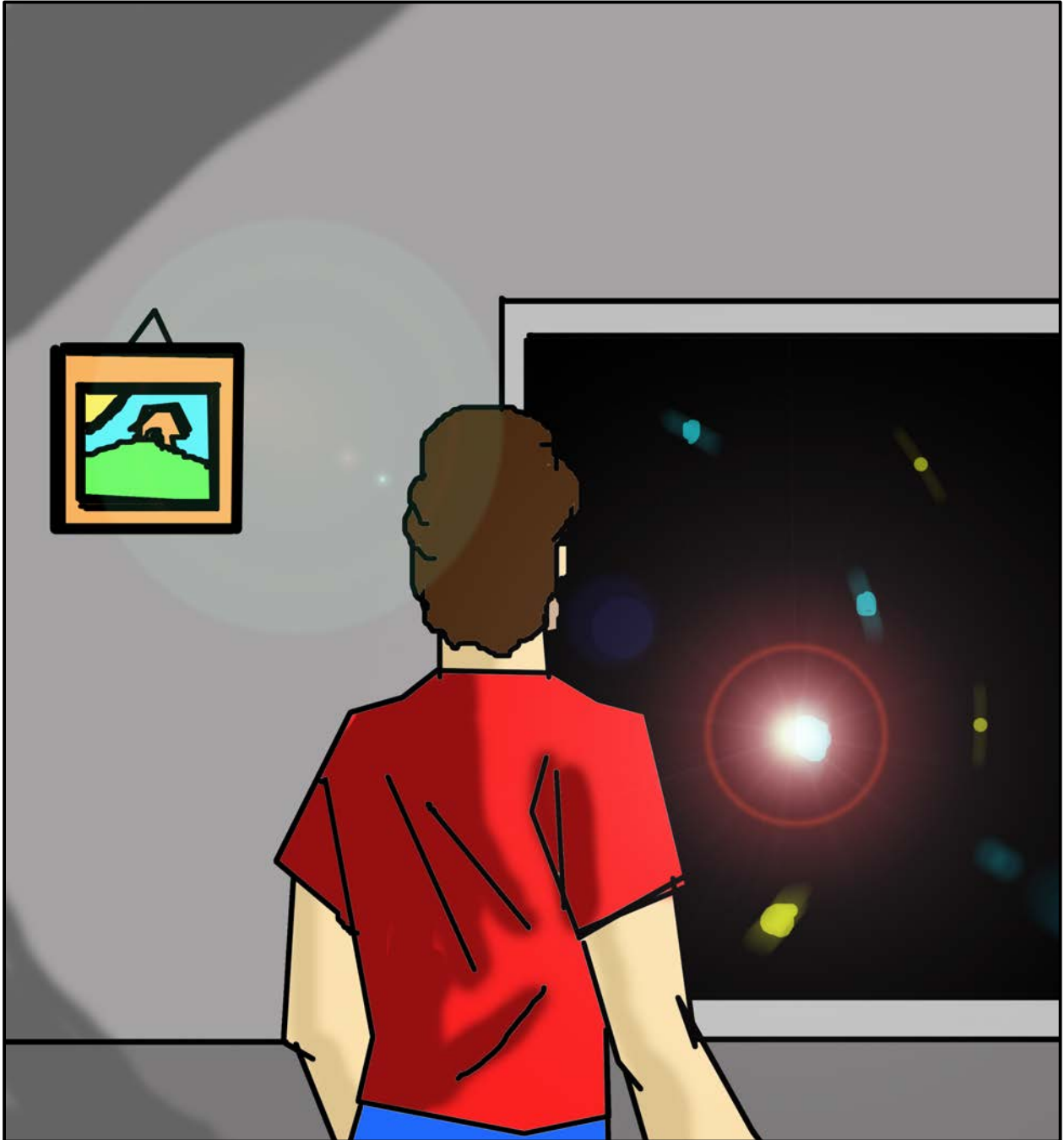


Chapter 5
“Graduation Day”



Captain Sarantos stood in his private quarters looking out at the incredible constellations. It was something he saw every day, but each time he looked upon it recently there seemed to be a new addition to this majestic canvas. He loved the

stars, the peace and the vastness of space. It was very different than a sunset, yet somehow more breathtaking and at the same time full of riddles and intrigue. Some of the stars he was seeing were so far away they could already be dead; ever since he was a young boy, that always blew his mind. The universe held allure and pulled him into its seductively mysterious web.

He sighed. They would be arriving at their destination in about 26 hours.

Addie was working late and wouldn't be around at all this evening. Depressing. She was head of security and needed to be at the ready, as she called it. Her sister couldn't be trusted and Addie felt she was the only one who could handle a precarious situation, if one did arise. He couldn't object to her logic. It made sense. He missed her far worse than he thought he would though. In fact, he was totally consumed by her, not in a bad way but in the best possible way.

Their plan had worked perfectly when they left the ship sitting and docked at the last space station, while he fled secretly. She just might seek revenge when they least expected it. Amy, Addie's sister was a very dangerous woman to cross. As beautiful as Amy was, she was not Addie. Addie set his heart on fire. Sarantos hoped that Addie was not the real traitor, who now walked around freely on his ship. Could she possibly even be working in cahoots with her sister? He refused to believe Addie would have anything to do with being a traitor, or maybe he just didn't want to believe it because he was so taken with her.

He'd eaten a light dinner consisting of an exotic vegetable named stanch. He'd never had it before, but had enjoyed it immensely. The vegetable resembled a giant cauliflower cooked and drizzled with a white seafood sauce. The taste was sweeter than cauliflower and it had a slight honey flavor. Although the meal had filled his plate, it wasn't a heavy dish.

Now, here he was standing in his own captain's quarters again alone with his racing thoughts. Maybe they'd be going to war. He'd never really fought in a war before.

Although he was well trained, the reality of war only came when you were standing there looking at it straight on. School teaches but life gives. It was terrifying! He knew no matter what he'd imagined from years of training might go quickly out the window the moment he was confronted with the absoluteness of death. He was a captain now, and hoped he'd be able to hold up against the ugly nastiness of an actual war effort, as well as make correct decisions that wouldn't cost people dearly. These were people that trusted him with their lives! The pit of his stomach was suddenly rocky.

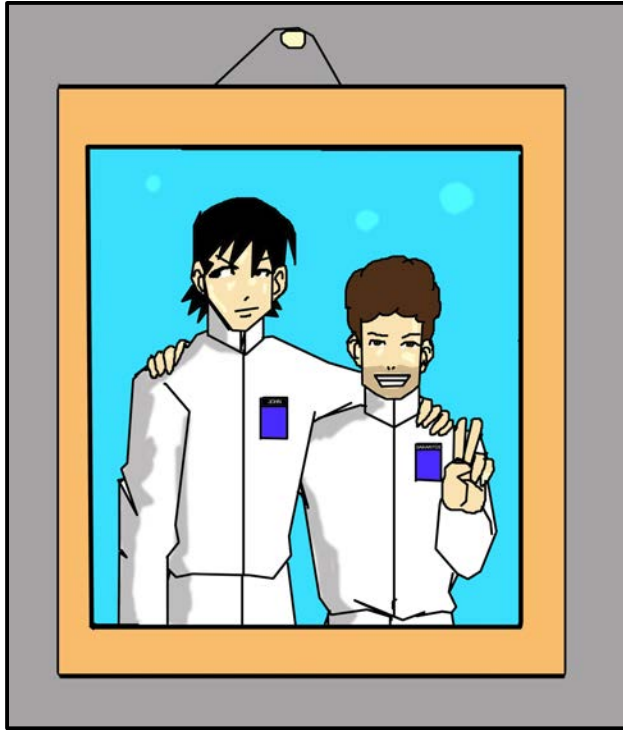
Trying to forget about what might be in store for him tomorrow, he focused on how far he'd come since graduation day at the academy.

His father never got to see him graduate but his mother beamed like a lighthouse on that memorable day. He felt a little down and skittish the day he walked across the stage to receive his diploma. He was sad, because of the finality. No more a student. Out into the real world whether he was ready or not. Leaving behind his youthful days created angst because the future was a dark corridor that had a billion doors and no matter which one you chose to open, there was ultimately an unknown surprise behind it. It could be good. It could be bad. More importantly though, he always felt like a kid at heart. He never took himself seriously and really didn't want to grow up. He didn't want to be like the other adults! All adults would eventually forget about what made them happy as a child. He never wanted to just work and forget about living life like he did as a kid. Wild and carefree with every dream a possibility!

Right now though, he was a Captain of the Starship Chicago and Lieutenant John Baker was in control of engineering on his ship. That was a fact. He couldn't act like a child right now. He was a leader.

His O'Kurian friend was a soft-spoken man with traits eerily similar to his step-father Brackish. They had incredible loyalty and were faithfully committed to their families. That's the only reason John's wife and daughter were allowed on board his starship on such a dangerous mission. The O'Kurian never left their children to be

looked after by someone else. It was their responsibility to raise them in their culture's way of life. The Federation would only allow it specifically for the O'Kurian people.



John had worked hard during their time at academy to keep his grades impeccable and even his friend's grades benefitted. Sarantos was wilder than John. He wondered how they'd become such great friends. The differences were entirely noticeable. He had what John referred to as the sickness of hormone enlightenment.

That term made him smile. To John everything had a purpose and part of the enlightenment meant keeping control over one's hormones, which showed a deeper control and a necessary balance

that was important.

Oh, hell, he wasn't truly that committed to balance, not like John was anyways. It wasn't as though he didn't try but that would only last until he saw a beautiful woman he wanted to get to know a little better. Being an O'Kurian made it a lot easier for John, after all, by the very nature of their race, control was inbred into them physically and then their parents disciplined them intensely from the moment they were born. Sarantos was domesticated but it was a different kind of upbringing, more nurturing and loving. He was free to grow into who he was and maybe, he just wasn't ready to give up some of his lack of control just yet.

However, he did find it different when he was near Addie. She intoxicated him in a way he never thought possible. He did seem to want only her these last few days. No one else came close to satisfying him both intellectually and physically. She was

sharp, gorgeous and brilliant. He loved her wittiness. Her attention to detail was incredible and she had a keen sense of her position on this starship and she wasn't afraid to take charge when needed; he found that quite attractive. He loved it when a woman made the first move! He always did.

Thinking about her made him realize he might eventually become more like his friend John, only needing one woman to move through this world.

Snap out of it, Sarantos! How did his thoughts run to that? He was starting to sound like an old married man. He wasn't truly ready to settle down, was he?

Even though, he'd had his share of good times along with plenty of parties during his time at the academy, it had been hard work too.

One time, he'd been all set to go out with Barb Mattson. She was so hot. All the guys loved Barb which made her even more sexy. She was a babe. He had invited her to a cabin on the beach for the weekend. He was giddy and out of control when she said yes. All week that's all he could think about until Professor Gladstone told them late on Thursday of that same week that he wanted a full-scale emergency situation worked out for the holodeck. The professor said he didn't want it fake and cheesy. It had to be a real emergency that could happen aboard an actual starship. He wanted them to come up with three different conclusions, with cause and effect. He expected a complete detail of who would come up with each scenario and then wanted it acted out. They were put in groups of five and then he hit Sarantos over the head with a hammer, not literally, but he might as well have, when the professor announced that he expected it done first thing Monday morning! The agony...the pain...the inhumanity of it all. It was a project that would have to be worked on all weekend long. There went his weekend with Barb...

Barb was in his class and got the same news. He looked her way and she shrugged casually. How could she just shrug? Didn't she care more that their wonderful weekend wasn't going to happen after all? It was an, oh, well...better luck next time

he thought. Maybe that was quite possibly even a blow off. His cheeks had felt flushed, but the embarrassment came when he moaned out loud. Everyone heard him. He wanted to run out of the room screaming like a little child when the professor then asked him if he had a problem with the assignment. Of course, he had a problem with the assignment but what could he say now?



“Yes, professor, I was hoping to get lucky this weekend and all the guys were so jealous of me until you gave us that assignment. You see, I was the man of the hour, but you just cut me down to size in front of all my buddies. So I hope you understand, this assignment just won’t work for me. How about next weekend or even the next two weekends? As a fellow man, I’m sure you understand where I’m coming from. How about you do me a solid?”

Did he really let his hormones get the best of him? Did he just ruin his career with his unique skill set? Yep, he said those smart-alecky words to his professor that day and was still allowed to graduate. While his professor chuckled at the brashness of his request, he of course didn’t change the due date. He did suggest though that this was a good test for Sarantos because in times of war, he’d need to learn to control his fragile condition.

Yes, his mind flashed thru the sacrifices of many nights and the tears he’d cried when he was sweating away in a little room with four other guys trying to come up with three different crises that they could ultimately handle, or not handle. It’d been the worst weekend of his time at the academy. The guys teased him all weekend. One even kept provoking him that Barb had already agreed to spend the next weekend

with him. Sarantos couldn't think about a starship scenario. He didn't care. The only scenario he could come up with was how he could murder the next guy that made fun of him and get away with it! The professor wasn't even nice enough to give them a female comrade to work with in their group. Just four sweaty guys. Not a female in sight.

He never had another chance with Barb and maybe it was for the best. His world would have turned out a whole lot different. They probably would have had several children by now and wanting to raise them close to his parents would've created a different direction for both their careers. Children aren't allowed on certain missions, so if he'd pursued a career with the Federation with kids, which he probably would have, he'd be on this ship alone right now and worried for his children who could've possibly been down on the planet he might be rescuing.

It was bad enough he was on edge about his parents. He and his mother were very close and Brackish was an outstanding father, the best in fact, if he couldn't have his own. Brackish would've been his first choice in step-fathers. He was so lucky. He still missed his dad and thought of him often, especially now.

This journey opened a pit in the bottom of his stomach, perhaps because he lost his dad a long time ago to war. Why do nations have to fight? They should learn to communicate, negotiate and barter if necessary. After all this, it'd still taken the Federation and the alliance of planets many years and much sacrifice to come this far. Years of horrendous battles, fatalities and almost the total destruction of many different races. Though these were in the past, before they worked their way to this more peaceful commitment to each other and the worlds they lived on, the scars were there on all of us visible for all to see.

The backlash of peace, as ironic as that seems, always caused unhappiness in at least one or two races. Not everyone could be content, and isn't that the saddest thought ever? Sharing and compromise were maybe for the mature and those with a high IQ he thought. How could those that didn't share that sort of socialist focus be dealt with? How could they be made to understand the importance of a nonviolent

existence? Well, if he had the answer to that, he'd be a millionaire, or at least back home in the safety of the space station working on a plan to improve its function while discovering new plants and ways to use them in exotic dishes.

He'd be enjoying his evenings in a laid-back atmosphere with his friends and colleagues. Instead he's out roaming the universe in The Chicago worrying about saving planets and containing a possible war before it happens. Oh, it wasn't just him. Other starships and Captains were probably standing in their quarters staring out over the vast universe thinking the same exact thing. That thought made him chuckle.

Well, life was indeed strange sometimes. He rarely ever knew what was in store for him. That's what made life as a Captain of the Federation like the greatest conundrum ever. No book could come close to the unknown mysteries of the real world; and not only that, it was his own unique story. He was the main character bouncing around from chapter to chapter challenging fate and making his own moves. Yeah, that was both exhilarating and disturbing. Even some of the fallouts were just a part of the story but until his adventure ended, he was going to keep writing, editing and re-writing this tale until it suited him. It was his story after all.

Though there were some things that were beyond his control but mentioned quite frequently by his good friend John, he still had to try to make a difference. However, John did offer a great perspective about life in general that stuck with him. He'd said once, 'Those things about life that can't be changed are part of the learning. It was how a person dealt with their own mind that made it easier or harder to handle those unforgettable, unforgivable and toxic moments. If life was always moving in the same pattern, we would be mindless robots. Enjoy all the precious and sometimes seemingly mundane moments but prepare yourself every day mentally and physically for the unexpected. That is what life offers you. That and nothing else!'

It really did make sense. Sarantos just had a hard time accepting a few negative and unexpected events, like Barb Mattson. He must really think more about the moment, because in that moment he felt both humiliated and helpless; must be a big ego on

his part and when it no longer mattered, he was able to let go of his enormous ego and move forward. But, there was always a new affair that would build up his ego and make it easier to let go of the past pain of humiliation. Hum...

Thinking about his graduation day, today of all days, allowed him to really appreciate what that day meant. As he stood here in his private quarters, he realized that he'd earned the title of Captain. No one gave it to him. He earned it. Years of practice, study, humiliation, fun, strife, late hours and lost weekends had led him to this title. He smiled. He was a Captain. He was a good Captain.

He deserved this moment of reflection. It was his alone to enjoy. The special silence in this room and his thoughts belonged to only him and no one else could own this. This was part of his story. This scintillating novel was written by Captain Sarantos and all the lessons in it were procured by him, both good and bad. He yawned. Forget my awesome personal story, he decided he needed some sleep. It was late.



Addie was glorious. She looked across the room at him, licking her wet lips like she'd just tasted the most decadent chocolate this or any other world offered.

He ached for her. Yet, she'd spent the entire party teasing him; he wanted to invite her back to his room but was very hesitant about approaching this woman who belonged to the Satorian race.

She tilted her head, laughing at something one of the three men who

stood around her had said. They couldn't help themselves, acting like children or lapping dogs - enthralled by her beauty. Addie's laugh reached out and fell upon him like spellbinding stardust, somehow sprinkling her essence deep inside his body, filling him with her spirit, until it reached his toes. They tingled.

He almost fell over with the wave's power and instinctively reached out to grab the nearest chair. John's hand locked onto his arm with a vise-like grip.

"You okay?"

"Yes. At least, I think I am," he replied.

The room was foggy, even dreamlike. His motions were slowed. As he slipped into the chair next to John, Addie was gazing at him with her eyebrows pointed down and violet eyes smoldering with passionate flames. Why was she doing this to him?

"Don't be pulled into that woman's tricks, my friend."

John, the reasonable one, had spoken. Too late, he thought. It was already way too late. All he could do was think of how he could get her back to his room for the night. To touch her would be heavenly. To make love to her would be carnal, delicious, thrilling and for some reason he couldn't quite explain, a little hellish.

She was grinning at him. Oh, my god, she was coming this way. Crap. Another guy just jumped out of nowhere directly in front of her. All he knew about him was his name, Bobbie, and that the girls in the academy called him Bad News Bobbie. What the hell did he want with Addie? Did he honestly think she would go for a jerk like him? Well, the jerk factor he'd only heard about through the grapevine so he really didn't know if it was true.



Look at him putting the moves on her! Oh no. She seemed to show some interest. She's giggling. She's sliding her hand down his arm in a rather seductive motion. Wait. Now she's looking over here. She's watching me to see if I respond to her aggressive behavior. I'll respond, alright.

"Don't do it, buddy."

Good grief, was John a mind reader?

"Don't do what, John?"

"Oh, I think you know what I'm talking about. She's trouble with a capital T."

"How would you know, you're hung up on one girl? How could you stay with just one woman?"

"I'll have you know, I'm a great observer of people, of humanoid nature and all the ins and outs that come along with your species. You should know that much by now my friend. Besides, I've heard things and that woman can't be trusted. She'll put a spell on you, well, I guess she already has and it appears to be working rather well."

"I can't imagine what you might mean? After all, my all-knowing sidekick, women are always putting a spell on us, so what makes hers any different?"

"For starters, she likes control and the puppet arena."

“Meaning what, I’m her puppet?” Sarantos sharply shook his head. “You’ve got to be kidding me? I’m nobody’s puppet. I want her because I want her and if I didn’t want her, I’d just walk away.”

John started laughing uncontrollably and wouldn’t stop. Sarantos liked this guy, but right now he wanted to slap him silly. His laugh was becoming increasingly more hideous. Luckily for him, Addie was done playing with Bobbie and now stood in front of him, seductively moving her leg across his own with a ravishing purpose.

John just kept laughing and stood up, shaking his head he walked away and into some sort of mist.

“Did you see that Addie? John seemed to fade into a mist. Do you think it’s sort of foggy in here tonight?”

She licked her lush lips and said, “Don’t worry about it.”

“What...?” His head was spinning and he was confused, about what, he couldn’t be sure.

She moved her fingers along his hand. Her smell was incredible. His flesh was crawling with mysteriously furtive sensations that delighted him to the point of...

They stood in his room. How’d they get there so quickly? He didn’t remember leaving the party, let alone arriving in his room.

It must be that damn fog that was penetrating his mind blocking out his memories but how could that be?

He looked around. The mist breached his residence as well. Where did it come from?

“Addie, where is all this mist coming from?”

“Don’t worry about it.” She said those words drawing them out so long that it sounded like she was under water.

He watched as she went to a cupboard and pulled out two goblets and sat them on the only table in the room. Then she pulled a bottle out of thin air or maybe out of the mist. He couldn’t be certain. She poured it into the glasses and smiled at him, and licked her juicy lips again.



Where was John? Certainly, he’d be back soon. After all, they shared a room together.

She removed her academy uniform. He watched her, his eyes transfixed to her unusual body and the incredibly gifted movements that elegantly stirred the most hidden thoughts in his mind.

He was perspiring profusely. As she got closer, the sweat began oozing out of his pores. She handed him a glass filled with a red liquid. He gulped it down so fast, he

choked on it, momentarily. She just grinned and moved into him, wrapping her arms around his body.

His knees were weak and he started shaking. John was right, he was a puppet...her puppet!

He found himself backing up to the bed and stumbled into the edge. She followed. He stood there as she intimately and slowly removed his clothing. He couldn't hide from her what she'd done to him. No way was that going to happen. She was in control. Of that, there was no doubt.

Suddenly, he was dizzy, even swooning a little. The drink, or just her presence? Her mouth opened gently and she licked him all over. He stood there frozen to her tongue. It was weird, all he could think of was the 'Christmas Story' scene when the boy put his tongue against the cold pole and was stuck, except he was the pole stuck to the tongue. Strange thought.



She lifted her glass and took a sip, then carefully poured it all over his naked body. He couldn't move and even if he could, he wouldn't have, because the liquid was like sweet honey tickling every nerve on his skin.

Her mouth opened once again and the liquid came out but thicker. She wrapped her sweet lips around his mouth and the drink went down his throat without a fight; it was savory and appetizing...wait, something was wrong.

It wasn't Addie!

John's voice rang in his ear, 'stay away from her.' He must have known. Why didn't he tell him that it wasn't Addie? He'd been deceived, by both of them!

He found his voice but it was just a whisper, a hoarse whisper. "Get away from me, I know who you are."

She laughed and pushed him onto the bed. It wasn't his bed but John's bed. Where was John?

She threw herself on top of him and he couldn't stop her. His head fell to the side. The fog cleared. John was there in his own bed but he should've been sleeping, big day tomorrow.

"John, help me."



Addie's sister giggled and pulled John's face towards him and started to pleasure him but John was dead. She'd killed his best friend.

He succumbed to her like a toy, like a puppet. He knew he was going to die when she was done. Some people say death is easy. Maybe this is what they meant but as she started to strangle him, his voice rang out like a siren on a fire truck.

“No, I can’t die! Tomorrow is graduation day...tomorrow is graduat ...”

He awoke and bolted straight up in bed. The covers were soaked with sweat. What the hell was that??

He jumped up and looked around the room checking for intruders. He found none.

The replicator offered cold ice water. He drank a whole pitcher before heading to the shower.

What kind of sick dream was that? Fear? The past week had been rough and it was now showing up in the strangest of ways - in his dreams. Not really dreams though, but nightmares.

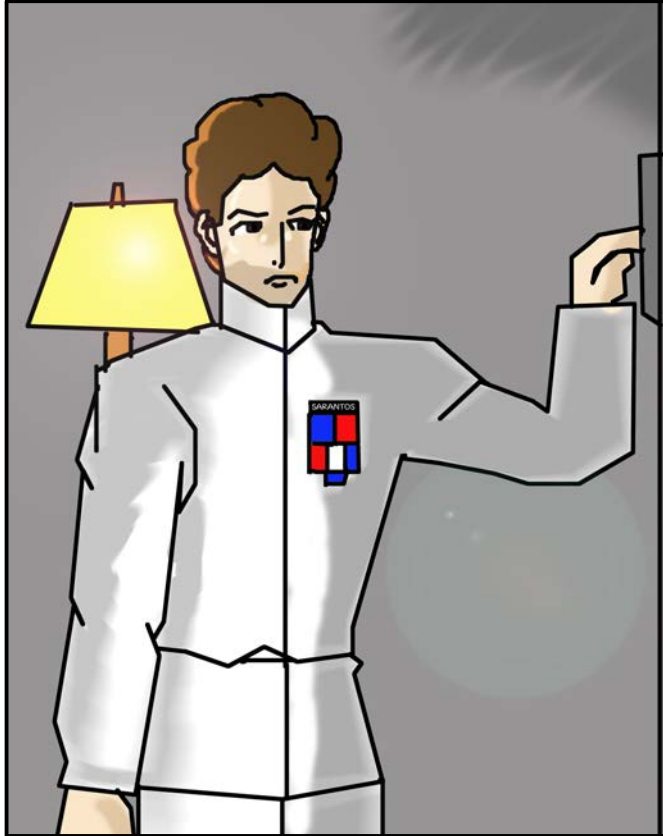
The shower was warm and felt good. He didn’t want to get out. After that nightmare, he felt dirty. He felt like he cheated on Addie.

He stepped out into the snug room onto the soft rug and listened again for any noise that might be out of the ordinary; there was nothing.

He brushed his teeth and rinsed his mouth. Breakfast in the Diamond Room would be a great way to forget his nightmarish dream. Being around people might help.

“This is the Captain. Everything okay on the ship?”

“Good morning, Captain. All is good. Out.”



He felt reassured hearing the voice of Lieutenant Kitara. Her soft unemotional voice.

“Out,” he said.

While getting on his uniform, he’d stop periodically and listen. Something didn’t feel quite right.

He was nervous enough about being a strong Captain. He didn’t need Addie’s sister possibly running around on a revenge spree. He didn’t need that type of anxiety with the added burden of a war brewing.

He’d feel better after some breakfast. Food always helped.

He looked himself over and after a complete inspection of the room, decided he was ready to start the day.

The door whished open and he took one last look around his room, then turned and headed to the dining hall.

The room was busy. He was glad. There was a table by the windows, unoccupied for the moment. He headed that way and nodded towards Matt Blume.

Matt smiled and sent one of his interns to assist him. He'd decided to train several people for the rush hour madness to help him handle the tables and menus.

He pulled out the chair and sat down. "Morning, Walt."

"Morning, Captain." Walt parked a pot of his favorite coffee along with a cup and a plate of pineapples with some sort of pastry crisps.

"Thanks, Walt. I'll have the usual. Eggs and toast but please add some kippers this morning."

"Welcome, Captain. Will do."

Walt was an elderly man who knew a lot about a lot of things. Handy to have around and a really nice guy. He helped maintain the basics of the ship - stuck doors, portal malfunctions, plumbing issues, things of that nature, oh, yeah, serving food also seemed to be added to that list. What a guy, always there to help. He was tall with dark hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. Highly intelligent and another O'Kurian.

Addie walked in and headed straight to his table along with a young cadet, named Flora. She worked with Addie in security.

"Good morning, Captain," they both chimed in unison.

"Good morning, ladies." He grinned at both and stood up politely until they sat down.

Walt brought more cups and soon they were enjoying the crisps and pineapple along with hot coffee.

“I had some weird dream last night. I’ve been thinking about graduation.”



“Oh, sure. I can’t wait to graduate. It’s a lot of work but quite wonderful, really,” said Flora.

He wanted to tell them about his thoughts, but Flora started chatting about her days so far at the academy.

She was still talking when Addie pipped in, “That reminds me of a story of my graduation day. Well it started out in engineering with Professor Bandor, what a graduation experience that was...”