enjoying a free ride and making sure we give it to them, and just maybe, our energy supplies them with life?”

John said, “What you’re stating is that we don’t know the truth? The possibilities are endless and until we experience this and record it as fact what we’re facing is nothing worth recording?”

“Sort of, John. We can record our thoughts and prepare for different situations but until something happens here we record and learn from, all we have to go on is our previously recorded experiences which amounts to almost nothing.”

Addie smiled. “You’re theorizing banging against the ship’s side might be normal in this black hole? Until we understand it, we can’t really analyze it as fact.”

Sarantos smiled at Addie. “That’s it, and my thoughts were just that. Instead of allowing the darkness to take control of us, let’s take control back from the darkness. Assign all crew to log a diary of their time in this space. What they hear, sense, and see.”

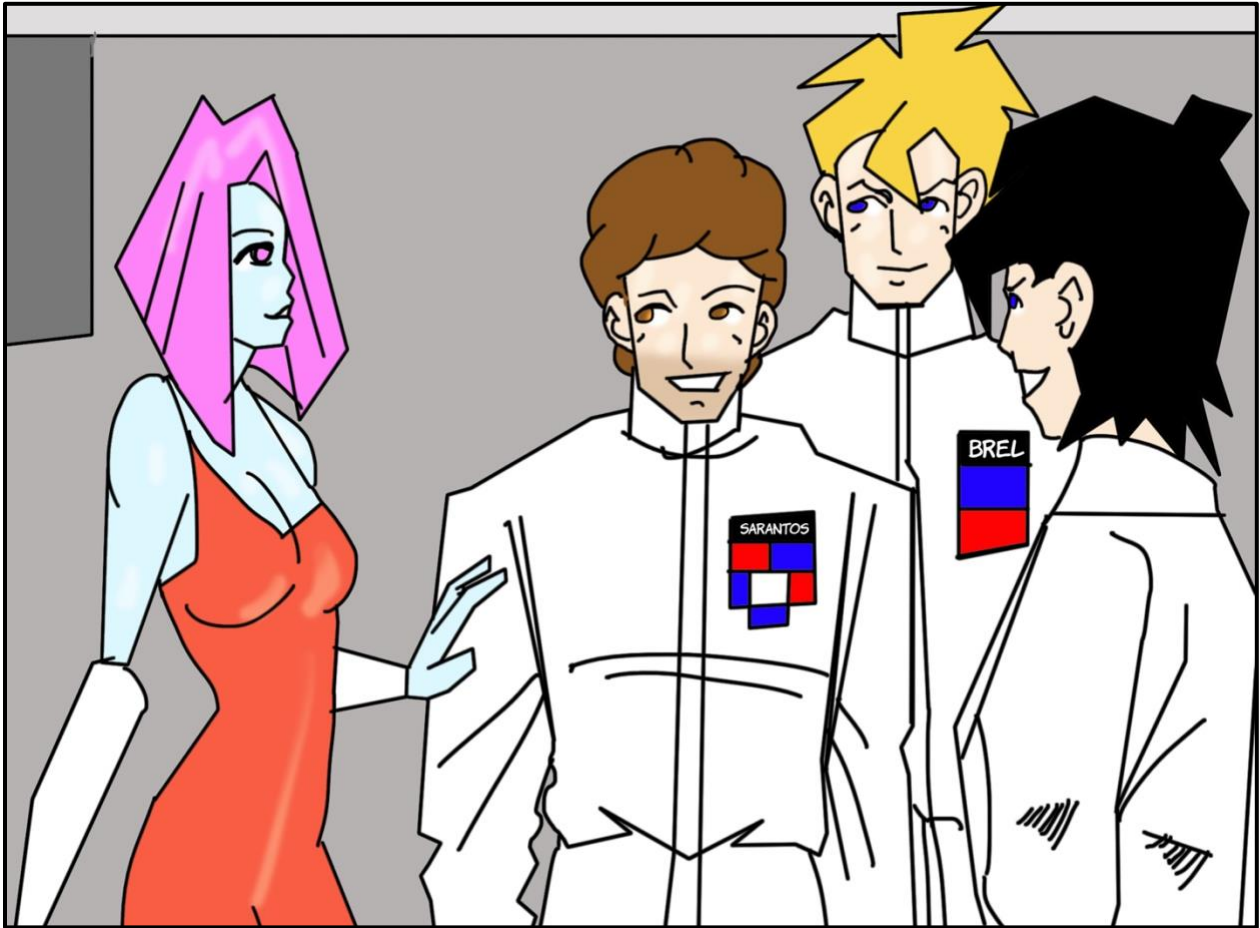
“Sure. Then everyone will have something to do. We can discuss. Then we can even analyze these facts. We can at least attempt to ascertain why things work in a certain way here. They could use the creative room as a place to work their magic on the facts they collect. It would give them an opportunity to set up new research in this quadrant.” Addie sipped her drink and sat back - her voice now calm, because it had somewhere to go.

“Exactly. We’ve never experienced this black hole before. So it’s unnerved us and taken control of our rational thinking. We should treat this like any other mission, full of intrigue, questioning everything, and filling our databanks with new knowledge. This is where our scientific approach should kick in and where the fun should begin.”

Brel said, “I’m with you Captain. The darkness and not knowing where we will end up adds to this black, scary and confusing course. We’re unsure how to get through this. We wallow in our own despair of not being told our job when all along this is our job.”

“Now we get it. So, starting tomorrow let’s record, test, explore those places no one else has ever been to before, and if we don’t make it back, we’ve at least sent over our recorded data to the Federation so they can understand this place a little better,” said Sarantos.

“Something else we might want to consider. It might be we are seeing things, but those things we’re seeing can erase themselves from our memories. I can’t conclude anything is out there and wonder if I saw something but may not remember it. Even the desert has hidden secrets and the plant life endures.” said John.



Sarantos laughed. “That’s right, John. Record that. Our thoughts are sometimes all we have about what we’re experiencing, and they might prove factual later.”

“Sarantos, sometimes you amaze me.” Addie let her guard down. Possibly, it was the endorphin release of not being trapped anymore, or possibly the sexy nightgown she wore to dinner. She didn’t want to call him by his name in public, but only address him as Captain.

Her face glowed. That’s when he noticed she had finished the wine. Okay, it was not the dress or the sensation of entrapment, but the alcohol. Real alcohol was not often used in drinks anymore because they rarely needed it. They duplicated the flavors with a much healthier substance, but it appeared Matt had given them an old bottle pulled from his deep stores.

“Addie, I think you might not want to drink that anymore, until we talk to Matt.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think there’s real alcohol in it.”

She blushed and picked up her glass. “Noooooo!” She dragged out the word no until the glass almost fell from her hand.

Matt was now bringing over their dinner.

Sarantos noticed hope for the first time since they started on this mission. They might get somewhere. He thought his idea would help the crew and maybe it did. It’s about time he started being helpful around here.

The dinner smelled incredible as Matt put the plates on the table in front of each of them.

“I see you appreciated the appetizers,” Matt said, as he removed the empty plate.

“Aaa..... maz.... zing,” said Addie.

Matt’s eyebrows went up, and he looked at Sarantos.

Matts voice lived low. “Is she tipsy?”

“Yes,” said Sarantos.

“Oh, no. I bought that supply at the last base we were on. Real alcohol? Seriously?”

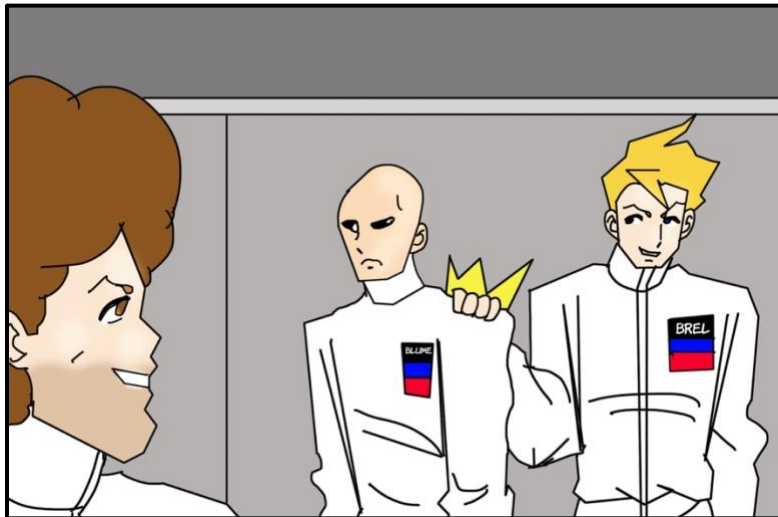
“Sorry, but someone tricked you, my friend,” said Sarantos.

“Man, that makes me mad,” said Matt. “That almost never happens.”

“Well, she won’t be able to go back on duty for a while, but she needed the break. Brel can you fill in?”

“Yes, Captain. Absolutely, I’ll take care of her shift.” Brel tried to contain his laughter behind a silly smirk.

“She’s going to be ticked,” said Sarantos.



Brel nodded. “You’re not kidding.” He patted Matt on the back and said, “Sorry, my friend, but you better run.”

“That’s great, Brel, where the hell should I run to escape her fury?”

Brel showed his sense of humor in his words. “It’s your problem, not mine.”

Matt said, “Hey, you are security and I will need security. Do your job right. No one needs to get hurt?”

Everyone laughed, including Addie who wasn't sure what they were laughing about.

Sarantos grew excited because after dinner he would take Addie back to his quarters to sober her up and they might have a little private time to unwind. He couldn't wait. Every story has to start somewhere!

She stood in the middle of his room looking like a goddess.

It seemed like it had been ten months he'd lived in misery, without her in his bed. He somehow got by, but it wasn't worth it. It was the worst trip he'd ever gone on.

He grabbed her and kissed her hard forgetting to excuse Block.

There was a cough behind him.

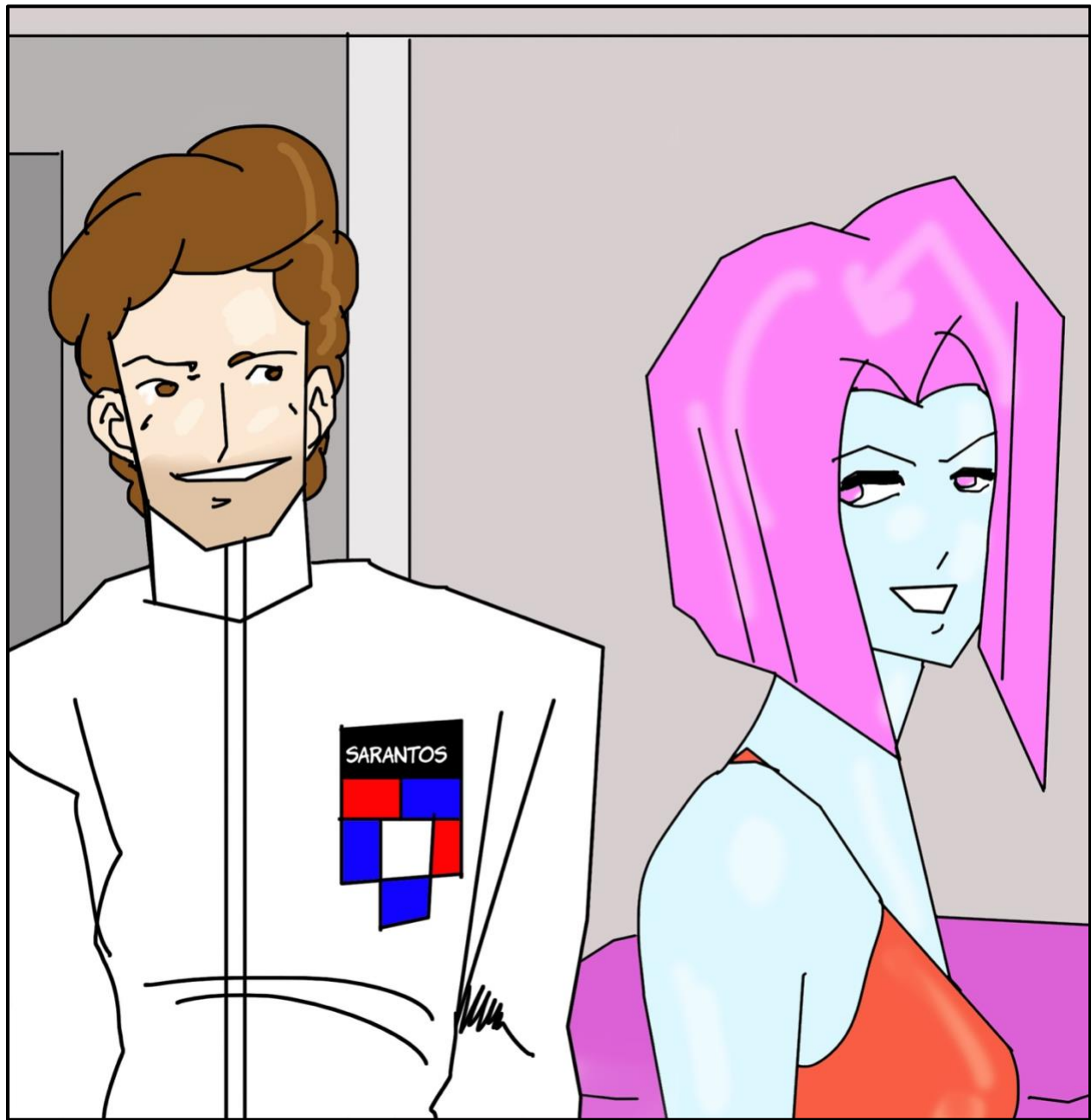
“Captain, would you like me to wait outside your door?”

“Sorry, yes, Block thanks.”

The door shut, and he stared at this gem, this gorgeous woman who made him seem wealthy. Without her he seemed penniless, alone and full of despair.

She grabbed him and led him to the bedroom where he'd be fed with a silver spoon. Addie Stuart had the spoon, and she was the silver that made it sparkle.

“Feed me, baby,” he said.



“Hey, baby, come and get it.” Addie winked and licked his mouth. You can count the days or make the days count...