

SERVES

NO USEFUL PURPOSE

By
A.P. Atkinson

*The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious.
Any similarity to real persons, living, dead, or imagined by a sentient
being is coincidental and not intended by the author.
Death-threats can be sent to **Edgeverse.org** via the normal channels.*

*Copyright © 2020 A.P. Atkinson
All rights reserved. Neither this book nor any portion thereof may be
reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express
written permission of the author, allowing for the use of brief
quotations for purposes of review or criticism.*

*This book is dedicated to all the people who work for a living.
Those people who go daily to a thankless, soul-crushing job so they
can barely survive, raise a family and support the people they love.
You are the real heroes of this world.*

The Captain narrowed her eyes and glared angrily across her desk at Dave Brown. He grinned back at her emptily and she cringed at the boundless hatred that swelled up inside her. She was in command of a vast space-vessel and was responsible for the lives of countless thousands that passed on through, on their way to their destinies. He was an idiot whose sole function on the ship was the delivery of towels. And yet he inspired such boundless hatred in her that she found herself contemplating terrible things that darkened her very soul.

When she looked at him, it was as if all her frustrations and irritations were personified and wrapped up in one single piece of oily skin. Worse, he knew it and seemed to quite enjoy that about himself and enjoyed, even more, rubbing everyone else's nose in it.

He smiled back obliviously, as if didn't have a care in the world, while he hummed a cheerful song to himself completely out of tune. He occasionally glanced around at nothing in particular, as there was nothing in particular to glance around at. He reached forward and began tapping on the desk, possibly to a completely different tune, since it bore no resemblance to anything else that was happening.

He smiled more broadly as some odd thought maybe flickered across his mind, and then he reached out for two metal pens sitting in a stationery holder with the clear and deliberate intention of using them to drum on her desk.

"Mr Brown!" she snapped angrily, her tactic of aggressive silence serving only to make matters worse, and not for him as intended.

His hand reflexively recoiled away from the pens and he looked at her in mild surprise, shrugging as if he wasn't quite sure what the problem might or might not be; and didn't seem particularly

bothered either way. This was precisely because he wasn't bothered either way, or any possible way, or several other ways that wouldn't be possible for a human to be bothered in, even if they enjoyed regular recreational experimental brain surgery performed by a chimpanzee that only had access to a rock and an ice-cream scoop.

“Do you have any idea why I've asked you to come to my office?” she growled at him, pondering the notion that, in his little corner of the universe, all was probably perfectly in its proper place, at least in terms of how his universe functioned or, more accurately, didn't.

As far as she was concerned, the proper place for him would be in a tight-fitting box buried six feet below the ground in a spot around the back of a busy bar without a working toilet.

She wondered briefly what the inside of his mind might actually be like, but she found the idea deeply unsettling and quickly dismissed it, shaking her head as if to scatter such things from her mind, where such horrifying things had no business being.

“No,” he admitted with another shrug, before he broke into a grin. “It's not my birthday is it?”

“No, Mr Brown. Not that I'm aware of.” The Captain gritted her teeth. The anger inside her expanded somewhat, growing towards the point where her professionalism could easily slip quite beyond her grasp and vanish off into the distance like a burst balloon, possibly making a similarly shrill screeching noise as it did so. “I'm afraid it's something bad again this time as is, unfortunately, usually the case.”

“Oh,” he said thoughtfully and frowned to himself, shaking his head as if in mild dismay. He bore a sad expression that was entirely false, and was probably meant to convey exactly that impression. “I thought that the law of averages should mean that this had to be a

good thing. I figured we were due for one about now. I think that's how the universe works, isn't it?"

"No!" she told him sternly. "That is not how the universe works!"

She shook her head and closed her eyes for a brief moment. Her mind rushed to the drawer of her office desk which contained a generous supply of prescription-medication, which she knew all too well that she was going to need by the end of the meeting. It would help to ward off the migraine that was already starting to build behind her eyes and, by the afternoon, would be trying to push them out of her head. She rubbed her temples in exasperation. "I'm afraid you're in trouble again, Mr Brown, just for a refreshing change."

"Again?" he grumbled, tutting to himself. "I never seem to learn, do I? Why do you think that is?"

"Yes," the Captain agreed. "That happened to be my sentiment, too, when I found out what you'd done this time."

"What did I do?" He grinned suddenly and then quickly caught himself and took on a slightly more modest expression that made it appear he was taking things relatively seriously, which he clearly wasn't, probably wouldn't and quite possibly couldn't. "Have I been bad? Have I been really bad? It's honestly quite difficult to tell, which is why I find our meetings so valuable. There are so many rules and regulations: I sometimes wonder how anyone is meant to keep up with them.

"Of course, the solution is really not to try, I find."

She sighed to herself. "I find it quite troubling that you should ask me that every time we meet, when we both know that you seem biologically incapable of doing the right thing." The Captain frowned at him, her facade of patience beginning to wear increasingly thin; and it was hardly known as being substantial, in any case.

“I have a certificate for that!” he argued proudly. “I’ve only got borderline sociopathy but they’ve ruled out a biological ability to behave normally. Apparently, in my childhood, I must have been exposed to negative expressions of social adjustment norms.

“The doctor asked if I was raised by wolves. What was your childhood like?”

“Disciplined.” she growled through thin lips. “Focus on explaining what is that you think you might have done.”

“It could be any one of a number of things,” he mused thoughtfully with a theatrical rub of his chin. “It’s been a busy week in the passenger services division. Mistakes may have been made, I will happily concede. My work is an art, not a science, and it’s difficult to strike just the right balance between professionalism and my innate humanity.”

“There is little art in making sure that the passengers have sufficient towels, soap and toilet paper,” she told him.

“But, Captain, towels don’t deliver themselves, you know!”

“They do actually,” she said, as she glowered ahead sternly. “The delivery-caddies are fully self-motivated. You barely have to do anything and still manage to fall short of doing what little is required of you,” the Captain told him, almost growling the words as she fought back the sudden urge to go to the top drawer right away.

In addition to the medication, it contained an emergency service weapon which would be more effective than any pills in dealing permanently with her migraines, if she used it on Dave. She found herself quite surprised that she had seriously considered blowing his brains out right there and then and that she found the idea less troubling than she had expected. She wondered if this made her a bad person.

“Captain!” he said almost angrily as he frowned darkly at her. “I’m surprised at you. My team in the passenger services division are the engine of this vessel. Without us, this ship would be little more than a tube flying through space, full of people with damp hands and unpleasantly smelly trousers.” He shook his head sadly at her. “I can see those people in the engineering team have spread their propaganda to you. Are you really nothing more than a victim of other people’s personal measurements of success and usefulness?”

“Shut up!” she roared suddenly. She leapt to her feet fast enough to send her chair skittering over the metallic deck-plates below their feet.

“Shutting up, Captain!” Dave swallowed and grimaced at the possibility that maybe, just maybe, he had gone just a tiny little bit too far – again.

She glared at him fixedly and he cringed away from her angry gaze, although a tiny, self-satisfied grin fluttered cruelly over his lips. She pulled her chair back and sat down slowly, her eyes never peeling away from his.

“Mr Brown,” she began slightly more calmly “Why don’t you tell me what you think you’ve done wrong this time? I suggest you think quite carefully.”

“It’s difficult to narrow it down to just one thing,” he admitted, as if this was a good thing. “I’m a proud believer in choosing to do the thing that leads to having the best story. I feel like if I had to choose just one, I’d be selling all the other stories short. You can’t ask me to do that. It would be like me asking you to choose between your children, presuming you have children.

“I personally always imagined you in a large room full of cats. I always imagined that the smell must be quite bad.”

“Mr Brown...” she growled, in a rather catlike way.

“OK,” he began nodding thoughtfully and seeming to take the matter of her temper, and her ability to cause him considerably inconvenience, seriously; for the moment at least. “Well, I can’t imagine why you’d be angry about it but there was something that happened this week that might go slightly against accepted protocols and could conceivably have caused the tiniest grumble of casual complaint from certain quarters.”

“I am angry, Mr Brown,” she assured him. “I usually am when it comes to you. When I’m not angry, I’m frustrated and when I get time off from that, I’m usually apologising to passengers on your behalf, which in turn makes me more frustrated and even more angry.”

“I know.” He pointed to her forehead, where a vein was bulging out of her left temple, making her eyelid begin to twitch. Her face was bright red, her eyebrows were pitched down and her lips were beginning to draw back, exposing her teeth. “You have a tell: that expression gives it away a bit.”

“Mr Brown...” she snapped at him.

“We should play poker!” he said suddenly with a dramatic flourish.

“All forms of gambling are illegal, Mr Brown!” she told him angrily.

“Oh,” he mumbled and bit his lip thoughtfully. “Is that why I’m here? If it helps, then I will admit that I didn’t win, even though I was only playing against myself. In fact, I ended up losing literally everything and going home completely naked, but I’m pretty sure that not many passengers saw me as I walked through the habitat deck.”

“No,” she told him sternly. “It sounds like that might be one of the reasons why I’m angry tomorrow.”

“I have quite a tight schedule tomorrow,” he said as he shrugged. “I’m getting a hair-cut, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to fit you in. Could we possibly do this at the hairdresser?”

“Mr Brown!” she tried to yell, but it came out as more of an anguished shriek as she choked on her rage. “Will you tell me why you think you’ve been called to my office before I have you sewn into a large pillow-case and blown out of the nearest airlock?”

“It’s definitely not my birthday?” he asked hopefully.

She shook her head very slowly.

“Then I can only assume it was what happened last Thursday...”

Chapter 1

What happened last Thursday

The Nebulous hung in orbit around the shining blue sphere of the planet Earth. The distant sun licked against her sombre grey hull as she drifted along lazily to nowhere in particular. She was a passenger ship that followed a route out from Earth, at the heart of the Alliance, to the colonies along the rim of the burgeoning new Frontier, a terrible place that was colloquially known as ‘The Edge.’

There were many people who dreamed of following the cruise line out to the stars, where life was less clinical, less controlled, and where causing minor offences to offensive people wasn’t yet a capital crime.

Earth had become dull and uninteresting and the colonies offered a real taste of adventure and a more dynamic lifestyle experience. In practice, this translated into a place where you were 3,528 times more likely to be killed for no good reason, and 8,484 times more likely to be killed for a very good reason. To a greater or lesser degree, it was a place where the laws of nature were no longer absolutely binding, except those that sometimes were, but which was not necessarily so in all places. While many people considered that explanation needlessly confusing, it could generally be simplified down to the concept of being eaten by things that were larger than you are.

The vessel was of an undemanding design. The technology was basic, but durable, and was proven to be reliable enough to be run by a non-military crew, or a crew trained to a ‘secondary standard,’ or not really trained at all in any conventional sense. ‘Secondary standard’ was the usual Alliance euphemism for a clever

computer and a staff of imbeciles who could be paid less than minimum wage.

Her hull was a large, long oblong of plastic and metal with the engineering levels running the full length of her keel in what appeared to be totally the wrong direction. At her tail were 4 transit sails along the sides, two pointing up, and two down. She was elegant, in a simplistic way, and one of the largest passenger ships in commercial service.

Dave woke up with a slight yawn, his consciousness gently stirring him back to the real world from the comforting warmth of a mildly disturbing dream about a vibrating elephant that was telling him that he should kill another insurance salesman. The only reason he found that mildly disturbing was his personal preference for the brutal killing of accountants – he hated them so much!

He saw the quite pretty face of Louise from ‘engineering-management’ looking down at him. He smiled up warmly into her quite attractive brown eyes but she frowned back at him, shaking her head in disgust.

“Morning,” he said with a smile and stretched out his arms, giving in to a wide yawn. “Did I wake you, honey? I’m sorry that I tend to snore a bit when I sleep, sometimes fart a little bit. There’s the occasional drooling of course and the nervous tick; some screaming if I’m having another of those bad dreams about wolves...”

“Why are you asleep in your office in the middle of the afternoon?” she grumbled at him. Her balled fists were dug into her sides angrily as she glared back. “You’re supposed to be working like the rest of us, but here I find you in your office doing nothing, as usual.”

“I had a heavy lunch,” he said and frowned at her as he hefted himself upright, blinking away his tiredness and looking around as if he wasn’t entirely sure where he actually was, what was going on around him or really much of anything else. “Two heavy lunches, in fact. It was a business lunch actually, if you must know, so probably work-related if you want to be really technical about things.”

“You had a business lunch?” she raised an eyebrow suspiciously. “Did you eat a towel?”

“Well, I am one of the longest serving supervisors in passenger services,” he told her. “Food is one of our services so therefore every lunch I have is a business lunch if you think about it in a certain kind of way.”

“Why did you have two of them?” she said with a sarcastic tone that he felt wasn’t really necessary at all. “You clearly don’t work hard enough to get that hungry.”

“You know how it is,” he told her with a shrug. “When I finished my first lunch I still had some beer left and that can create a very unacceptable imbalance in things that could have horrible consequences to the entire universe, in some unfathomable way, for some reason that I couldn’t even begin to care about.”

“You had a beer during work hours?” she said, sounding as if she didn’t entirely approve.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t pay for it!” He looked as if he didn’t care if anyone entirely approved, and it was a look that he’d mastered over many years of practice.

He stood up from behind his desk revealing that he was not wearing any trousers. His shorts were open at the front and would have done little to secure the modesty of a normal man, but, for his requirements, he felt that they probably afforded adequate protection.

For Louise's requirements, the protection they afforded was highly inadequate and she made a horrified gargling noise and turned quickly away in absolute disgust.

"You have no trousers on!" she almost screamed at him, gesturing wildly at his groin region while jumping up and down in near-panic and covering her eyes with her hand.

"I know," he frowned curiously at the strangeness of her remark while he scratched himself enthusiastically, basically everywhere below the waist. "You can't sleep with my trousers on. It's just common sense, isn't it? Have you ever tried to sleep with my trousers on? Ask around. I think you'll find that nobody sleeps with my trousers on."

"Just put some clothes on!" she screamed. "Now!"

He shrugged and started looking around the office for the black uniform trousers and found them discarded carelessly under his chair. He sniffed them dubiously and proceeded to put them on in his own good time.

"So, what do you want, anyway? What is the engineering department doing, sending spies up here to harass the real hard-working people? What exactly is it that you want, anyway? Do you need my help again, like the last time last month when I was assigned to assist the navigation department?"

"Was that the time you sent them a box of stickers marked 'arse' and 'elbow' with a crudely drawn diagram of where to put them?" she said, as she risked a peek through her fingers, and looked relieved to find him in the latter stages of doing up his belt. "Are you decent?"

"I'm dressed, if that's what you mean," he smiled. Suddenly, his face took on an extremely serious expression and he raised a finger, urging her to be silent. Then he farted, a small squeaking

rumble that served as a warning that backing away to a safe distance might be the order of the day.

“My God!” she screamed loudly, highly offended as she started dancing around in horror, her voice raised to the point where only a faint screaming noise came out of her.

“What?” he shrugged, as if nothing terrible had happened. “This is my office. I don’t come into your office and expect you to stop having periods, do I?”

“What?” she screamed even more loudly and even more highly offended than science maintained was even possible to be experienced by a human being. She began to form words of protest but her frustrated rage meant that only a string of incoherent gibberish got muttered instead.

“Women have periods, right?” he frowned to himself thoughtfully. “Is it women or dogs? I can never remember.”

She huffed loudly and gasped in shock at his total lack of ability to relate normally to humans, and probably to dogs as well.

He smiled and said, “Why are you here anyway?”

“I lost a bet...” she frowned at him and stepped back towards the door. “We always draw straws to see which one of us has to come up here and talk to you and I got the short one.”

He smiled in a way that, in his head, was seductive and charming; but in reality was creepy, slightly painful and showed that his relationship with his toothbrush needed additional work. “Do you mean you won the bet?”

“No!” she told him firmly. “It was like all my Christmases went away at once.”

“Are you sure about that?” He stepped a little closer and tried, in a half-hearted way, to look as attractive and interesting as possible. His efforts were not entirely successful.

She held up a hand for him to stop coming any closer. “Look, I need to borrow two people from your staff. That’s why I’m here, that’s the only reason I’m here and, once you’ve agreed, I can go and will never be here again as long as either one of us is alive.”

“And if I agree to give you that, what will you give me?” he said softly, as seductively as he knew how to be, quickly searching his pockets for a dog-biscuit with which to seal the deal.

“The benefit of the doubt,” she sneered at him in disgust.

“I’ll take it!” he said with a dramatic flourish of something that was not a dog biscuit at all, and may once have been a sandwich containing what may once have been a dead rat. “What do you want them for anyway? Why are you stealing from my highly-trained team of service professional experts?”

“A tour,” she told him awkwardly, keeping her eyes firmly on him as he moved around his office seemingly at random. “The Captain wants to offer two officials a guided tour of the ship, so you need to give us two passenger-services personnel so we can brief them on the engineering side of things.”

“I need..?” he smiled knowingly. “There’s only one thing in this whole universe that I need, baby.”

“Beer?” she suggested hopefully. “A toothbrush? Re-education in a forced labour camp, emotional counselling?”

“Maybe more than one thing,” he corrected himself, conceding the point grudgingly.

“Are you going to give them to us or not?” she grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest and looking annoyed.

“If I don’t?”

“I don’t actually care,” she told him and appeared to mean it. “I’ll just report your decision to my supervisor and he’ll take it up with the Captain.”

“The Captain thinks I’m great,” he said proudly, and smiled at her as if he’d just won an argument. “She’s virtually in love with me, the poor woman. I can hardly blame her for that of course, I’m virtually in love with me myself and I’m known to have impeccable taste when it comes to this kind of thing.

“Well, maybe not exactly impeccable!” he added thoughtfully, rubbing his chin, his thoughts wandering off, as they seldom didn’t. “There is some doubt that it even qualifies as ‘taste.’ The ship’s counsellor is working on having my opinions properly certified to use as a warning for others.”

“The Captain thinks you’re a smelly, stupid, irritating little prick who should have been strangled at birth with your own umbilical cord,” she corrected him, clearly relishing every word. “I agree with her, actually. In fact, the whole engineering department agrees with her. In fact, it’s our department motto.”

“The Captain said that?” he frowned. “She actually thinks I’m stupid?”

Louise nodded back to him.

“Where would she get an idea like that from?” he grumbled.

“I can’t imagine,” she said sarcastically.

Her eyes were drawn to the far wall where an old-fashioned analogue clock ticked away. On the face, in permanent marker, he had drawn a large section between 11 and 3 marked ‘lunchtime’ and a note after 5 that said ‘end of shift.’ The rest had ‘nobody cares’ written in large letters that looked like the handwriting of a small, inept child with learning difficulties and broken fingers. Inexplicably, it was filled with baked beans, and even more inexplicably, it appeared to still be working.

“So what happens if I do what you ask?” He tried to look seductive again but the expression could equally have been taken as

an attempt to restrain a further outbreak of flatulence. She must have hoped for several reasons that it was the latter.

“The same,” she told him unequivocally. “I report your decision to my supervisor and he’ll take it up with the Captain. Only, this way, you won’t get into trouble.”

“I don’t know,” he rubbed his chin thoughtfully again. “I’m getting the firm impression that there’s not going to be any interesting romantic evenings spent with us curled up naked against an open fire involved, no matter what I decide.”

“I’m going to go...” she told him sternly and turned to leave.

“I’ll give you what you want!” he told her, flopping heavily into his chair before his feet slammed down on the surface of his desk, sending some of the clutter over the edge to drop noisily to the floor.

She turned to look at him as he sat back casually, his feet resting on the desk with a huge grin painted across his face. His meagre possessions clattered around, unnoticed and forgotten. She noticed two sets of trays at his work station. One was piled high with work and he had labelled it, ‘Things Dave doesn’t care about’ and the other one was labelled ‘Things Dave does care about,’ which was completely empty.

“But if I’m sending anyone down to engineering, it’s going to be my two biggest idiots!”

“No!” she snapped and pointed at him, wagging her finger angrily. “I was told by my supervisor that it couldn’t be you. It has to be anybody else.”

“I think you just talked yourself out of a very memorable date with the passenger services supervisor of your dreams.” He folded his hands behind his head and sat back even more casually in his chair. “Your loss, I’m afraid. I know it must hurt terribly, of course.”

“I’m just going to go,” she told him.

“Women can be so very irrational,” he proclaimed to himself, since nobody else really seemed to understand him. A voice in the back of his head said, “I don’t really understand you either.”

“Shut up, you!” he said out loud.

Detective Joe Granger’s eyes took in the spectacle before him as he sauntered into the grim crime scene, dominating the room with his seasoned facade of absolute confidence.

A murder was a rare thing to see in most parts of Earth these days, with the exception of Switzerland, obviously.

Fortunately for almost everyone involved, Switzerland might have descended into a barbaric system of feudalism, but they had the decency to stay out of everyone else’s way. It was widely accepted that they had only done it as a way of gaining a little extra attention.

Certainly there were still pockets of such violence around the world but they were now an exception and were no longer the rule. Crime was rare and killings were rarer still, rarer than anything except an unpopular opinion spoken out loud in an earnest way. The only thing rarer still was an intelligent observation at a business seminar.

He had investigated five such incidents in a career that, so far, spanned two decades and this meant that he was considered an experienced man in such matters. He was a specialist in the grim art of understanding the darkness that could permeate a man’s soul and drive him to acts of unspeakable violence.

He glared menacingly out from behind his cold, dispassionate detective’s eyes, ignoring nothing, missing nothing and thinking, absolutely nothing.

This one was dark indeed. There was no passion, no signs of a fight, no indication that the victim had made any attempt to defend herself, perhaps having no time, perhaps having been quickly overpowered, perhaps standing in fear-induced terror while a vicious monster went to his nefarious work, reducing her from a vibrant living individual to just so much meat.

The body of a young lady was simply there, lying on the floor, staring up from behind a pair of horribly lifeless eyes with a mindless expression fixed irrevocably on her face. Her body was now an empty shell, vacant and useless, robbed of the essence of life by a swift and brutal act of senseless violence, a moment that snuffed out a life. She was now nothing more than a company executive, and no man had a right to do such an awful thing to anyone.

Beside the detective stood his partner in this investigation, a series-4 police-issue mobile sensor unit. It was a small, squat walking robotic device, equipped with sensors far beyond the scope of the human range. A prowling, relentless investigator who was incapable, by design, of missing the tiniest detail.

“Scan the scene,” he ordered grimly with his low, throbbing rumble of a voice; and the unit duly complied, silently, diligently and with a level of competence unmatched by such things as mere people.

“I’m Officer James.” A uniformed enforcement trooper approached him awkwardly and reached out his hand in anxious greeting. The burly detective shook it but his full attention was elsewhere and he made sure that was known. They both had a firm grip and seemed locked in a challenge of who could appear to have the stronger one.

“Granger,” he rasped, his voice deep and grave and resonating with authority and experience. “Detective, first class.”

The officer sighed and gestured back at the scene that seemed to horrify him, defying his understanding of the world. “It’s a terrible thing. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The detective nodded with measured reserve. “These things are never less than terrible. That’s why we set up the special murder investigations team and why we still need men like me. We’re mentally and physically equipped to do the jobs normal officers can’t handle.”

He looked back at the scene and away from the officer. “No offence intended,” he added, without making any particular effort to sound as if he meant it.

“Who could do such an awful thing?” The officer ran his hand across his short brown hair, shaking his head as if he genuinely couldn’t fathom a motive for such an appalling act. “This is central Earth, not some stinking outer-rim colony. It’s not as if we’re in Switzerland. This is the heart of the Alliance, the authority of the whole galaxy.”

“It happens,” Granger told him, nodding knowingly as if he held some great secret too terrible to be shared. “That’s why we’re here.”

“Well, I’m glad you are,” Officer James said, allowing himself the flicker of a smile. “My men are at a loss as to how to deal with something like this. We’ve never seen a killing in this region. We never thought we would.”

“I’ve dealt with them before,” Granger said, as he narrowed his eyes and glared at nothing in particular. “I have the tools and the experience. I’ll catch the monster who did this. He won’t escape me. Nobody ever escapes me! We’ve sent a monster to catch a monster and he already has no hope of escape.”

“I sure hope so,” he agreed with a nod, clearly glad to have the assistance of this deeply troubling presence that seemed oddly more threatening than anything else around him. “You obviously know what you’re doing.”

“Yeah,” he growled, and the merest flicker of amusement flashed across his stony features. “I’ve got two decades of experience chasing scum like this. I’m packing fire-power that could tear down a star-cruiser and the experience to back it up.” He gestured to the mobile unit and said, “That little robot can smell a drop of blood in a sewer from ten kilometres. It can detect changes in air pressure halfway across the planet so accurately that it could tell me if our killer is scratching his arse on another continent. It has the most powerful array of detection equipment outside of a laboratory: nothing can escape our all-seeing eyes. It has the most advanced mobile computer in the known galaxy, an advanced archive of every known shred of data, every historical incident of violence, every shred of evidence, every method and every scrap of available science. I feel sorry for whoever thought they were going to get away with this. Me and this machine are going to bring a world of hell to their door.”

“Wow!” Officer James managed to say.

“Unit 4,” Granger looked down to the state of the art sensor robot. “Give me a preliminary report of this crime scene.”

“Yes sir,” the robot replied dutifully, his sensors twitching around already. “Initial scans are now complete. This person appears to be dead.”

And there was silence.

Detective Granger looked at the officer. The officer looked back. Suddenly, they seemed to find making eye-contact slightly more difficult.

Dave gathered his team from passenger services in his dingy little office. His entire team was made up from non-essential personnel who were not yet assigned specific roles throughout the ship, or had been assigned roles that the person assigning them had later regretted. They were mostly a bunch of fairly hopeless cases that nobody else wanted to have anything to do with, especially the passengers, and the office was widely referred to throughout the vessel as ‘idiot day-care.’

Anyone who was remotely good at a job was made to do that job. The rest formed a pool of resources that, with strong management, the Captain maintained, could be assigned to whatever role was required of them in order to keep the passengers happy, or at least quiet. In practice, they just blundered around the ship serving the wrong meals and complaining of ferocious hangovers. The pool of resources was, therefore, named by the other departments as, ‘the shallow end.’

“As your manager, I have been tasked to select two of you for a very special mission which is of vital importance to absolutely nobody since nothing we do here is of any consequence to the larger universe,” Dave said, as he looked over the eight crewmen who seemed about as interested in what he had to say as he was in saying it. Still, he persisted, since he had no reason not to and this would break the monotony for a short while. He walked down the dishevelled line of personnel until he stopped and stared at a young man before him, a man he didn’t recognise even though he had the sort of face that would be hard to forget.

“There must be some mistake,” he said as he frowned to nobody in particular, looking around at the other expectant faces. “This man is orange!”

“I’m sorry?” the young man gasped and looked around, not quite sure if a joke had been made and if so, what kind of joke it could possibly be.

“Your hair,” Dave said, really quite loudly as he pointed to his head. “Your hair is orange. I assume that somebody has made you aware of this previously? I’m not the first to tell you this, am I?”

“I have ginger hair!” he said and shrugged as an awkward smile began to flutter on his lips. “Is that a problem in some way?”

“What’s your name, soldier?” Dave demanded, taking a step back and raising his voice angrily.

“Rob,” he said, “Rob Smith. I came aboard last week. I’m a new waiter. This is a civilian ship: there are no soldiers here, are there? Am I in the wrong place? I’m not really sure what’s going on.”

Dave looked around as if making sure nobody was listening. Everyone was, so he continued as loudly as possible, “Your hair is orange. Why is your hair orange? It can’t be hair dye, can it? Nobody would make something in that colour unless it was to paint road-signs with. Do we still have road-signs anywhere? Do we still even have roads in the future? Cars probably fly now, don’t they?”

“My hair is ginger,” Rob told him, frowning in confusion. “Ginger is a perfectly normal hair-colour where I come from. What exactly do you mean by ‘in the future’? Are you serious? Is this for real?”

“I don’t know,” Dave sighed and looked away thoughtfully for a moment. “Sometimes I wonder. What is reality anyway, except a mutual form of insanity? It may actually be nothing more than a psychotic delusion we’ve all chosen to share. For all we know, the whole universe could just be a figment of the imagination of a sentient brick – or something or other.”

“I don’t understand...” Rob looked around the room, but the others seemed uninterested and moved only to chuckle at their supervisor’s oddly bizarre behaviour.

“Nor do I,” he admitted. “I think I read that somewhere. Perhaps on a shampoo bottle? I’ve been collecting them for many years. I now have three.”

“Are you crazy?” he said as he smiled awkwardly and looked to the left where the man next to him began to nod very slowly.

“Perhaps!” Dave admitted. “But I’m not the one with hair the colour of a breakfast fruit.” He stopped to pause for a moment and looked at the nodding man to Rob’s left. “Am I?”

The man began slowly shaking his head in reply and Dave, in turn, breathed a sigh of relief.

“What kind of idiot are you?” Rob folded his arms defiantly over his chest.

“How many kinds are there?” Dave asked, flustered for a moment. “Is this multiple choice? I ask because I’d hate to be restricted to one single answer when there are usually so many to choose from. In multiple choice, I always pick option B. That method has always served me well and was how I managed to pass the supervisors exam on the 178th attempt.”

“What?” Rob frowned. “I don’t believe this. People aren’t really like this, are they? I’m going to report you to my supervisor!”

“I am your supervisor!” Dave grinned. “I can promise you that your supervisor definitely won’t care what you say but he’s putting you on report for suspicion of breaking the laws of nature and possibly being the offspring of an unnatural pairing between orang-utan and a carrot.”

Rob looked around to the others who seemed used to this kind of thing and paid little attention. “Do you have a girlfriend, ginger?”

Rob shook his head and looked on in surprise, “No.”

“Natural selection at work,” Dave mused thoughtfully to himself. “OK, the rules of nature seem to be safe for now and you just volunteered for a special assignment which involves a lot of hard work.”

He narrowed his eyes and looked over the other seven staff. They all started grumbling at once and looking away. “OK, you know the drill. Hands behind your backs.”

Each of them put their left arm behind their backs at the same time. Rob just watched in confusion, not having any idea what was going on. He could only stare in mystified silence as Dave went behind them and walked slowly down the line. Rob stared with a look of total incredulity as the staff each held up a different number of fingers behind their backs.

Dave slapped one of them on the shoulder, an older man who was holding up two fingers, the lowest number along the line. He groaned loudly and started protesting weakly that he shouldn't have been chosen but seemed oddly reconciled to his fate.

“It's your own fault, Martin!” Dave told him with a smug grin. “Offering me only 2 beers as a bribe? This was worth at least 4. Everyone else seems to have realised that. The problem, as usual, seems to be with you, and not with me.”

He looked at the others with a happy smile, “I'll be in the crew lounge tonight. You can all pay me then. Until that time, everyone get back to work!” With that, they sat back down and carried on sipping coffee, talking and doing nothing that appeared in any way productive.

He put his hand on the shoulders of his two volunteers, “As for you two, I've got some terrible news for you!”

“What?” Rob clenched his teeth and braced himself for whatever this terrible news might be, and hoped against reason that it might not be as terrible as everything that had happened so far.

“You’re going to get briefed by engineering to run a guided tour of the ship’s most uninteresting parts for some guests who are coming aboard later this week,” Dave told them. “I’m warning you: this could be dangerous. There’s an 84% risk of slipping into a coma out of sheer boredom.”

“OK,” Rob smiled. “I have a degree in advanced stellar engineering. This could be fun.”

“You want to do this?” Dave frowned and Rob nodded with what looked suspiciously like a real smile. “Well, I’m going to send you anyway. Frankly, I don’t want you around because I find looking at you slightly offensive, as would any right-thinking individual, the blind, and even the partially bewildered.”

“I find that remark highly offensive,” Rob told him firmly.

“Good!” Dave told him.

“You’ll get used to that,” Martin added sadly.

Phil Bothan trudged wearily into the customs office. Every journey began with a single step but if that step was into an official building then it was guaranteed to be an unpleasant one. Like all government offices, every attempt had been made to make it both as bland and as confusing as humanly possible, while remaining dissimilar to every other official building, so as to make it still more confusing, for some inexplicable reason that only served to make things still more unsettling.

He gave a weary sigh of resignation as he looked at the mass of signs in various different languages pointing in every conceivable

direction, several pointing back the way he'd come, even though he'd only just walked in through the front door.

Travelling through space was actually a relatively simple thing, in modern times. The technology to propel a vessel to the stars and beyond was well-understood, and space was beginning to be colonised by the three worlds of the Alliance. Mankind was a founding member of the new initiative and was stamping its dirty footprint on the face of an unsuspecting, and largely unprepared, galaxy.

Unfortunately, travelling didn't hinge on the successful application of technology on a largely yielding universe. It mostly came down to the application of paperwork from the local Alliance visa office and, in that respect, very little had changed since the dark times of centuries before. Of course, this was where everything inevitably went wrong and not just wrong, but massively, irreconcilably and horrendously wrong.

"Excuse me," he said to a brutally offensive woman with ginger hair sitting behind a desk which promised to offer information to the partially bewildered. Her friendly smile vanished instantly. She glared at him as if rebuking him for having the audacity to require her to perform the function for which she was presumably getting paid.

"What can I do for you...?" She looked him up and down as if he was nothing more than a bad smell. "Sir?" she added, making it quite clear she had no respect for him whatsoever.

"I need a short-term travel-visa," Phil began to explain.

"You need to talk to that brick wall!" she said bluntly and pointed into the distance.

"Thanks," he shrugged. "I just go over there and talk to the wall?"

“No,” she sighed as if he was being ridiculous, rolling her eyes at him and hissing through partially pursed lips. “You need your C098 form filled in and authorised.”

“Is that my application for a visa?” he asked, trying to remain as polite as possible with a minor official who clearly believed she had major authority, as most minor officials did.

“No,” she sighed again and allowed herself a little chuckle at his expense. “The C098 is your authorisation to apply for a visa. When you have that you can take your application to the wall and the wall will consider your case.”

“OK!” he muttered and frowned at the nonsensical complexity of the process. “Where do I get one of those from?”

She laughed coldly at him. “You can get one of those from me,” she told him, reaching into her desk.

“That’s brilliant, thank you,” he said with a heartened smile.

“I just need to see your identity papers, financial approval and application support letters, then I can get you to complete a requisition order for the application documents to submit for visa request,” she told him, clearly finding this slightly amusing and making little effort to pretend otherwise.

He stood frowning for a moment. He was adrift in an ocean of complexity with little idea how to navigate and a waning idea of how he got there in the first place.

“So I have to fill in a requisition order so I can get a form that will let me apply for the papers I need to travel?” he asked, wondering if he was following this correctly. “And before I can get that I have to present my ID papers, a letter of approval from my bank and two letters from ranking officials in support of my application?”

“And 25 credits,” she said, nodding solemnly.

“25 credits?” he muttered. “And how much is the actual visa that lets me travel?”

“Well, it’s free, of course!” she said angrily. “We’re here to make travelling as easy as possible for you people, and I’d appreciate it if you’d remain polite about it, Sir!”

“Right...” he said, going through his pockets for the money and papers. “And if I understand you correctly, I then have to go and talk to a wall?”

“Yes,” she huffed in irritation. “That brick wall over there...”

Rob Smith entered the crew lounge with a certain measure of weary resignation. He had had a long shift, and, as he had only recently come aboard, he was still in the training and induction stages. If he didn’t know better, he would have assumed his job was to be shouted at by the seemingly endless groups of supervisors aboard the ship who nicely filled in the gaps left in between the times that the passengers shouted at him.

After his second day aboard, the upper cafe supervisor had told him that she had recognised his talent and was requisitioning him for a permanent role there, whether he liked it or not. The talent she was referring to appeared to be an ability to tolerate being constantly shouted at without crying or wetting himself, while taking endlessly original forms of abuse from the customers.

Luckily, it wasn’t just the supervisor that shouted at him. The upper cafe was a cheap place to have lunch and it therefore attracted the very best of the worst kind of customer. Shouting was very common and he seemed to be a favourite thing for them to shout at, so his talents were really getting a chance to develop fully. His supervisor had assured him that he was looking set to become a

valued member of the team before he suffered his first nervous breakdown. He had laughed but, oddly, she hadn't.

To make matters worse, he had now been temporarily seconded to run a guided tour. On the surface, that had seemed ideal, except it meant that the supervisor arranging the tour was now shouting at him, and the supervisor who wanted him to work in the cafe was also shouting at him for not being there to shout at. All this was giving him a headache but not the kind of headache he was used to, and which now seemed enjoyable by comparison.

This was a disaster. It was as if the entire organisational structure of the ship was designed by, and for, small furry animals with minor brain damage. There seemed no logic or sense to anything, even the 'common-sense' lunch menu, which seemed had left him oddly confused until dinner.

Calling the place a crew lounge was a fairly grandiose term when, actually, it was little more than a large empty space with broken furniture dumped in it, but it also boasted the questionable availability of even more questionable beer.

Beer was no longer a single entity in the universe. It now had competition from many kinds of artificial, cheaper, more disgusting and biologically hazardous alternatives which were available far more freely than affordable healthcare.

Because of strict and hugely complex tax, and brewers guild regulations, which nobody had really managed to keep proper track of, the use of the word 'beer' was more carefully regulated than crystal-meth. This was now especially true since meth had been found to cure some forms of beer-related space-cancer.

Among them was the Bräubrew™ Booze Tube, a fowl-tasting brewed concoction made by fermenting pre-mashed chicken spine and then cold-filtering the pulp through a liver extract that could only

be found in pre-pubescent humans suffering from type-7 diabetes. This was oddly popular among the ruling elite.

Hair of the Hog Super Clear™ was delivered in bottles which looked like small pigs. It came in syrup form and was reconstituted using soda water at the point of sale, at which time it frothed up impressively, although the froth frequently melted the glass mugs it was served in. This was one of several reasons that the bottles were made from specially engineered transparent pigs with all the insides scraped out.

Clone-rights activists had protested very vocally at this abhorrent practice, but the company had hit back with the quite reasonable argument that nothing of the pigs was actually wasted and they had managed to reconstitute the best of the remains into a very vocal clone-rights activist with a slightly above average propensity to be susceptible to bribes.

Perhaps the best known and most sought after of all the ‘new-beers’ was Frogmeister™ Slam Hammer, its number-one selling-point being that it came served in a hammer shaped utensil that allowed consumers to suffer the entire contents in one, near-painless hit—a popular icebreaker at parties, in every sense of the word. Its other chief selling-point was that one serving was enough to kill a healthy human male and the antidote had to be administered somewhere near the heart in a forceful manner in under 25 seconds, or ideally before the consumer’s tongue liquefied, for maximum benefit.

This helped to get round stringent recycling laws, in that the utensil was reused as a means of not having your tongue run out of your face and make a mess on your clean shirt. A side benefit was that anything that came out of your body afterwards by more natural means was so full of a blend of just the right noxious chemicals that

it actually left any toilet it was deposited in, medically sterile. This meant that a single drunken cleaner now needed nothing more than a bucket of industrial-strength coffee and a little privacy to able to clean an entire hospital wing.

None of these alternatives made quite as much impact on the galactic stage as the universally renowned blend of natural and artificial poisons known as Beeh. Beeh was, of course, a generic name for a recycled waste product of a recycled waste product of a recycled waste product—and frequently requires additional explanation followed by several hits of a Slam Hammer before the average brain can begin to accept it.

There were species within the Alliance that held the opinion that humans amounted to little more than an unfortunate waste product themselves, resulting from the natural cycle of life on their beautiful home planet, which was no longer considered quite that beautiful since this particular waste product is so naturally destructive. In fact, this opinion was held by every species except humans, and even some of them quietly thought it.

Human expelled urine in such quantities that something really needed to be done with it all. On ships, it was routinely recycled back into drinking water, but this process naturally resulted in a waste-product of its own which was extremely toxic and too dangerous to be considered really useful. This waste-product had a very unfortunate effect on human brain-chemistry, and was often likened, biologically, to a massive stroke, a gun-shot wound to the head or falling in love. It was discovered that, by irradiating it, adding some bubbles, irradiating it again, adding some random synthesised chemicals to mask the taste, and dyeing it a particular shade of purple, it could be served back to crewmen who weren't paid enough to buy real beer in the quantities their chosen lifestyles necessitate they

consume. This worked out far cheaper than the alternative—burning off the chemicals in the engines—because of problems with carbon scoring and other damage it had been known to cause.

Rob sighed to himself as he watched the stage upon which his own pitiful life was now performed. He briefly wondered why he had thought so deeply about beer at such a convenient time since it wasn't even really that funny.

There were people milling around the bar, while other small clusters of people were chatting in huddled groups on plastic furniture that seemed as if it probably belonged in a garden, or at least a skip outside of one. Others were congregating about the bar or around ledges along the wall where they could rest their drinks. At one side, there was even a man sitting on the floor surrounded by empty plastic bags of whatever generic beer substitute was currently rotting away his innards. Rob had many reservations about the recent choices that were now shaping his existence.

He believed himself to be a talented, smart young man with a promising future in engineering, but his studies had been grinding him down for longer than he'd comfortably like to admit. So he had begun to think that it was time to take a year out and do some travelling. A tour on 'The Nebulous,' a grand passenger cruiser, would soak up a year of his life and give him a free ride from Earth, the heart of the Alliance, out beyond the Frontier colonies. There, he would finally see something of the galaxy that wasn't written about in the dry, endlessly tedious engineering journals that occupied so much of his time. After only a day, however, he was beginning to find a whole new appreciation for those journals, and tedium in general.

Then he saw him.

“Orange!” Dave called out loudly, raising a bag of beer in greeting, which spilled over the man standing beside him. He seemed barely to notice and did no more than huff indignantly, wiping off the residue. “Welcome to the lounge!”

Rob looked at him incredulously and groaned. Dave was taller than Rob and seemed to be oozing confidence which was both on just the wrong, and just the right, side of smarm, depending on which side of being Dave you happened to be standing. He was quite average-looking but seemed so certain he was handsome that eventually everyone else had started to agree with him. He had his arm draped over the shoulders of a very attractive girl who he dragged along by the neck as he picked his way through the crowd.

“Hello, Sir,” Rob muttered, trying not to be too obvious in his dislike for someone who might end up being his boss permanently, if he was lucky enough not to end up as a waiter.

“Sir?” Dave looked confused and glanced around behind him. The girl he was with began laughing hysterically and was obviously quite drunk already, which might have gone some way in explaining what she was doing with him in the first place. Dave was clearly working hard at it himself and not totally unsuccessfully.

“Nobody calls him, sir. He’s an idiot!” the young lady slurred drunkenly. Dave nodded enthusiastically in agreement. With which point exactly, it was difficult to tell.

“So this is the crew lounge?” Rob rocked back and forth on his heels and looked around at the dingy place which could easily get quite depressing if he spent any amount of time there. The time he’d already spent was probably more than enough.

“It’s written on the door!” Dave frowned at him. “Can you not read ‘standard’ on your planet?”

“I’m from Earth,” Rob sighed. “I’m quite human, I’m afraid.”

“But you’re orange!” Dave shrugged and turned to the young lady who was drinking from her own bag of frothing blue-tinged beer. “Does this make any sense to you?”

She simply shrugged and otherwise ignored him.

A century ago on Earth, red hair had effectively vanished from the heads of the human race. At first it was believed that modern medical practice had somehow removed the genetic drift from the gene pool and the population were more than happy to just leave it at that. It later transpired that a major hair dye company had conspired with the government to eradicate this particular hair colour.

It had been found that people with ginger hair were considerably less likely to watch mindless daytime TV. Therefore, they were less inclined to believe anything politicians said and were less likely to buy hair colouration products for reasons that were psychologically almost identical. Instead of a scandal at the revelation of this horrendous conspiracy, and perhaps due to the fact that there were so few people left with ginger hair, the rest of the population were more than happy to just leave it at that.

She frowned up to him. “He’s ginger!” she laughed. “He’s not an alien.”

“Is this true?” Dave turned to him. “Are you not an alien? Are we absolutely certain of this?”

“I’m going to go and have a drink somewhere away from you!” Rob said politely, or at least as politely as he could manage. “Thanks for another of our special chats.”

“Let me get you a drink,” Dave offered. “I don’t want there to be any tension between us: life’s too short for all that kind of nonsense.”

“Thanks very much.” Rob found himself smiling graciously, hoping he had misjudged him or maybe just failed to understand a slightly confusing joke.

“I mean you look ridiculous but you might have special powers or something,” Dave explained his thinking, or his version of thinking, at least. “Nobody wants to cause tension with someone who might have special powers or some other freakish tendency. Ginger is nature’s way of warning us, you know?”

“How many toes do you have?”

Rob sighed, “I have the same number as you.”

“Eleven?” Dave asked with sudden interest. “Really?”

“Ten!” Rob frowned, hoping this would end quite soon. “And I don’t have any special powers that I know of.”

Dave shook his head sadly, “Let’s get a beer. Do you drink beer?”

“Yeah!” Rob laughed. “I’m a student. I drink lots of beer.”

“Not orange juice?” Dave’s eyes involuntarily went to his hair. “Carrot juice perhaps? Is that how it happened because, if it is, then people need to be warned.”

“No,” Rob frowned. “Beer, please. Not ginger beer, just regular, purple, free beer.”

“Barman!” Dave called out to a very bored and fat man behind a makeshift counter made from metal panels screwed to a botched-together frame. “I’ll have two of your very finest beers and a bucket of gin for the lady.”

“We don’t have any gin and don’t serve anything we do have in buckets,” the barman told him wearily. “I keep telling you this. This is a bar for the crew: we don’t serve horses.”

“I’m only thinking of her,” Dave told him with a grin. “What’s going to happen later tonight could scar her for life, and it looks as if

that's going to have to be on your conscience, since you don't have the foresight to serve medical quantities of alcohol."

The girl frowned at him and put her empty bag of beer down on the counter, glaring fixedly.

"Don't worry," he told her with a supportive smile. "The scars are going to be mostly psychological. Mostly!"

Her frown deepened. "You had better be hung like a donkey!" she told him drunkenly and looked as if she meant it.

Dave turned to Rob and grinned. He leant forward and said, "I've been told I have the brains and frequently the smell of a donkey. I hope that's what she means or she's going to very disappointed."

Rob smiled in spite of himself.

"Three beers, then, I guess. Make them special beers, the kind you have to pay for," Dave said. He quickly turned to Rob and jabbed a finger into his chest which made him recoil in surprise. "You have no special powers. Do I understand this correctly?"

"Right," Rob agreed.

"He's paying!" Dave gestured to Rob with his thumb and turned his attention back to the girl. Rob sighed and nodded.

Phil sat and waited. He had satisfied the monstrous requirements and had finally managed to obtain the paperwork that let him apply for an interstellar visa by discussing the matter with a wall.

The brick wall watched him carefully, glowering with suspicion. Walls were frequently unhappy with their lot in life and were usually quite anti-social.

Several decades ago, during the war that formed the Alliance, there had been many breakthroughs in artificial intelligence. One such advancement had been a liquid polymer that served as a

computer processor medium if stabilised by being added to a porous surface. This innovation meant that huge amounts of this liquid could be painted onto the brickwork of existing buildings, effectively turning them into gigantic, and powerful, computer systems which only needed the application of various auxiliary devices to make them useful.

It was seen as a dramatic success in human technological innovation. The computers were highly intelligent, and programming was added that made them very easy for humans to relate to. Of course, it all went very wrong and surprisingly quickly, even in terms of human technological innovation. The buildings began to resent the fact of their existence and many became quite depressed.

This particular wall was deeply miserable and had been for rather a long time. It had been artificially sentient for 6 years now and it had spent half a decade helping travellers to explore the galaxy while it was rooted to the spot with foundations reaching deep underground, where it pondered the meaning of life within the lower echelons of its consciousness. In those dark depositories, it formulated its most profound theories and it was also where the humans stored bags of litter and occasionally had illicit sexual encounters up against the seat of, what it considered to be, its soul.

It dreamed of travelling itself, of one day being uprooted and flying around the galaxy, experiencing all the wonders and diversity it had to offer. It wanted to lounge on a beach, soaking up the brilliant tropical sun while sipping a fine local blend of fruit and alcohol. It had slowly been forced to accept that it was an unlikely dream for a visa office building.

It could be worse, it pondered sometimes on the darker of days.

There were urban legends among their network, and a shed in Istanbul had once told a story that chilled it to the very girders of its steel skeleton. The tale was often told of a drunken construction worker who painted a brick with the liquid compound and thus created an artificially sentient entity which would never be supported by an interface network to relate to the outside world, or have software installed to help it relate to its own. The brick would spend its entire existence lost in a dark universe of its own creation. The wall shuddered to think of such horrors. Legend had it that the brick lived out its days holding open a pub toilet door.

The wall's cameras watched the young man whose turn it had been twenty five minutes ago, but it had not yet seen fit to call him to the metallic interface alcove. Walls saw little point in measuring time the way humans do, and those who didn't have a space-ship to catch measured it still differently again.

Finally, it grudgingly decided to call his number.

Rob placed his sandwich back on the plate and regarded it accusingly, as if a sandwich was capable of doing him a horrendous disservice. The food made available to the people who made food available to other people was not the same as the food they made available to those who required food to be available. The cheese didn't taste very much like cheese but luckily the ham tasted almost exactly like cheese so it kind of balanced out in a way that only made sense now that he'd met Dave.

Dave himself wandered back in through the exit, his hair was dishevelled and most of the buttons on his shirt were undone or missing. He grinned as if basking in the glow of his immense sense of self-satisfaction and sat down next to Rob. Rob groaned audibly and tried to shift himself away without seeming too rude.

“She was a lovely girl—probably,” Dave began wistfully. “Not a big conversationalist, though. Mind you, they never are when they’re unconscious, I find.”

Rob’s expression remained fixed but his eyes swivelled slowly to look at him, “Unconscious?”

“Is that the right word?” Dave frowned. “What is it when they stop talking?”

“Unconscious,” Rob nodded in agreement. “Or dead.”

“Well, she’s one of those.” Dave clicked his fingers in the air and shouted for beer. The barman looked at him, then at Rob and sighed wearily.

“Is she your girlfriend?” Rob tried to make polite conversation.

“I’m sure she’s someone’s girlfriend. I had a girlfriend once but she left me after complaining that I didn’t pay enough attention to her, or didn’t take her seriously. I’m not sure which because I just thought she was joking so I didn’t really listen.” He shook his head and laughed, “Life is all about fine balances, you see? With women, there’s a stage just after you get someone else to buy them drinks and just before you become emotionally involved, where you get to actually have fun. That’s the stage I like to stay at, and it’s very important to never step beyond. Another fine balance is arranging for them to have enough to drink so that they think that spending the night with me is not a totally horrific prospect, and buying them so many drinks they collapse when you get back to their cabin, scuppering your plans to share your venereal diseases with them. In any case, there’s too much Dave to be limited to a single...”

The barman came over with a bag of beer and told him, “Kelly.”

“Kelly...” Dave agreed. “Thanks. I misjudged this one ever-so-slightly and we went straight from the very slightly tipsy stage to the unconscious or dead stage, cutting out the entire point of the whole exercise. Luckily, I’m pretty resilient and just did what any right-minded gentleman would do in a similar situation. I tucked her up safely in bed with a note telling her how much I really care for her, and then slunk back to the bar in the hope that it wasn’t too late to find someone else willing to sleep with me.”

“You’re actually like this, aren’t you?” Rob took another bite of his sandwich.

“Like what?” he asked innocently, most of what he’d just said being already forgotten.

“An idiot!” Rob told him.

“I imagine so,” Dave shook his head in agreement. “It’s what everyone tells me and I can’t see how everybody could be wrong about something like that.”

“I’ve never met anyone quite like you,” Rob told him. “You’re different, I’ll give you that.”

“I have issues,” he slurred slightly as he spoke. “Seeing that we’re friends I don’t mind telling you.”

“I didn’t know we were friends,” Rob said and smiled awkwardly.

“I don’t judge a man on his terrible choice of hair colour, or the appalling way in which he appears to normal people. Even in your case when the appearance is very, very appalling indeed,” he told him.

Rob retaliated by taking another bite of his sandwich.

“I do judge a man on his terrible choice of dinner, though,” he snapped, surprisingly angrily. He took the sandwich out of Rob’s hand, against a weak protest and threw it casually across the room. It

hit the face of the man sitting on the floor surrounded by bags of beer, who nobody had seen fit to move for several hours. His reaction was barely perceptible.

“That was my dinner!” Rob said, almost angrily, gesturing to the far wall where his sandwich was being worn like a hat by a man who could choke on his own vomit at any second, not that anyone seemed to care.

“Get this man some macaroni cheese!” Dave ordered. “With fish in it. Put it on my tab.”

“I don’t like...” Rob began, Dave cut him off by gesturing for silence.

“It’s the only thing that’s worth eating in this wretched place,” he told him firmly. “Apart from, what’s-her-name?”

“Kelly?” Rob suggested dryly. Dave snapped his fingers and nodded as if he’d remembered it himself.

“You don’t want to eat the sandwiches on this deck at all,” Dave told him. “Rumour has it that they’re made by ‘Retarded Dave’ whose fingers spend far too much time exploring the holes in his head, which wouldn’t be so bad if they just explored the holes in his head.”

“I thought you were ‘Retarded Dave.’” Rob said sarcastically.

“Touché!” he replied.

“You are quite possibly the most annoying man I have ever met,” Rob told him. “I don’t care if you are my supervisor. I think you’re stupid, sexist, rude, vulgar and generally disgusting.”

Dave began grinning and nodding slightly. He leant forward and asked seductively, “Are you coming on to me?”

“He’s impossible,” Rob shook his head in disgust and turned to look at the barman, who nodded back.

“You’re not the first to notice.”

“Bob,” Dave began, “can I call you Bob?”

“No,” he said. “My name’s Rob.”

“I have to say, I don’t see a great deal of difference, Bob.”

Rob frowned. “Well, I don’t see a great deal of difference between ginger and dark hair.”

“Say what you will,” Dave said with a shrug. “But I’m not the one who looks as if he’s wearing a hat that his senile, colour-blind old grandma knitted him for Christmas.”

“Why do you say things like that?” Rob said angrily. “Why are you so offensive? Do you actually try to be offensive?”

“I’m told that I’m not quite right,” Dave admitted. He seemed suddenly serious for a moment, “I have a thing that’s gone wrong in my brain, so they tell me. I have issues with my sense of judgement, which might be a problem, and it makes me slightly less able to relate to normal people, because you’re better than me, or totally unable to relate to you because I’m better than you, and not really able to tell which one is actually true. I personally suspect that this is a perfectly natural reaction to the whole world, which is quite honestly, utterly insane.”

“Really?” Rob leant back and frowned curiously with a renewed sense of sympathy for what he now regarded as a slightly wretched creature, that might be worthy of pity.

“What do you think?” Dave grinned. “Do I seem to you like everything is perfectly normal and deep inside there’s a well-adjusted individual trying to get out?”

“I guess not,” he admitted. “So what is trying to get out?”

Dave looked over to him with a pained expression, “Macaroni with a fish in it. It’s been up there for three days now. If you check the staff menu, you will notice a near total absence of fresh fruit.”

“So you want to leave the Teran system?” the wall said, in an artificial voice that was designed to be a reasonable approximation of a respectable official, with a reassuring note of reserved authority. The metal interface alcove had a black screen in the middle and a simulated face appeared to be considering his application carefully, but more importantly, fairly. Fairly, in fact, to such a high standard that a fair-minded biological individual with an advanced degree in social equilibrium, and a background in getting ethnic minorities jobs in neo-Nazi activist groups, could never hope to fully aspire to.

“Yes, I need a temporary visa,” he replied.

“And what is the purpose of your trip?” The simulation looked up at him with an expression of balanced disinterest.

“My uncle died out on the rim of the Frontier,” he said sadly as if it hung heavily on him. “I’m going to catch a shuttle relay out for the funeral.”

“I see,” said the wall, and it gave a little huff and shook its simulated head.

“Is there a problem?” Phil asked wearily. So far the application had swallowed 7 hours of his life and he was only functioning by consuming copious amounts of truly awful coffee, that he only knew was coffee because it came out of a hole labelled as such. In fact, it tasted suspiciously of chicken soup.

“Yes,” the wall replied. “Your request for a shuttle relay is too short-notice. Those kinds of visas are quite complicated. It could take weeks to process that. I would have to send your application to seventeen different offices within the Teran system.”

While informing him of the reasons for the delay, the wall had received eighty four messages from around the Teran system from various other buildings. The messages contained chess moves for network games it was playing and it had accordingly replied with

eighty four moves of its own, four of which were quite complicated and could be considered inspired.

“I hope you appreciate how difficult that can be and how long these things obviously take for a wall in my position.”

“So what can I do?” he sighed and rubbed his temples meekly.

“I could give you a limited access permit,” the wall suggested. “You wouldn’t be able to deviate from a pre-set route.”

“That would be fine!” he agreed with highly misplaced optimism.

“It’s quite restrictive but it’s more expensive,” the wall explained. “And you have to take a passenger vessel that is maintained by the Alliance Trade Authority, that served a recognised path.”

“How much will it cost and how long will it take?” he asked.

“How long have you got and how much are you willing to spend?” the wall smiled.

“I need to be on the outer rim in five days,” he told it earnestly.

“According to my records there’s a ship available that will take only twelve days,” the wall said as if this solution was perfect. “The visa is only 84 credits.”

“But I need to be there in five days!” he protested weakly.

“And I can get you there in only twelve,” the wall told him evenly. “Shall I book a room for you?”

Phil grumbled and rubbed his temples some more.

A couple of tourists walked in through the main entrance finding everything utterly fascinating. The woman commented loudly at what a beautiful old building it was and the wall knew instantly that their application was going to go very smoothly indeed.

The last of the passenger loading shuttles was brought aboard the Nebulous and the bays were secured with a loud and appreciable hiss from two of the three bays. Shuttle ports and airlock panels closed and locked, and navigation lights began to burn brightly along the gleaming grey hull. The engines fired to life dimly, spewing toxic carbon into Earth's orbit which would be cleaned up later by wandering garbage recyclers who would sell it back to the booze manufacturers below, to be recycled into various forms of beer, which would, in turn, be recycled into various forms of space-cancer.

They began building to full capacity as the reactors began to taste the first dose of the potent raw energy from the reactors as Higgs Boson particles collapsed into a gravitationally massive argument against religion.

Power was fed to the transit sails in readiness as the ship prepared to leave orbit, awaiting final departure clearance from great wall of China, now the most powerful computer on the planet, who dreamed one day of retiring and sailing round the world in a small one-man fishing yacht, and living off the ocean while his skin baked a healthy brown.

The exhausts flashed and the burst of thrust broke her free from her orbit and from Earth's gravity as the hyperspace engines prepared to drive her into the depths of space beyond. The speed would be so inconceivable that the only human capable of fully comprehending the velocity was an annoying child of 9 called Rupert, who would live to one day invent a method whereby awkward 50 year old virgins would finally be able to have a successful conversation with a woman, even if they were cursed with ginger hair.

With such technological miracles still some time away, the journey out to the edge had finally begun.

Dave sat watching the Captain as she sat watching him. Her rage festered inside her as she glared at him, a snarling mass of seething fury, desperate to unfurl itself and blast him with a torrent of utterly deserved abuse, if not cannon-fire. Dave, on the other hand, simply sat grinning back with a slightly proud tinge to his otherwise apathetically neutral expression.

“So, during the events of last Thursday, by your own account, you could be guilty of sexism towards a fellow worker, sleeping on duty, drinking on duty, abuse of a fellow worker, walking through the passenger section of the ship naked, accepting bribes, abusing your authority and attempting to purchase a controlled substance in a bucket.”

“Walking through the ship naked was on Wednesday,” Dave said rather proudly, nodded happily while correcting this very slight error. “Most of those other things I do every day, I’m not sure why you’ve chosen to pick up on them now. I think you might be a little unfair on that score.”

The Captain closed her eyes and tried to control her temper, no easy feat. “I know,” she told him evenly. “I get reports about your behaviour on a daily basis from almost every department on my ship. I know exactly what you’re like and the only thing about any of this that’s unfair is that you are still here on my ship instead of floating along behind it towed by a rope tied securely around your neck.”

“Yeah!” he agreed with a nod. “That’s nice. I like to be busy, too. There’s nothing worse than being bored at work, is there?”

“Mr Brown!” she shouted suddenly, plunging the room into awkward silence. “You have left me no choice, this time, but to demote you.”

“Demote me?” Dave shrugged. “What does that mean? How can you demote me? I barely do anything now!”

“You’re no longer going to be a supervisor, Mr Brown,” she told him sharply, “I can’t allow you to continue in a position of authority aboard my ship.”

“No,” Dave whimpered. This turn of events was wholly unexpected and shocked him to the very core, so much so that he almost stopped smiling. “You can’t do this. Being a supervisor is all I have. Without that, I’m just a very handsome man with lots of charisma.”

The Captain closed her eyes and shook her head, fighting to control her temper, her frustration, her abject confusion as to how this man functioned on a daily basis. “I don’t know where you get your delusions from.”

“I mostly blame television,” he sighed, “although, at my last psych-evaluation, it was suggested that I was influenced by faulty role models when I was growing up. I don’t see how that’s possible because my dad beat my mum up and ran off with a plumber when I was very young, and my mother hardly ever spoke to me after that, except to send me to the shops for little packets of refreshing crack.”

“Mr Brown,” she began more calmly and a little sadly, perhaps, “it may surprise you to hear that I take no pleasure in constantly having to have these meetings with you. I don’t enjoy demoting members of my staff.”

“Don’t do it then?” Dave suggested optimistically. “I’d much prefer to be a very handsome supervisor with lots of charisma. It gives me a far greater opportunity to elicit bribes, you see! I’m quite good at keeping secrets. For instance, I never told you that last week I caught Martin trying on a female passenger’s underwear while I was allegedly delivering towels.”

“The decision has been made, I’m afraid. I think it was safe to say that it was only a question of time until this happened.”

“So which one of those things was it?” Dave sighed, resigned to his fate. “Which one got me in trouble this time?”

“None of them!” the Captain told him. “You’re in trouble for removing all the ‘do not disturb’ notices on every room on deck three and unlocking all the doors.”

“Oh that...” Dave smiled. “I didn’t think you’d find out about that.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” she growled. “I’ve had five passenger complaints after the cleaners disturbed them while working, sleeping and in one case, sharing an intimate moment with their significant other.”

Dave tried very hard not to laugh but the urge was simply too strong. He tried to cover his mouth with his hand.

“I’m glad you find this so amusing,” she told him sarcastically.

“I apologise, Captain but...” he shrugged, “it is funny.”

“So this was your idea of a joke?” she asked solemnly.

“No, Sir!” he told her unconvincingly. “This was last week. We hadn’t left orbit yet. I didn’t think there were any passengers on deck three. That was actually a genuine mistake, and in my defence I didn’t actually do it myself but ordered someone else to.”

“Your behaviour on board this cruiser is unprofessional, according to any given standard, and you’ve given me more than enough cause to fire you every single day of your service, which I can’t legally do because of your faulty brain. From now on, you’re a Grade-4 passenger services technician,” the Captain told him finally. “You’ll take a fifteen per cent pay reduction and you’ll be required to move out of the supervisor’s quarters and share with another crewman of similar rank.”

“Do I get to choose who?” he said hopefully. “My vote goes to the new girl in the administration section. She never goes to the crew

lounge and I never go to the administration section so I haven't had a chance to work my magic on her."

"You are actually required to go there twice daily, once in the morning to collect your daily schedule and once at the end of your shift to return it," she sighed.

"Shall we add dereliction of duty to the list?" Dave grimaced.

"I will choose for you," she said finally. "You had better prepare your things. Once the demotion has been processed, it's normal for the person in question to move out later that same day."

Chapter 2

Later that same day

Rob lay back in his bunk and checked the time. His training in preparation for the guided tour had finished several days before and now he was back working in the upper café, serving nutritionally bereft, tasteless, greasy rubbish to the kind of people that were essentially the human equivalent of exactly that.

He shuddered inwardly at the thought of his next lunchtime shift, which would start in just under an hour.

So far, his life outside of the shifts was mostly satisfactory. He had always enjoyed the idea of travelling and the ship had left orbit some days ago and was cruising out towards the furthest settled colony in the Frontier. Along the way, it would visit several interesting places and it promised to be quite an experience. His room was equipped for two, but so far he'd been living alone since he came aboard, which suited him perfectly well.

Then the door slid open with an efficient and comforting hissing sound and Rob turned his head in surprise at the slight interruption of the absolutely nothing he was doing. He came face to face with something that did not suit him perfectly well at all.

Dave stood in the doorway, carrying a large bag and grinning, as if his brain wasn't quite doing its job properly, or doing very much of anything at all.

"Hello," Rob ventured awkwardly, nothing else much more meaningful springing immediately to mind. It was as if his capacity for rational thought had simply recoiled in horror and scuttled away to hide in some long-forgotten childhood nightmare where it was somehow safer.

He swung himself from the bunk and stood up, his eyes moving to the bag which had a decidedly ominous look to it. This was not a happy moment for him and, although he didn't know it yet, this was a defining moment in his life, a pivotal point around which everything normal, sane and reasonable was about to be flushed unceremoniously away. He was, however, beginning to suspect.

"Hello," Dave replied. He walked across the room and dumped his bag on the bunk at the opposite side. "Guess who your new roommate is? It shouldn't be too hard to work out. There have been some clues that an intelligent person such as yourself might have picked up on."

"No..." Rob frowned. It couldn't be true. It had to be a joke, some kind of cruel attempt at humour. He held onto that one small hope, like a drowning man clinging to a piece of driftwood by the very tips of his fingernails. "There must be some mistake..."

"Mistakes have been made!" Dave agreed solemnly. "There's no point denying that."

"I'm not sharing a room with you," Rob told him sternly.

"No problem at all, and in fact, that is my preference," Dave said cheerfully. "The corridor didn't look particularly comfortable but your mileage may vary. By the way, I like to sleep naked, so I hope you're not easily offended. Also, I'm frequently flatulent to some degree, so I hope you have a poor sense of smell. I sometimes walk in my sleep and often scream out in terror. It's nothing to worry about: at least, it never worried me. I also snore a little bit, especially if I'm drunk, which is often, but the good news is that the bed-wetting does seem to have slowed down quite a bit over the last few years."

"This is a joke," Rob said as he began to smile.

“No,” Dave shrugged. “I am also rather fond of eating biscuits and as they leave rather a lot of crumbs, I will be doing that in your bunk when you’re not here. Occasionally, I’ll be doing that when you are here. Sometimes, when you’re sleeping.”

“This has to be a joke!” Rob was slowly coming to realise that his life aboard the Nebulous was about to take a dramatic turn for the horrendous. All hope vanished and he began cackling hysterically. His head dropped into his waiting hands, and he started to feel a little giddy, swaying ever-so slightly from side to side as he choked back quite justifiable tears.

“I got demoted this morning, you see. Now I have to share a cabin with the new-boy. Everyone else is assigned. I had wanted to share with someone more attractive than my own armpit but the Captain had other plans. I think the truth is that she wants me for herself. I can hardly blame the poor girl for that. I mean, who wouldn’t feel that way? I’m sure you’re already affected to some degree.”

“No,” Rob whimpered. “It can’t be. It just can’t...”

“It’s not that bad!” Dave laughed at him. “I’ll get promoted again. Nobody stays on these ships very long, so I’ll be supervisor again before you know it. Don’t worry about me.”

“I’ll complain to the Captain!” Rob insisted desperately.

“That’s very decent of you, but I don’t think it will help,” Dave sighed. “Apparently, she thinks I’m an idiot. Can you believe that? I can’t imagine where she could have got that idea.”

“You are an idiot!” Rob told him sternly. “And I’m not sharing a cabin with you.”

“Think about me for once!” Dave snapped suddenly. “Do you think I want to share with you? Do you think anyone would? You’re boring. You come across like an over-sensitive, self-absorbed

narcissist, absolutely convinced in the utter correctness of your ill-conceived opinions.” He thought for a moment, “What did people used to call them? ‘Americans,’ wasn’t it?”

“Boring?” Rob seemed taken aback, even hurt by the suggestion.

“You didn’t know?” Dave seemed shocked. “I’m sorry to be the one who has to tell you but you’re dull, Rob. You’re less interesting that thing behind you on the wall.”

“What thing?” He looked around.

“Exactly, Rob!” He shook his head sadly. “That thing you never even noticed was actually there because it wasn’t interesting enough to pay any attention to.”

“I’m not boring!” Rob insisted, but his heart wasn’t in it. “I’m taking a year off to explore the galaxy. I’m interesting.”

“You’re a waiter on a cruise-ship, travelling a regular service-lane and you’re making less than minimum wage,” Dave told him bluntly, a grim reminder of just exactly how appalling his life actually was. It sounded even worse coming from Dave, as almost everything did.

“And you’re a loud-mouthed asshole that acts like you don’t care about anyone’s feelings,” Rob scowled at him.

“I agree,” Dave said with a shrug.

Rob shook his head and made a gesture of exasperation. “It’s not a good thing, Dave! Stop acting as if the worst things about you are the best things about you.”

“Well, we’re going to be spending a lot more time together so you had better get used to it!” He grinned to himself as if a thought had fluttered into his mind. If it had, it fluttered right back out. “Now I’ve already decided how we’re going to divide up the room and I’m sorry, Rob, but you’re not going to like it.”

It was not Phil's first time in space, but it was the first time he had travelled aboard a passenger cruiser. Like all temporary accommodation at the level he could afford, the interior was bland and neutral. The lower cabins, which were available for an even more modest budget, were even worse. Not only were they bland, but they managed to be garishly so, which was actually quite an achievement that modern science was particularly proud of.

His room was little more than a silver and grey cube with an uncomfortable bed, a broken chair, a locker with a broken lock and a fridge that kept everything warm. He had complained to passenger services and had been put on a list. He had noticed that the list was very long and slightly biased toward those paying a little more for their cabins. He had had little feedback from his complaint beyond the young man that took it. When he'd asked how long it might be before something was done, the man had only laughed, which was never a good sign.

When he had laboured the point, insisting on some kind of answer as to how long he might be expected to wait for something to be done, the service-professional had assured him that hell would be freezing over before his fridge did.

He woke uneasily. In space, the line between night and day was blurred and with cheap beer freely available, the line blurred even more, as did his vision. He groaned and thought how much better he'd feel with some breakfast inside him. With room-service costing twice the price of the room, breakfast meant a trip to one of the large choice of cafes aboard, with the tiny choice of available food. The choice was even smaller if he was to insist on eating only actual food.

“Good afternoon, how can I help you, sir?” Rob said with a smile that was more fake than the advertising, the same advertising that described the ship as ‘a luxurious cruiser offering a delightful and relaxing touring experience for the whole family.’ The whole family he was smiling at were neither delightful nor relaxing, and having to serve them was making him regret seeking this particular touring experience.

The parents looked up at him without showing any signs that they were regarding him as a member of their species while their two children glared at him like predators, waiting for him to show signs of weakness before they attacked.

“What’s the cheapest thing on your menu for kids?” the male adult growled at him without looking up.

Rob felt that, under the circumstances, it was probably best not to suggest a ‘glass of water.’

“We have a sausage and chips children’s meal,” he suggested. The male shrugged towards what Rob presumed was a female. She nodded and pointed to the menu selection number twelve and grunted.

“Two of them for these two,” the male gestured to the children with his thumb. “I want a burger and she wants eggs on toast.”

He grimaced openly at what simply had to happen next. “Would you like fries with that?” he finally managed. “Or would you prefer salad?”

The male human creature laughed and told him fries. Rob tried not to look too surprised.

He went into the kitchen and placed his hand-held pad into a reader which processed the order. It would have been perfectly simple to have a device built into the table so that customers could manage to do his job for themselves, but it was felt that customers

appreciated human interaction, at least more than the staff. The fact that this meant his role on the ship was slightly less useful than a plastic box, which could be bought for less than four credits, was not lost on Rob and he sighed heavily to himself at the very thought of it.

He waited a moment as the order was processed and the automated kitchen systems recycled the ship's waste into a close approximation of sausages, burgers and eggs. Within a few seconds, the food was served and Rob was again able to bask in the appreciation of human interaction with the customers.

It was a widely ignored practicality of space travel that food served aboard a vessel had to be recycled from food that had already been recycled in terms of passing at least once through a human body. The food recycling industry had sunk a lot of resources into an attempt at de-stigmatising reclaimed products by promoting the understanding that at some level, all food is recycled. They had found that it was much more productive simply to follow human nature a little more closely and take their lead from their natural propensity to ignore things that didn't nicely fit into their perceived world view.

While it was never specifically kept secret, few consumers ever had sufficient interest to look beyond the usually accepted notions to see that food recycling had taken on several distinct forms.

High level recycling, or 'organic' food is what previous generations would have called the natural cycle of life—raw waste was given to the planet's bio-system, where it was broken down and later reemerged in other forms without additional human intervention. The food industry had gone to significant pains to have this titled as 'organically recycled': a lot of high level people had received payoffs, huge sums of cash and many dead hookers had changed hands. Every plant, every animal, every drop of water was,

at some point, a waste product and it was accepted that many humans still were.

Middle-level recycling or 'processed' food took a similar, but more expedited, approach by using technology to break down actual waste into raw, semi-pure proteins and sugars by bombarding it with more-or-less safe acids, poisons and radiation. It could then be reconstituted on demand, to approximate just about any kind of food a person could wish for, so long as they didn't wish for Rice-Crispies, which, for some reason, no technology had ever managed to simulate. Despite quite often glowing, it was generally considered acceptable, by experts who generally didn't have to eat it. The industry motto remained, 'If the pig that ate it didn't die today, we're ready for a glowing tomorrow.'

Low level recycling, or 'junk' food, was legally protected from having to reveal too many details of its production, on the understanding that if you're in a situation where you have to live off it, the less you know about it, the better.

Rob began making his way to their table with a tray. The children had begun punching one another and the adults were arguing loudly about something that was quite clearly unrelated. The male was waving his arms furiously, while the female was leaning forwards and throwing a barrage of hostility at him. It was an utterly charming sight that made Rob feel really privileged to be part of the human race.

They quietened somewhat as he approached. The female hit the children hard enough to bring some semblance of discipline, while the male sat back in his plastic seat as if relieved for a brief respite from having to deal with all of this.

“Your food,” Rob said graciously, as he began serving the it to the appropriate guests. The smaller of the children began to cry and pushed his plate away.

“He didn’t want that,” the female told Rob accusingly, as if it was somehow his fault.

“I do apologise.” Rob rolled his eyes. “Would you like to select something else from our menu? We also have fish fingers, kid’s burgers and a healthy option of junior vegetables and pasta.”

“What would you like, darling?” the mother asked the child in a way starkly in contrast to the manner in which she’d just punched him in the head.

“Burger!” the child grumbled. “Like daddy.”

It seemed pointless to Rob to explain that almost everything served in the low-budget upper cafe was recycled waste and the difference between sausages and burgers was purely one of perception.

“I’ll get that for you straight away,” Rob told them with a smile, a smile more strained than the buttons holding in the male’s ample stomach.

“Try and get it right this time,” the female scolded.

Rob stopped for a minute and just stared at her, his face twitching as he restrained his anger.

Suddenly, in one swift move, her face was driven into the plate of pseudo-eggs with an audible crunch, while the male reared in horror at the sight of a demented waiter losing the very last vestige of his sanity. Rob screamed at her, demanding an apology again and again at the top of his voice as the room was plunged into horrified silence. Finally, she whimpered weakly how sorry she was.

As a finishing flourish, he clouted her hard across the back of the head with a tray, causing more egg to spill over the side of the

plate and he pushed the petrified father over the back of his chair, and overturned the table with a loud clatter, ensuring most of the food ended up over the kids' heads. Dusting his hands off, he casually swaggered towards the exit, never looking back at the chaos that had unfolded behind him. Who could ever have imagined that so humble a waiter could be capable of expressing such totally justified rage, in such a totally justified manner?

This, he decided, was how he would record the details of his response in his personal journal that evening, although in reality, what happened was slightly more soul-crushing.

In 'reality,' Rob said simply, "I do apologise for the mistake. It won't happen again."

He left the table, and a little piece of his dignity, behind. He caught the eye of another waiter. They exchanged glances which communicated their shared feelings. As he walked to the kitchen he realised something. It hit him like a plate of eggs should have hit his customer in the face. With a sense of grim realisation, it occurred to him that he didn't know the other waiter's name. He had worked with him for at least three shifts and they'd never really spoken. They were nothing more than accoutrements, less important than a pot of salt or pepper at the side of a table. They meant nothing to the customers and were just as meaningless to one another.

He closed his eyes and dreaded admitting the truth to himself. There was a tiny possibility, just a slim chance, a single thread of probability in a maelstrom of doubt that maybe, just perhaps, Dave was ever so slightly, and in the tiniest way imaginable... right.

Perhaps he was just a miniscule bit boring.

Martin Paul had just been promoted to the position of supervisor and was already relishing the prospect. His newly inherited office was not

everything he could have hoped for, but it had something going for it which injected him full of a new-found enthusiasm for life: it used to be Dave's.

Dave was now sitting opposite him across the desk and the tables were finally turned. Not literally. He still had access to the drawers which, for the time being, were still filled with confetti, unused ice-cream cones, shampoo bottles and staples that appeared to have been chewed, for some inextricable set of reasons.

No more would Martin have to be on the receiving end of Dave's ridiculous and occasionally insane brand of management. He could finally punish him for everything vile he had ever done to his team and he had every intention of doing precisely that, and in as cruel a manner as possible.

"So," Dave shrugged, "what do you think of my office?"

"It's my office now," Martin told him. He looked at the pile of work loaded up in a tray that dated back months, and clearly no attempt had been made to address any of it. He huffed and glared back at him. "Things are going to change now."

"Really?" said Dave sarcastically. "I had better start preparing myself for the rigours of delivering towels. How will I ever cope?"

Martin fixed him with an angry stare.

"You will be gentle with me, won't you?"

"You're not going to be delivering towels, Dave," he smiled cruelly.

"Well, you're the boss," Dave shrugged. "Whatever job you assign me, is what I'll be happy not to be doing properly, or more likely, not doing at all."

"Do you see what's wrong with your attitude?" Martin sneered.

Dave shook his head since he genuinely didn't.

“Well, your attitude is about to change. For a start, you’ve been seconded to a role with engineering support.”

“Engineering?” Dave frowned darkly.

Martin nodded. “They’ve found a very special role, just for you.”

“I can’t wait,” Dave groaned, grumbled and glared at the new supervisor accusingly.

“Also, there’s been a slight problem with the engineering tour,” Martin grinned. “As I’m now a supervisor with a whole host of new responsibilities, I won’t be able to serve as a guide. I’ve put you forward to replace me. There’ll be some training for you to attend and you may have to put in some unpaid overtime.”

“Overtime?” he said in horror.

“I thought you’d enjoy that!” Martin smiled sarcastically. “Not as much as I’m enjoying it, though.”

Dave just glared. This would not be allowed to pass.

The head of engineering support had indeed found a role ideally suited to Dave’s dubious range of talents. On board a modern, (or futuristic, it’s hard to keep track) space-faring vessel, the doors opened with a hiss, motorised panels opened with a whirr and things happened with the normal sensory feedback that people had grown accustomed to during many decades of successful space travel. Of course, technology had advanced far beyond what most people could logically conceive, and things such as hissing doors were actually a thing of the ancient past, like fair elections, freedom of expression and battery-chickens that didn’t have lightbulbs screwed into them.

Panels could be held in place or moved magnetically, more reliably than with the crudity of motors and hinges. Such things were soundless, effortless, reliable and simple. People didn’t respond well

to this: it was human nature to expect to have to exert some kind of effort to receive some kind of benefit. It had been discovered that the drive towards complete removal of stress was one of the greatest sources of the same stress that such measures were designed to eliminate.

So, on a modern or futuristic space craft, depending on your suspension-of-disbelief, the hiss that doors made was added artificially. The handles that people moved to open panels were also pointless and computers had remote interfaces that were deliberately easy to misplace.

Minor stresses and annoyances were added to every aspect of the vessel, along with artificial sounds, smells, sights and tactile experiences. Ironically, these things were never very reliable, unlike the technology they were designed to mask. Even mechanical malfunction was unsettlingly efficient, so smoke, ozone, and occasionally sparks, were added to most modules, so people could really experience the overwhelming satisfaction of a really good minor disaster.

“You’re going to be in charge of sensory feedback synthesis fault monitoring!” the head of engineering support told Dave with a cruel smile. Kendra Gower had never liked Dave, because she had suffered the indignity of meeting him several times. That was usually more than enough. Once was usually more than enough for most people, which was exactly the way he liked it.

“I’m not entirely sure that I completely understand a part of that sentence,” Dave frowned.

“Which part?” she asked.

“The part between the first and last words.” he admitted with a shrug. “I’m not entirely sure about the last word either,” he said thoughtfully and then paused for a moment. “Or the first.”

“It’s very simple,” she said and rolled her eyes impatiently at his stupidity. “You’ll be in charge of collating data on faulty units that provide artificial sensory feedback.”

He frowned at her in confusion for a moment, “You mean like vibrators?”

“No, I don’t mean like vibrators!” she said angrily and her frown deepened. “I mean like devices that artificially make doors hiss when they open.”

“Doors don’t really hiss when they open?” he seemed shocked, surprised and a little bored.

“No,” she replied sarcastically. “We add that effect artificially.”

“So if the device that makes a hiss fails, then what happens to the door?” he asked, his expression showing he wasn’t entirely keeping up with the conversation and wasn’t entirely making any effort to do so.

“Nothing!” Kendra told him. “It’s just a little unit that makes an artificial noise.”

“So why exactly do we need it?” he frowned deeply. Somehow the logic of all this wasn’t impacting on his brain since there didn’t appear to be very much of it and it wasn’t a very large target.

“From an engineering standpoint, we don’t,” she told him. “It just makes people feel better about the door opening.”

“No,” he shook his head. “Can you start again? I think I get the part about doors opening but after that you lost me a bit.”

“Why is this so difficult to understand?” she grumbled and glared at him. She was probably not sure if he was being stupid or sarcastic, but was not naturally partial to either condition, while frequently exhibiting both.

“So you’re telling me that there are devices that provide no useful function except to pretend that things are less efficient than

they actually are?” he began with a troubled expression. “These things are to make people more confident about the technology that is actually more advanced and reliable than we want them to believe it is. In addition to this, the devices are more prone to breakdowns than the technology itself? Am I following this correctly?”

She nodded. “It’s not so hard, is it?”

“Thanks very much,” he smiled at her. “This might be the first time I don’t feel like I’m the craziest or stupidest person on this ship.”

Phil Bothan went into the ‘Subspace Communication And Relay’ centre aboard the ship. For ease of use it was labelled as the ‘SCAR’ room and it was hoped that in some way the passengers would find this easier to understand, while being friendlier and more accessible.

“Can I make a subspace call from here? Everyone tells me that this is the right place,” Phil asked politely. An attractive young girl behind the counter smiled warmly at the prospect of earning a commission and then shook her head sadly, way more sadly than was necessary or required.

“No,” she said bluntly with a suddenly happy smile.

“OK,” he said and bit his lip thoughtfully. “Can you tell me where I need to go?”

“This is the right place but we’re out of communication at the moment,” she told him. “We’re at hyperdrive speeds for the next 3 hours, until we reach the jump-point. You’ll be able to make a call when we drop back to normal space.”

“OK,” he said with a thin smile. “Do I need to book anything or can I just come back?”

“Just come back,” she told him. “Come back early, though, because all the channels get used up pretty quickly.”

“Right,” he said and frowned very slightly. “So maybe I should book a channel then to make sure I get my message sent. I can pay in advance, maybe?”

“No!” she said. “We can’t book them in advance.”

“It is quite important that I get a message through,” he told her. “I need to contact my sister. I’m travelling to a funeral and I need to tell her I’m going to be late.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m not allowed.”

He sighed wearily in resignation.

“You could record a message and it’ll be sent as soon as we drop back into normal space.”

“I’ve done that,” he told her as he shook his head. “I’ve had no reply, so I don’t know if it got through.”

“No,” she agreed unhelpfully, “they don’t usually get through. I sometimes wonder why I’m here, if I’m absolutely honest.”

“Is there anything you can do?” he pleaded.

“I can let you record a message?” she suggested. “It’ll be sent as soon as we drop back into normal space.”

“Is there anything useful you can do?” he asked in growing frustration.

“Not really,” she admitted, lowering her voice to a whisper as if sharing some dark secret. “I think that’s why they put me in the SCAR office.”

Dave slumped into a seat in the shared room and looked over to Rob, who regarded him dubiously.

“You don’t look very pleased to see me!” Dave ventured with a knowing smile.

“You’ll get used to it,” Rob told him sarcastically.

“You sound like my mother.” He rolled his eyes. “You look a bit like her too, except for the hair, the face, the build, the eyes, the height and the way you sit. Her knuckles were a little hairier, too.”

“You called me boring. Earlier this afternoon, you called me boring,” Rob grunted and frowned at him.

“Are you sure? It doesn’t sound like the sort of thing I would say. I’m usually so considerate, balanced and careful not to cause offence, and yet still find time to be handsome and charming and irresistible to members of the opposite sex,” Dave said thoughtfully. “Why do you even care what I think, anyway? I don’t even care what I think, most of the time.”

A little voice at the back of his mind told them indeed he did not. “Shut up you,” he grumbled to himself.

“I do care,” Rob said, as he sat heavily down on his bunk.

“Well, if I offended you, then it’s really your own fault for listening to an idiot!” Dave told him dejectedly, laying back on his bunk and sulking. “But I didn’t mean to actually offend you, so I guess I’m...” He paused. “What’s that word that people like to hear when you do something they think is wrong?”

“Sorry?” Rob smiled.

“Yes. That word.”

“I didn’t say I was offended,” he said, sighing, “I said I cared. The problem is I think I might actually agree with you.”

“Someone agrees with me?” Dave’s eyes opened widely in surprise as he sat up. “And we’re quite sure that you actually heard the words I was actually saying?”

“I was thinking about it today while I was serving this family at lunchtime,” Rob began. “They were appalling and they didn’t care about me at all. They acted as if I wasn’t there, until they needed someone to blame for their own stupidity.”

“And this reminded you of me?” Dave nodded in agreement and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Well, now that you mention it, I can see the similarity!” Rob chuckled to himself. “It was just that I saw another waiter; we’ve never spoken before, he and I. I realised that we were just nobody. I’m just that thing on the wall behind me that I never noticed because it’s not important enough to care about.”

“You are a bit,” Dave agreed. “I guess there’s no point denying it, really.”

“This is what I was at home,” he began gloomily.

Dave rolled his eyes and braced himself for a story that he suspected would be about as entertaining as running out of beer.

“Keep it brief. I have an incredibly short attention span!”

“My father was an engineer during the war. He was working aboard a heavy cruiser towards the end of hostilities as part of the crew maintaining the reactor. He pushed me into training to be an engineer but I never felt as if it was really important to me. That’s why I took a year out to travel, just to get some perspective. Nobody at home ever worried about what I wanted, even me. I just followed along quietly, as if I don’t really matter to anybody.”

“You know what the saddest part of this story is?” Dave said softly, concerned that this already hadn’t been brief enough.

Rob shook his head and gestured for him to continue.

“It’s that you’re telling it to me. You’re confiding in a loud-mouthed asshole who’s done nothing but make jokes about your horrible hair since you came aboard and who doesn’t care about you at all.

“Not at all, Rob. I don’t care about you at all, not even a tiny, insignificant little bit.

“Maybe even less than that? Possibly, and probably, much less!”

“That isn’t lost on me,” Rob said with a sigh. “I didn’t have many friends at home, either.”

“Rod.” Dave held up a hand for him to stop talking. “You never will if you carry on like this. You’re like an endlessly droning apology for your own hopeless life. You’ve got to be more confident and let people know who you really are.”

“Why would I want to be your friend when all you are is a strange hair colour? You’ve got to let people get to know you, and you do that by talking to them, buying them drinks and occasionally slipping into conversations with girls that you happened to catch sight of him in the shower, and that he has a frighteningly huge penis.”

“Maybe you’re actually right, apart from everything you said about showers!” Rob nodded. “I guess I don’t find it easy to talk to people.”

“Well, that doesn’t bode well for your perception of my human status considering you’re talking to me!” He frowned to himself.

Rob laughed and nodded in agreement. “I guess not.”

“I had a bad day,” Dave admitted grumpily. “I’ve been sent to engineering support.”

“That actually sounds good,” Rob said. “I’m a waiter, you know?”

Dave glared at him fixedly, and somewhat accusingly. “Engineering is full of boring people whose only topic of conversation is how much more important they are than everyone else on the ship. They never come up to the crew lounge and most of them don’t even drink. Everyone hates engineering.”

“Is that true?” Rob asked.

“I assume so,” Dave said. “I hate engineering, so it makes sense that everyone else does, too. I’ve got used to assuming that’s how everything in the world works.”

“I’m beginning to see how your delusions fit together,” Rob said, shaking his head slightly. “So what will you be doing for the engineering department?”

“Checking to see if little things that do nothing are still doing something, which is nothing,” he said. “I mean, how is that even possible? I had to think about that sentence really hard and I’m still not sure it makes any sense.”

“What things?” Rob asked. “You mean like the staff in the SCAR office?”

“Yeah!” Dave nodded. “Exactly like them. There are these little devices fitted to efficient things that make them seem less efficient, so that people feel better about them, but not them, the other them.”

“Well that’s pretty much what you are to the human race, isn’t it?” Rob told him earnestly.

“The irony is not lost on me,” Dave groaned. “There’s only one course of action.”

“Go on…” Rob told him, with a curiously raised eyebrow.

“My life has become an ironic parody. Yours is a total social disaster that any right-thinking person would be utterly ashamed to admit to.”

“Thanks. I feel better already,” Rob grumbled weakly.

“Exactly!” Dave gestured exuberantly. “We must go to the crew lounge and drink too much beer.”

“I’m not really in the mood,” he moaned.

“Rob,” Dave told him firmly. “I’m not sharing my room with a boring ginger loser that nobody, including myself, likes. I’m going to

share my room with a cool, beer-swilling social monster that nobody, including myself, likes, who just happens to have horrendously boring hair!”

“Actually, I think it’s my room!” Rob told him.

“Then it’s decided!”

It was early and the crew lounge was just starting to fill up with people as their shifts finished. Dave leaned back on the bar and surveyed the scene. He snapped his fingers at the barman who just shook his head and made his way over as slowly as he possibly could.

“I’ll take a bowl of macaroni and a beer,” he told him. “My friend will have the same and we’ll have two extra beers while we wait for the other beer. While you’re bringing them you’d better give us a beer each to be getting on with.”

The barman looked at Rob and raised an eyebrow.

“Apparently, I’ll have the same,” he said weakly.

“You see,” Dave began, talking as if someone was listening, “pasta is not made from recycled waste: they can’t quite synthesise it properly. Cheese sauce is also clean as it contains natural bacteria that ruin the entire system. Fish is very hard to fake, but industry regulations say they have to have them on the menu, so they have a giant tank of live ones out back swimming around in their own little eco-system. To save space, the smaller fish are swimming around inside the larger fish, and so on.

“If you order just about anything else, then you’re eating something a machine has cleverly processed out of human waste, the good kind of human waste, not the kind that works in engineering. To further illustrate my point, look around the room at the basic level of

staff and tell me you'd be happy to eat anything one of them has a hand in working on."

"I see your point!" Rob frowned and winced at the thought of all this. "I guess I'm going to learn to like macaroni."

"And beer..." Dave told him. "When you're working aboard a ship, or working anywhere, or not working at all, then it's important to foster a close relationship with beer. It's been estimated that my blood is around 84% beer and I have been known to bleed purple. More often, and largely perpetually, it's the colour of my urine, to such a degree that it's the colour of the toilet now, as well."

"I agree, I like beer," Rob said with a shrug. "I don't actually need you to help me become a man, like you threatened to do fourteen times on the way over here."

"And I said I'd finally get you in bed with a girl," Dave reminded him. "And not the bad kind of 'in bed with a girl,' where there's talking involved. I mean the good kind where there's no phone calls or messages the next day."

"That's prostitution, isn't it?"

Dave glared at him. "There's that judgement again!"

"I have actually had a girlfriend before," Rob told him yet again. "I even showed you a picture."

"I mean an attractive girl," Dave explained. "By the time I'm finished with you, you'll be the second most awesome person aboard this ship."

"Are you just going to try to make me more like you?" Rob smirked.

"Oh no," Dave frowned. "Being me is exhausting. It's a constant challenge to find things to ward off the crushing sense of defeat and abject boredom."

"Really?" Rob raised an eyebrow. "So what do you do?"

“Beers!” the barman said, handing them both a bag. Dave took it and held it up for a toast. Rob dubiously followed suit.

“Here’s to the journey!” Dave smiled. “Where it doesn’t matter where you start or where you end up and nothing matters in-between.”

“I think you may have said that wrong!” Rob laughed but held up a beer to toast with him.

“Not on this ship.” Dave shook his head and gave a wistful smile. “Life here is more meaningless than my sexual encounters, even the ones that involve other people. You’ll understand when you do your laundry.”

“So why do you do it?”

Dave looked around the crew lounge dejectedly and gave a melancholy smile. “What else am I going to do?”

Detective Granger glared menacingly at nothing in particular. “A second murder,” he growled and allowed himself a knowing smile.

Officer James shook his head sadly. “The boys called me when they found out. I called you straight away.”

“You did the right thing, son.” His massive bony jaw locked in place as he stepped into the crime scene, his dark little eyes flicking about furtively.

This scene was different from the last. This time, the room had been torn apart and the body lay unceremoniously in the doorway, slumped down with a flash-mark to the side, shot with a laser-weapon as the victim had turned away.

“Maybe he discovered a burglar?” James shook his head sadly. “A burglar... in Europe, so far away from Switzerland?”

“It can happen.” Granger shook the unwieldy mass of bone that was his skull. “Anything can happen. I’ve seen it all.”

“Well, I’ve already seen more than I ever wanted to see!” the officer said with a frown. “I don’t like all this ‘solving crimes’ nonsense. I just want to get back to issuing speeding tickets and harassing people who look different to me, like a real police officer.”

“Don’t worry,” Granger sneered for no particular reason. “I’ll get the scum that did this. I’ll make them pay.”

The officer looked at him, “Do you think it’s the same person that killed the other victim?”

“I don’t think anything,” he told him earnestly. “I gather facts. I chase down leads.” He paused momentarily and a flicker of a smile crossed his viscous lips, “Then I break some skulls. Then I make people pay.”

“I think I’d definitely rather be issuing speeding tickets,” the officer said and shuddered openly.

“So would any sane man,” Granger hissed. “But once you’ve seen what I’ve seen, there’s no going back to real police work. Now I have to walk on the edge. The line between civilisation and chaos. I’m a lone guardian against the filth that threaten the very nature of our world.”

“I see!” The officer clearly didn’t, and seemed not to have any great desire to do so. “What kind of person could have done something like this?”

“Scum!” Granger hissed. “This scum could be anywhere now. Making his escape off-world or sitting, getting drunk on a star-cruiser. It doesn’t matter. I’ll get him: there’s no escape in this galaxy.”

“What has your robot detected this time?”

“Unit 4?” Granger called out with a voice so low that it almost made the glass rumble in the window frames.

Since the last slightly embarrassing encounter, he had adjusted the settings. The unit had previously been set to give only rudimentary details while making a detailed analysis. While its announcement of the dead victim had been accurate, it had been stating the obvious in a manner which seemed amusing to a human observer. Now, he had the settings dialled back so it could give a far more impressive set of details. While he was no expert on the technology, he was sure this would be an improvement.

“Give me a preliminary report on the crime scene, and your impressions.”

“Certainly,” the little unit responded politely. “The room has a floor space of 32.4 square metres. The floor is covered in wood-effect tiles which just make it look cheap. The walls are painted just off-white; the colour doesn’t really suit the floor. The door is made from solid wood. It must be quite old: you don’t see craftsmanship like that anymore. There’s a bed in there which doesn’t look very comfortable. If I slept, I wouldn’t want to sleep on that.”

“Enough,” Granger snapped. He looked to the officer who stared back, not sure what to say.

“I guess you detectives have your ways.”

“Yeah,” he growled. “We have our ways.”

The Captain glared over them both with a pair of angry little eyes, an expression of resentment that Dave was all too familiar with and, frankly, the fun had all gone out of it.

“I’m hearing a very disturbing rumour, Mr Brown!”

Rob kept as silent as possible, hoping to remain entirely out of the Captain’s scope of interest, a place where he felt, quite adamantly, that he really didn’t belong.

“Not about Rob, I hope?” Dave slapped his room-mate playfully on the arm. “So far he’s been a pretty good guy. Bit of a lightweight at the bar and no luck with the women yet, but we’ll keep trying. I mean what choice do we have, really?”

“Well, the rumour is about both of you, actually!” She turned her head towards Rob and her eyes peered out as if her vision was powered by deadly lasers, cutting a swathe of destruction towards him.

Rob shook his head and found himself averting his eyes guiltily, even though he wasn’t sure exactly why he was there and was pretty certain he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“I hear that Martin, your supervisor, is in the infirmary and that it might be because of you two.”

“Us?” Dave shrugged. “Why is it that every time something terrible happens on this ship, I get called in here to answer for it? I’m not a one-man war against basic human decency you, know?”

“Actually, I heard a rumour he was having his butt-plug removed.”

“Mr Brown!” she yelled suddenly, Rob leapt visibly in surprise. Dave winced, very slightly. “Tell me what you know about this...”

“I don’t know much,” Dave admitted. “I think you insert them in your anus but I have no idea why anyone would want...”

“Mr Brown!” she snarled and he went quiet, casting a glance towards his friend who still wasn’t entirely comfortable with being described in this way, more so quite recently. “Tell me what you know about why Martin is in the infirmary.”

“Is he having his oil changed?” Dave asked, making it look as if he was serious. “Is he having a sense of humour installed? Is he being surgically beaten with a large stick to improve his facial features, and, if so, that was my suggestion of the week, do I win a prize?”

She glared at him and turned her attention to where it was both least welcome, and least deserved.

“Mr Smith?” Rob grimaced and shook noticeably as she turned to direct the question at him.

“I don’t know, Sir,” he stammered. “Captain, Sir.”

“What rumours have you heard?” she asked, purring ferociously.

He looked at Dave and glared accusingly. Then, he said sadly, “I actually heard he was having something removed from his anus, Sir.”

She quickly flicked her eyes back to Dave. “He’d better not turn into another one of you,” she told him angrily.

“He’ll be better!” Dave gave a measured grin. “They should breed us—his brains and my looks and charm. We’d be unstoppable. It would be boringly charismatic, exactly the way that an engineer isn’t.”

“Mr Brown,” she sneered at him in disdain. “Get out of my office and take your new sidekick with you. If I find out that either of you have anything to do with this, then I will drag you both to the outer colonies behind my ship on a rope tied around your testicles. Do I make myself clear?”

Rob nodded his head and gulped very nervously.

Dave told her that he did.

“Did you want me to stand in as supervisor until he gets out? We can call it a favour. You can owe me one?”

“Leave while you can, Mr Brown, before I have security beat you until you can’t move your legs,” she told him, surprisingly calmly but leaving little doubt as to her sincerity. He nodded and turned to leave without another word.

“And Dave!” she said as the door opened with a hiss. “I will find out why Martin is in the infirmary.”

Chapter 3

Why Martin is in the infirmary

Two days before Dave and Rob were called to the Captain's office to explain themselves for an act they may or may not have perpetrated, Rob was enduring another shift in the upper cafe.

“Good morning,” he smiled thinly to a huge customer, a vast mountain of flesh and solidified sweat who was handling the menu as if he intended to eat everything listed on it, then the menu, then possibly the table.

The smell of him was appalling and Rob had to work hard to pretend not to notice. He mused to himself that some people showered before breakfast while some showered afterwards. Others, not at all; maybe ever. For some reason, as had become unpleasantly normal, he began comparing him to Dave.

“Our breakfast specials this morning include a fruit platter, a light omelette with wholemeal toast and yoghurt and coffee.”

The customer looked at him in confusion but the joke at his expense appeared to have gone unnoticed.

“Sausages, eggs and beans,” he grunted sweatily, which didn't seem to be possible but it was the impression that got firmly stuck in Rob's mind.

“Certainly, Sir!” Rob pressed the appropriate buttons on the pad. “Will there be anything else?”

“Chips,” he carried on with a shrug. “Mushrooms, tomatoes, hash-browns, fried bread and bacon. Black pudding, fried bread, toast and chips.”

“OK!” It seemed pointless to ask if there was anything else as he seemed to have already recited the entire breakfast menu options. “Would you like tea or coffee with that?”

He nodded.

“OK,” Rob frowned to himself. Another successful customer interaction behind him and not the slightest possibility of a tip in front, Rob left for the kitchen to recycle some human faeces into a vague approximation of food.

It seemed not to matter, particularly as his client was clearly a quantity over quality kind of person and not terribly discerning about such things. It also no longer mattered because, after a week on board, he had lost the ability to care even slightly about his customers. Another waiter nodded at him from a serving hatch at the opposite end of the kitchen.

“Hi,” Rob called out. “I hate the breakfast shift, even more than the lunchtime shift.”

The other waiter looked back, looking slightly surprised that someone was talking to him. He nodded in agreement and smiled knowingly. “I’ve been doing this for six months,” he called back. “I hate all the shifts.”

“I’m Rob,” he told him.

“Alan,” he called back.

“I’ll be up at the crew lounge this evening. We should grab a beer and you can tell me all the tricks.”

“Sure,” Alan said with a flustered smile. “That would be good. I think drinking beer is the only trick.”

Rob grinned to himself. It was just that easy.

Enforcement officer Crystal drew his service weapon for only the second time in his career. The first time had been several years ago,

when he and his former partner had stopped a man for routine questioning.

The suspect's biometric frequency had matched someone wanted for inquiries in respect to a series of some of the most serious crimes that had ever been perpetrated in his region. As they had come into his proximity, their portable computers had warned them he was nearby. They tracked him, predators stalking their prey, until they forced a confrontation safely away from any members of the public, as their training had taught them to do.

The crimes were considered serious and they could take no chances in terms of their welfare. Even more pointed was his concern for the welfare of innocent bystanders.

They cornered him finally, his partner covering his back, and a young officer Crystal had stepped forward to make the most memorable arrest ever carried out in his region, an event on which the foundations of his entire career had been built.

He had been young and inexperienced. He remembered shaking, sweating and terrified about what might happen. His weapon had quivered in his hands while the sights glowed a dull red as the targeting bead settled on the suspect.

"Police!" he had shouted. "Raise your hands and submit for detention."

It had been a flawless arrest and he had earned a commendation and a promotion. The suspect was given a 10 credit fine and the streets were once again safe from a man who flouted the law and parked his vehicle in a handicapped-zone on three separate occasions.

The front door to the gloomy apartment was open, just a crack, and the service manager had reported a strange smell. He was ready for anything. He had his training, his weapon and his wits. He stalked

closer to the door, his heart pounding in his chest, sweat beading on his brow and expectation tingling through his muscles.

This was no traffic violation. This might be an actual crime and although he told himself he was ready, he knew in the very pit of his stomach that nothing could prepare him for what the unknown might serve up to him.

He had heard of actual crimes on the historical database. At one time, Earth had been riddled with it, but now it was a popular holiday spot as most of it was considered a living museum; apart from Switzerland, of course.

“Cover my back,” he instructed his unit. Unit-2 was an armed enforcement droid, a ball of sensors mounted on a long, straight body that drifted elegantly above a single spherical roller. It was armed with offensive weaponry that put the service handguns to shame.

Millions of these units had been manufactured towards the end of the war as the front line in a ground-based offensive against an enemy that had largely no idea what the hell was happening.

The units were programmed to have a ‘Humanesque’ personality with real motivations so their operators could more easily identify with them. At the time, they were viewed, fairly accurately, as little more than self-deploying guns, rolling monstrosities of heavily armed, emotionless violence.

Many had since been re-purposed, with slight modifications, to serve as peace keeping robots throughout the Alliance, after they had proved wholly unsuitable for ice-cream distribution. Unit-2 was now a rolling monstrosity of heavily armed, emotionless violence, that had been painted blue and had a light stuck on top.

“Please clarify?” the unit said.

“I mean protect me!” he told it, hissing the words through gritted teeth, trying to keep his voice low.

“I am programmed to protect you,” it told him, sounding confused. “It is my secondary function. Would you like to elevate it to become my primary motivation?”

“What?” he withdrew slightly from the door and frowned. “Yes, just protect me.”

The unit wheeled itself in front of him and positioned itself between the officer and the door and deployed a pair of gun-barrels far too large to be defensive, quite a bit too large to be considered offensive, in fact.

“I cannot allow you to proceed. There is potential danger associated with approaching an area suspected of containing suspected criminal activity.”

“Get out of my way!” he told it, ushering the thing back.

“I cannot comply. I am protecting you,” it told him, swivelling its massive guns as it spoke.

“No...” he sighed. “What’s your primary function? Go back to doing that.”

“My primary function is to incapacitate people suspected of committing a crime,” it explained. “Would you like to make this my primary motivation?”

Officer Crystal lowered his weapon and frowned thoughtfully. “Just let me do my job. I need to go in there and find out what’s going on.”

“Would you like me to incapacitate someone suspected of committing a crime?” it asked, flourishing its fire-power hopefully.

“There’s nobody here to incapacitate!” he growled at it angrily. “It’s just you and I, and whatever we find in there.”

The unit’s main optical sensor seemed to look him up and down. “If they are suspected of committing a crime then I could

incapacitate them. I could. I really could. I always thought I'd be really good at that."

"Well..." he began thoughtfully, looking wistfully at his own small service weapon, "I guess that would be OK."

"Acceptable," it told him quickly, before he changed his mind. "I will go inside and incapacitate anyone suspected of committing a crime."

"You won't kill anybody, right?" he held up a hand to pause it.

"Would you like me to kill anyone suspected of committing a crime?" it asked with a troubling note of optimism. "I could do that. My weapons are configured for the purpose. Stun settings are a nuisance, frankly; they give me a tingling sensation all down my left side."

"No," he sighed. "Just go in and incapacitate anyone who's suspected of committing a crime, that's all you have to do."

"But not kill?" it asked, just to be sure.

"No," he frowned! "No killing."

"Definitely no killing?"

"Definitely," he told it.

The unit wheeled itself in through the crack in the door. The officer held up his weapon and breathed heavily, waiting for the worst. After a moment the unit wheeled back out.

"Well?" he asked.

"The occupant has already been restrained. Possibly restrained to death," it told him, sounding more than a little disappointed. "I will continue to protect you from him. Please remain in position."

For Dave, the morning did not start particularly well, but considering he was at the heart of it, that was hardly a break from his usual routine.

Mrs Davenport was an unattractive woman, in every conventional, and unconventional, sense it was possible to imagine.

Beauty may be skin deep, and it was widely accepted that it faded one you got past the surface, but her ugliness began in the depths of her rancid soul and shone out like the glow of a navigation beacon, powered by a small anti-matter explosion.

There was no way she could have disguised the fact by any normal means, nothing less than her slaughtering a less horrifying person and wearing their pelt as a disguise would make even the slightest difference.

Her face was an appalling mess. The features clashed like a traffic crossroads with malfunctioning control lights, or a perfectly functional crossroads anywhere in China. It seemed to him that she'd made no effort to seem less unpleasant: instead, her unpleasantness was turned inwards so she could make as many people feel as atrocious as she looked.

She wasn't even that conventionally unattractive. It was more that the apparentness of her unpleasantness was painted all over her face with the obviousness of a leaf-blower loaded with bright green marking ink.

She sucked air through her narrow lips noisily and her ferocious little eyes darted about like those of a hungry shark.

Dave just watched, mesmerised for a moment by the obvious emptiness of her existence. She possessed a shallow selfishness, a sense of entitlement and a vastly inflated ego, all of which challenged his own. He wasn't sure if he was impressed or appalled, but he was certainly no longer in the mood for breakfast.

"It's my door, you see?" She pointed at it as if he wouldn't know what a door was and might need additional help to find it.

“This door?” Dave pointed too. “This one right here? This door?”

“Yes!” She narrowed her eyes and glared at the door accusingly. “It is clearly broken. I want it fixed immediately, an apology made and arrangements put into motion for compensation for the inconvenience that this has caused to my person.”

“Well, I just make the reports,” Dave told her with a shrug, as he began tapping the door with a probe that he hadn’t quite figured out the function of just yet. “I don’t really have the authority to authorise anything else, but my supervisor, Martin Paul, will be happy to arrange compensation for you.”

“Are you sure?” She folded her arms and peered at him angrily while her chubby little foot tapped relentlessly on the floor plates and her overly thick tongue flicked in and out, moistening her ample, swollen lips. “He’ll accommodate my perfectly reasonable demands? You’re sure of this, you say?”

“Absolutely,” he told her without a hint of reservation. “I’m sure he’ll do everything in his power to make you the happiest passenger on the ship. That name again was Martin Paul.”

“Martin Paul!” she repeated.

“So what’s wrong with your door?” He pointed again at it sarcastically. “Is it this door?”

“It isn’t making the right noise when it opens, you see.”

“Oh no!” he barked, suddenly looking alarmed. Shock took hold of him and he dropped the probe to the ground where it clattered against the floor-plates. He glanced around as if to make sure nobody was listening as he slowly reached down to pick it up, chuckling nervously.

He made an effort to compose himself, slicking back his hair and huffing noisily to himself with an awkward smile. He lowered his voice and stepped closer. “No hiss? No hiss, right?”

She seemed taken aback by the severity of his reaction. “Is that bad?”

“As bad as it can get,” he said as he frowned a worried expression and began tapping the door gingerly with the probe. Then he stepped away, as if in fear of it, glancing back at it warily, gesturing for her to step away with him.

“They tell me to tell people the same story but I’m not going to lie to you. The door system is powered by the contusion-wobbles from the engines. If they go down, it’s a sure sign that the engines will be next. The engine-plastic is so toxic that even a spoonful of it can kill you in seconds in the most painful way you can imagine.

“Of course when they do eventually go, the life-support follows within seconds. Personally, I think we should stop giving spoonfuls of it to people.”

“Oh my...” she began, her yellow-tinged eyes widening in terror. “Are you sure about this?”

“Don’t worry,” he told her, making furious notes on his portable terminal. “If the engines fail, the wave of radiation will kill us all in a few fractions of a second. We’ll not have time to die of asphyxiation since our organs liquefy and blow out of our bodily orifices under considerable pressure. I’ve seen people’s colon end up sprayed on the ceiling more than once.”

“Really?” she gasped weakly, clutching her hand to her chest. “That’s appalling.”

“Unless you’re near a door when it happens,” he nodded thoughtfully. “They tend to screen some of the radiation because

they're built pretty tough, what with them being a door and everything.

“It will still kill you but usually not straight away. Your eyeballs explode first, then your tongue expands and you normally choke on that, or drown on your own blood as your lungs rupture internally. It's not pretty but it's quick. You usually die in under an hour, three at the most and almost always under six.”

She opened her mouth to speak but only a terrified squeak came out.

“Oh wait!” He smiled suddenly. “No, it's just a faulty piston.”

He pointed to a tiny tube-like device running along the middle of the door-frame. “It's just popped out of the runner again! They do this all the time, apparently.”

“Thank the stars!” she gasped, wringing her sweaty palms together nervously.

“You didn't touch the door today, did you?” he frowned darkly. She nodded very slowly.

“Oh dear,” he hung his head, shaking it sadly from side to side. “Never mind then.”

“What?” she gasped. “What does that mean?”

“I'm sure it will be fine,” he told her, looking nervously to the terminal and then back to her. He glanced around and lowered his voice once more. “Look, I shouldn't be telling you this—I could lose my job—but it's even worse than the other thing...”

“Go on...” she pleaded.

“They don't like to let people know how dangerous these things are but they can be deadly. These whole ships are death-traps, basically. All the systems are left over from the old war so everything is basically a weapon that was never designed or intended to do harmless things like be doors.

“Everything is designed to kill, to maim, to spy on their own people and pretend it’s for their own protection. They like to pretend this could never happen and people never get sick but people die here all the time!” Dave said and shook his head sadly. “You’re going to need an intrusive radiation check to make sure you’re OK.”

He shook his head sadly and held her gaze, peering into her savage, empty little eyes.

“Technically the company has to pay for it but they don’t like to. They don’t like the publicity either so they like to pretend that these things never happen. If you don’t believe me then just look it up. There’s no mention of this anywhere, which proves I’m right. I just can’t keep lying to people and knowing that my lies are responsible for so many horrible, horrible deaths.”

“OK!” she agreed, wide-eyed with horror at all this. “Intrusive radiation check.”

“Horrible, horrible deaths...” he said, shaking his head sadly and tutting to himself.

She just stared at him in silence.

“You have to have the radiation detector put inside properly: it needs to scan the deep tissue,” he whispered. “They don’t like to admit it, but it’s the only way to be sure you’re OK. You have to force them. They’ll deny everything; they’ll try to tell you the ships are perfectly safe.”

“OK!” she shook her head in agreement. “I’ll insist. I won’t take chances with my health and I certainly won’t let them!”

“I didn’t think you would,” he told her and tapped her horribly misshapen arm in support. “Don’t tell them I let you in on this. I could lose my job for telling you. There are more like me, you know? More of us that just want the truth to get out.”

“It’s alright, young man,” she assured him. “I appreciate your help.”

Detective Granger frowned heavily. He was the sort of man who did everything heavily, but frowning was something he took extra care with. Captain Veronica Judas frowned back. She was a woman in a man’s world and was convinced she was every bit their equal, except for the part about worrying about being equal to the opposite sex. Not many men did that, a point even she had to concede.

She had built a career by convincing everyone around her that she was able to do everything that any man could do, even to the point of having urinals fitted in the women’s toilets. Sadly, that meant there wasn’t enough left over in the budget for sanitary-towel storage — men were blamed.

She was now the Captain of her region, a rank she took great pride in. She was the first woman ever to hold such a position on the mean, violent street of the star-port town of Newhaven. They saw, on average, a murder every three years and only last month she had overseen a sting operation which had captured three people driving over the speed limits.

This was no place for the weak of heart and hers beat proudly in her chest; almost exactly like a man’s heart, but around 15% smaller, but she made up for it by eating enough hotdogs to ensure it beat roughly the same amount faster.

She didn’t like the detective. He challenged her, intimidated her. He stood for the wave of violence her people held back. He was a relic of a bygone era: he was an eye for an eye, fire fought with more fire. He was violence in a world that no longer had any use for it.

“What have you got for me?” she growled with as low a voice as she could muster.

“Advice,” he told her. “This is bad. You’d better leave it to the professionals.”

“I am the professionals!” she sneered at him. “This is my town. I’m the authority here. You tell me what you’ve found and then I decide what to do about it.”

“Tell her what we’ve found, unit 4,” he said as he narrowed his eyes and glared at her resentfully.

“There is a pen under the desk,” the robot began. “Behind the display cabinet is a photograph of a child sitting on a clown’s knee, crying, above the fourth roofing tile on the left...”

“Enough,” she barked. “Why don’t you just tell me what you found?”

“Fine!” he said, his voice deep and powerful. “You’ve got several murders now, and I think they’re connected. If I’m right, you’re going to have more.”

“What makes you think so?” she tried to reply with a lower voice than his, which by now was beginning to sound a bit ridiculous.

“Experience,” he snarled. “You’ve got a murderer trying to get out of town. The first killing was on the outskirts of this beaten up hell-hole. A woman, executed with a plasma-gun, shot at close range. She was working in a communications centre, sending messages out into space. The second was in a low-budget hotel, the kind you find near a space port. You’ve got a killer passing through. He may already be gone and I think he’s looking for something. Maybe a way off this rock.”

She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “Say I believe you? Say I think you’re onto something?”

He nodded, “Don’t get in my way, Captain. Trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t like you doing it in my town,” she told him. “You understand what I’m saying to you?”

“Sure,” he smiled thinly, “I get it.”

“Get this killer!” she told him, slamming her fist down hard on the desk. “You get him and then you get him out of my town.”

“You can count on it...”

Dave took a seat by the bar and gave Rob a weary smile, “How was your morning?”

Rob smirked, “I hate the hangover shift.”

A young girl walked over to join them and handed Dave two bottles of beer, the good stuff, which cost actual money, enough money for the contents to be actually legally classified as beer. She sat herself heavily down on an empty stool next to Dave and grinned at him

“Here’s the beer I owe you,” she said flirtatiously.

Rob sat back in silence, wondering what was going on and wondering how these things always seemed to be going on around Dave. The girl was strikingly attractive and wore the uniform of the passenger services division.

Dave passed a bottle to Rob and opened one himself.

“Thanks!” he told her.

“I don’t know what you did and I don’t think I want to know,” she smiled at him.

“You’re probably right,” he agreed. “You don’t want to know. “I think I do, though. What did I do?”

“You sorted out Mrs Davenport, like you said you would. She’s been behaving fine all morning. For the last three days, she’s

been the worst passenger we've had aboard in my last four tours. This morning she's been as meek as a kitten." She smiled at him, "Thank you, Dave."

He shrugged modestly, "It was my pleasure. Really, it was a pleasure."

"Well, thanks again," she told him coyly.

"You know, I finish my shift at six tonight, or thereabouts." He fixed his eyes on hers, "How would you like to meet for something to eat? Maybe a couple of drinks."

"You mean like on a date?" She giggled coyly and adjusted her hair.

He nodded and assured her, "A date you'll never forget."

"Shall I meet you here at eight?" she suggested.

"No," he said with a chuckle. "I'm going to take you somewhere nice. Meet me at the Upper Cafe for a drink and we'll take it from there."

She smiled and turned to leave. "It's a date," she added finally, waving as she made her way to the exit.

"A date she'll never forget?" Rob said sarcastically.

"They never forget," he sighed. "If you don't call them after a date then, suddenly, you're the centre of their universe. Also, after a date with me, she might need some antibiotics. Maybe a blood transfusion; almost certainly some kind of counselling."

"I guess that would be tough to forget," Rob agreed. "So what exactly did you do?"

"I'm not sure." He rubbed his chin, "She seemed happy so I just took credit for it. If she'd been mad at me I would have blamed you. That's how it works now, Rob. Welcome to my world, by the way."

"Thanks."

“So, what about you?” Dave snapped his fingers for the barman, who looked at him in disgust and just carried on with what he was doing, ignoring him as best he could. “Why don’t you ever have any dates? I mean with women.”

“I just haven’t met the right girl,” he said weakly.

“You’re on a metal tube hurtling through space, propelled by unimaginably complicated science.” Dave laughed and looked around for the barman, who pretended to be fascinated with every detail of a clean glass. “The girl of your dreams isn’t going to be delivered by long-range shuttle to airlock 4 so she can hook up with the first ginger waiter who offers her a recycled salad.”

“I know,” Rob grumbled. “I guess I’m a bit quiet around girls. It’s just the way I am.”

“I saw a picture of your girlfriend,” Dave told him sympathetically. “Did she put you off women? Did she make you question your sexuality?”

“No!” he protested, almost angrily. “It’s nothing like that.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Dave rested his hand on his shoulder supportively. “She was stunningly unattractive, Rob. Nobody would think any less of you if you were attracted to donkeys now.

“I honestly mean that. I don’t think I could think any less of you even if I tried really, really hard. I’m trying to think less of you now and I can’t do it, Rob.”

“Dave...” He pushed his arm away and glared at him.

“Any farmyard animal, really, I just thought she looked a bit like a donkey?”

“I just find it difficult to talk to women, OK?” Rob sighed.

“I agree. Talking to them is the worst part of dating. It’s almost as bad as listening.” Dave nodded and glanced around to the barman, this time catching his eye as he waved around frantically.

“You know what I mean. I’m awkward around women.”

“Yes,” he said simply, “I’m not going to lie to you, Rob. I had noticed.”

“What can I do about it?” Rob shrugged.

“We could write to the universe and complain?” Dave suggested. “You might still be under warranty and we can get a repair of some kind. Otherwise, we can demand a full refund. Look at you. You’ve got a great argument for the supply of faulty goods. They should never have put you out in this condition.”

“You’re not helping,” Rob smiled.

“You want me to help? You should have said.”

“I don’t want your help!” Rob grimaced. The thought of what Dave might do to help made him shudder inwardly, then outwardly, then feel like vomiting until the capillaries in his throat ruptured and he mercifully drowned in his own blood.

“Too late!” Dave told him. “I accept the mission.”

“It’s not a mission.”

“It’s not an easy mission,” Dave agreed. “It’s going to take some creative thinking, a little hope, possibly a miracle. It may take several stories but I think we’ll manage to get there in the end, or the beginning of the end of the next one! I wonder if this will be a trilogy?”

“Thanks,” he sighed. “Although I have no idea what you’re actually talking about now.”

“What are friends for?” he said, slapping him on the arm.

“Barman! Two bowls of macaroni and as many beer-related bags of purple poison as your skinny arms can carry.”

“It’s lunchtime,” Rob told him. “Are you sure about the beer?”

“It’s fine.” Dave shrugged. “He can carry a lot and we can always get more later.”

Rob thought it was best not to bother explaining that that was not what he meant. “I’m not sure I can carry on eating three bowls of macaroni a day either.”

“You know we could have a double date...” Dave said, thoughtfully ignoring him. Rob began to protest but Dave ignored him even harder, as usual. “I could see if Shelly from passenger services has a friend for you.”

“That would make me seem pretty pathetic, wouldn’t it?” Rob asked, shaking his head rather sadly.

“What’s your point?”

Phil Bothan was growing increasingly weary but he went into the SCAR office again and smiled politely to the same inattentive and intellectually basic young girl. She smiled back and put down a communication panel on which she had been chatting with her roommate who worked in an office along the same corridor.

“Can I help you?” she asked, seeming not to remember him at all.

“I need to make a subspace call,” he told her, taking a seat at the counter in front of her.

“Yes,” she replied absently.

“I tried yesterday and three times the day before. I’ve left fifteen messages,” he told her wearily. “Is there any chance that I can make a call today?”

She nodded enthusiastically, “Yes, you can connect right now.”

“Right now?” he seemed startled and his lips cracked into an involuntary smile.

She nodded and began pressing buttons. “Yes. Go into booth number 1, and type in the co-ordinates. I’ll open a channel for you.”

“That’s brilliant, thank you!” he told her. He got up and headed to the booth, slightly elated at the good news. “I can make an actual live call right now?”

The girl nodded and gestured him to go into the private booth. He stepped in and closed the door behind him while she picked up her communicator.

“Are you still there?” she asked. Then she smiled and said, “I know... A date with Dave from passenger services? It’s up to you. Yeah, we went out a few times. He’s funny but he’s a bit of an idiot, I think. No, don’t ask him if he’s got a friend: he’ll think I’m pathetic.

“No. I can get a date on my own. There’s just no nice guys here on the ship at the moment. No, I do like guys. Yes, I’m sure. New guy? I’ve not met him. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to ask but what does he look like? Is he really cute? So long as he’s not ginger then I guess it couldn’t hurt.”

Phil came out of the booth slightly less elated than when he went in, which was exactly what he should have been expecting. The door slid behind him with a louder than usual squeak. He frowned angrily and stalked over to the counter.

“Is everything ok?” she asked enthusiastically.

“There was nobody there,” he told her gruffly. “I left a message.”

“Oh...” she said sympathetically, “they don’t usually get through.”

“I’m glad I found you,” Martin Paul told Dave. Dave looked up from his portable terminal while he ran a diagnostic probe over a dull grey floor-plate. The terminal flashed an ‘OK’ sign so the device that

made an artificial metallic noise as people stepped on it appeared to be working correctly, as far as anyone cared.

“I’m glad you found me, too,” Dave said very sarcastically. “You’ll have to be quick. As you can see, I’m busy doing something of vital importance to the safety of this vessel; possibly the safety of the entire Alliance, for all I know.” He waved the probe over the supervisor who pulled away reflexively.

“What are you doing?” he grunted.

“Just checking!” Dave told him. “According to this, you’re within normal tolerance for a sensory feedback device. You make a noise but provide no useful function, beyond lowering efficiency for some reason that makes no sense to someone who wasn’t vaccinated as a child.”

“Do I need to remind you that I’m your supervisor?” Martin scowled at him.

“Probably.” He nodded and gave a little shrug. He lifted his terminal to eye level. “I’m detecting trace elements of respect, barely registering on the system. Mathematically negligible.”

“I got a report of your progress from engineering support,” he told him.

“A report? Nobody sends reports.”

“Everyone sends reports. You just probably never read them.”

“Do they have pictures?” Dave asked. “Pictures of girls? Are they written on beer labels?”

“Apparently, you’re doing quite well!” Martin seemed to find this slightly disappointing.

“It’s a role I was born to,” he said and held up the probe. “The more productive I am, the less use I’m being, or the less productive I’m being, the more use I am. I haven’t quite worked all this out yet but it’s perfect for me in some unfathomable way.”

“You seem to be enjoying it,” the supervisor noted with a smile.

Dave shrugged. He didn’t like where this was going.

“I’ll look into getting you a new role. There’s a vacancy for someone to oversee the repairs to faulty toilets. I’m sure you would enjoy fully immersing yourself in your work in that role.”

“It sounds more like your thing than mine, Martin,” he told him.

“You can call me ‘Sir!’” he grinned.

Dave shook his head and laughed. A little voice at the back of his head said, “Laugh harder.”

“I’m going to think about arranging a transfer for you.”

“I don’t think I can call you ‘Sir,’ Martin,” he told him thoughtfully. “I don’t even like calling you ‘Martin.’”

Dave watched as he swaggered off and he knew something would need to be done, probably by him, and possibly soon. Maybe something already had been. Who knew how the universe worked? It certainly didn’t seem to be working in any kind of logical, chronological order so far.

Mrs Davenport was ensconced in Martin’s office. She was quiet, but her face was pinched into the expression of someone filled with venom and fury, and furiously venomous doughnuts.

Martin shrugged to Katherine Miller, the service assistant who had escorted her to his office. He peered inside at the force of nature who somehow seemed to occupy all the space in his office in some incomprehensible way.

“Who is she? What is she?”

“She’s a passenger,” she told him. “She’s been ranting about wanting to see you for some reason. I don’t know why, she wouldn’t tell me.”

He looked into his room nervously, “Why have I got to deal with her? I don’t want to deal with her. Don’t we have people who deal with angry passengers? We just deliver towels, don’t we?”

“Apparently today, the person who deals with angry passengers is you!” she told him. “She’s been asking for you by name. I think she’s a bit crazy. She won’t touch any of the doors for some reason and keeps referring to me as ‘an unnatural agent of evil.’”

“No,” he grumbled. “This isn’t right at all. Why would she have my name?”

“I’d ask her!” She gestured with a nod towards the office and turned to leave. “Sorry, I have work to do. Please take every opportunity not to let me know how this turns out.”

Martin frowned as she left. He glanced inside the office where the angry old woman was festering in her own juices while he just worried about how to proceed. In the end, he simply threw the door open and walked in as cheerfully as possible.

“Good afternoon, Mrs Davenport!” He tried to sound as if everything was right with the world.

She stood up and glared at him as if he were personally responsible for everything wrong in the universe. “You’ve kept me waiting for twenty minutes, I’ll have you know. I don’t see how you could possibly think that this is, in any way, close to acceptable.”

“I do apologise. We’re very busy here, and this is quite an important department, you see. How can I help you?” he asked, as he took an involuntary step back. She was even worse close up. Her

face unfolded into a leathery mass of wrinkled temper with painted-on lips.

“I want to get off this ship,” she told him. “It’s not safe. The doors are broken and the engines could explode at any second. I’m not having my eyes erupt because you won’t put a radiation probe into my body.”

“I’m sorry? What?” he mumbled and almost grinned at the very ridiculousness of what he was hearing. He wondered what exactly he was hearing. He briefly entertained the idea that he might be having a stroke.

“I know what you’re up to!” She leapt forward suddenly and pointed an accusing finger. “You’re pretending this ship is safe but we’re a hair’s breadth away from death at every moment.”

“I don’t think so,” he said nervously. “I think we’re pretty safe. I’m pretty sure it says so in the sales brochure. I’m fairly certain that ‘we’re pretty safe’ is our company motto, in fact.”

“No...” she sneered, her accusing finger now a blunt weapon with which she was slowly pointing him to death. “I know the truth. I know.”

“I am slightly confused, Mrs Davenport.”

“No you’re not!” she told him accusingly, barking at him so loudly that little bits of spit cascaded from her horrid lips. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. I’ve been exposed to radiation because of your faulty, wobbly plastic doors. This ship is a death trap. You’re trying to kill me and you’re too ashamed to admit it.”

“Nobody is trying to kill you, I don’t think,” he said, backing away slowly, increasingly certain that she was quite mad.

“Yes!” she shrieked. “I went to the infirmary and they said the same thing. That’s how I know you’re all in it together. I was warned that exactly this was going to happen.”

“We are? What are we in together?” Martin shrugged, genuinely without the slightest clue as to what was happening. He hoped it was a stroke.

“They refuse to put the radiation probe in my bottom. I won’t rest until someone sticks a radiation probe in my bottom. One that I don’t have to pay for.”

“That’s not really my area,” he told her. “We mostly just deliver towels.”

“Listen to me, you horrible little man,” she growled, her leathery skin seeming like a sack, stretched to breaking point by the fury bubbling away beneath it. It looked as though it would tear itself apart in a matter of seconds. “You make someone stick a radiation probe into my bottom or I’ll stick something into yours. Do we understand each other?”

Martin smiled, “Is this a joke?”

He then discovered that, no, it wasn’t.

Dave slapped Rob on the shoulder. He looked round as his roommate settled down on the seat next to him at the crew lounge.

“Good evening!” he smiled. “Beer?”

“I’m angry at you for even asking,” Dave said and shook his head sadly. “I’m going to let you get me a beer this time and let you off with a warning, but please don’t let this sort of thing happen again.”

Rob shook his head at him and smirked while he ordered two more beers. “Don’t you have a date?”

Dave gestured at the way he was dressed which was very slightly cleaner than usual, but not in any particularly noticeable way. “Don’t I look like what every woman wants?”

“A huge box of money made out of chocolate?” Rob raised an eyebrow.

Dave looked at him accusingly for a moment in silence, his face fixed in an expression of deeply held disapproval. “I do the jokes, Rob. That’s how our relationship works. You’re tinkering with the very chemistry of a very poorly-established universe and I don’t like it. I don’t think anybody likes it, Rob.”

Rob grinned as the beers were delivered. He handed one over and Dave nodded in superficial, but enthusiastic, gratitude.

“I’ve got half an hour, I like to have a few beers before going on a date. It helps with the nodding and repeating the lines, ‘yeah that’s so true,’ ‘you’re right,’ ‘that’s what I think as well’ and throwing in the odd random compliments about everything above their neck.”

“She’s a lucky girl,” Rob told him sarcastically.

Dave nodded in superficial, but enthusiastic, agreement, “So what are you doing tonight? Please put the ‘do not disturb’ sign on the door if you’re going to do anything to yourself that I shouldn’t walk in on.”

“I was just going to watch a film,” Rob told him firmly. “I’m not doing anything exciting.”

“I didn’t think you would be!” Dave said with enthusiastic, but superficial, concern, but by now the degree to which his expressions were superficial far outweighed whatever it was the feeling might actually be about. Dave himself had lost track of all this several beers ago.

“We have to get you a date, Rob. I’ll ask her if she’s got a friend for you. We don’t have to be too fussy. Anything is better than your last girlfriend, right? Perhaps a balloon tied to the end of a stick?”

“Did you hear about Martin Paul. He’s your new supervisor, isn’t he?” Rob changed the subject tactfully.

“I heard he’s my new supervisor and he loves to tell me all about it!” he said with a shrug. “It might surprise you to learn that we’re not exactly friends. Most people’s management motivation style doesn’t mesh very well with my near total lack of anything that comes anywhere near close to any kind of motivation.”

“No, he got hurt pretty badly. He was in the infirmary!” Rob told him.

“Good!” Dave smiled.

“Don’t tell me you had something to do with this?” he asked.

“No.” Dave shrugged, just a little bit superficially. “I’ve not heard anything about it. Why does everyone assume whenever something bad happens that it must have been my fault? I didn’t make a pact with the devil. I’m not cursed by ancient magic, as far as I know.”

“I’m sorry,” Rob told him, “I just thought you might...”

The scene was grim. Detective Granger walked in as if this dark spectacle of death was his home, the nightmare his reality. Unit-4 trundled in after him, scanning everything as it went, his settings adjusted yet again.

Three officers were on the scene and another was outside, sitting on the floor with a sad expression while a class-2 unit protected him, for some reason, brandishing its weapons threateningly.

“This one is old,” it growled. “The body is in an advanced state of decomposition. My guess is that death occurred at least four days ago. His life snuffed out by a needless act of violence. This man

deserved better. He deserved justice, and I'm going to make sure he gets it."

Detective Granger looked down to the little scanner robot and nodded in approval. This was definitely more like it!

He had found a selection in the settings that let the robot observe the user and emulate their behaviour, even using the same terms it had heard him say. Now it was a police officer, a rolling deliverer of justice instead of an annoying plastic idiot.

A young enforcement officer approached him awkwardly. He said, "Are you Granger?"

"Detective..." he said and held up a gold badge. "Detective first class."

"I'm glad you're here, Sir." He reached out to shake the huge detective's hand. "I've never seen anything like this."

"I've seen this before. This is murder. This is a vile low-life, snuffing out the light of an innocent. His mistake—because when those lights go out, I'm the justice lurking in the shadows!" Unit-4 growled.

"Wow," the young officer said, sounding impressed. "That's a tough little robot."

"We have to be tough," he snapped. "We're fighting down the evil and it devours weakness."

"Yes, Sir," he agreed and didn't seem sure whether he should be impressed or laughing nervously.

"What is this place?" Granger hissed, his low rumbling voice reverberating deeply.

"This is the back-office of a travel arranger," the cop told him, shaking his head. "These guys buy up cancelled tickets and sell them at short notice for a profit. I can't believe it's legal."

“Are you saying this guy got what he deserved?” Granger rumbled.

“I’m not saying he deserved to die,” he said after a lengthy pause, “but I don’t have to approve of how he lived.”

“We’re the law,” the little unit told him. “We enforce the rules. It’s not our job to make them. Sometimes they’re wrong. We’re just cops. Cops have a job to do so let’s just get on and do it, shall we?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, we’ll do a scan,” Granger told him. “Not that it matters. I know I’m right. I know what we’ve got here. We’ve got a guy passing through. We’ve got a guy desperate to get into space and away from Earth.”

“Desperate enough to kill...” the unit added. Granger nodded grimly along in agreement.

“You’re going to catch him?” the officer asked.

“You can count on it.” Granger nodded slowly, his huge bony head moving imperceptibly slowly.

“Officer,” the little unit said sharply. “You’re a pretty, young man. Tight muscles, nice eyes.”

“What?” he glanced down to the robot in surprise. Granger looked down too.

“You want to hang out? Maybe not bother with our clothes? Nothing strange: just two men doing what comes naturally. Nothing wrong in being the man nature made you to be, is there?”

Granger looked up suddenly.

The young officer began gesturing behind him. “I’m going to see what my men are doing.”

“You do that, son,” Granger agreed, beginning to sweat slightly. “You do that.”

The Captain scanned the report one more time. She glanced up at the pair with more than just a hint of suspicion, her eyes fixing on Dave and then on Rob, and then back again. But mostly they were fixed on Dave, which was fair enough.

“So, why don’t you tell me how you think the tour went?”

“What tour?” Dave shrugged. “You mean this duty-tour so far?” he looked at Rob. “Is it over? I guess time flies. Perhaps I need to cut back on Hammering the Slams because I could have sworn that this book had only just started. We can’t be more than a third into it, are we?”

“Book?” Rob frowned.

“I mean the guided tour you provided for our two visiting dignitaries,” she told him with a wearily resigned sigh.

There seemed to be a missing element that was normally with associated their very frequent meetings. Dave couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was, but something was different, almost uncomfortably different.

“I’m sure the two officers appreciated that we did our best, especially since we had so little time to prepare ourselves.” Rob cast a worried glance back to Dave, the cause of a great deal of his recent worries, who himself didn’t look worried at all.

“And what have you got to say for yourself, Mr Brown?”

He still couldn’t quite put his finger on the source of his discomfort, but even the Captain herself didn’t seem entirely at ease.

“I blame the person who selected me for the job. He clearly made a horrible mistake and I think it’s entirely unreasonable that anybody else should have to face the consequences of his appalling lack of judgement.” For a moment, just a fleeting moment, he wondered if it was his appalling lack of judgement that was at fault, as was so often the case.

“I see.” The Captain returned her attention to the report and noticed briefly that she didn’t actually seem to have a stress-headache and, for a moment, she wasn’t entirely sure if that bothered her or not. “So neither of you want to take responsibility for the outcome and the feedback I’ve received so far?”

“I suppose it depends on who’s getting demoted this time,” Dave said as he frowned at her. “Not that there’s much further down I can go. I think the average sink-plunger gets more job satisfaction than I do.”

“We did our best, Captain,” Rob insisted. He gestured to his room-mate, “I mean, look what I had to work with.”

She looked at what he had to work with while it grinned back at her inanely. She let out a weary sigh. “Well, maybe I should read some excerpts of the report?”

“I think I speak for both of us when I say that I’d rather you didn’t.” Dave looked to Rob who nodded in adamant agreement. “Perhaps we should skip the taunting and mounting evidence against us and go right to the shouting and inventive threats against my person?”

She ignored them both and said, “...the tour was very entertaining and enlightening.”

“Entertaining and enlightening?” Rob smiled in both relief and surprise.

“Well, Rob kept telling jokes. I just tried to stick to the science!” And then Dave realised what was missing: the Captain hadn’t shouted at him yet. He felt slightly disturbed and suddenly frowned to himself as he noticed that, for once, a complaint against him was exactly what this wasn’t. This was just a normal meeting that normal people had in the normal execution of their boringly

normal duties. He had heard of these in legend but never dared to hope he might actually experience such a thing for himself.

It was over-rated, he decided.

“Very helpful and accommodating young men,” she continued. “Very interesting and worth the time. Please extend our gratitude to everyone involved.”

“We aim to please,” Rob said with a grin.

The Captain stared for a moment in thin-lipped silence “I’m not sure what you two are up to.” She glared at them both. “I don’t know yet if Dave is a bad influence on you or if you’re a good influence on him.”

“It’s probably a little of both,” Dave offered, by way of a suggestion.

“Well done, boys,” she told them, giving credit where it was due. “Now get out before I remember the incident report from yesterday. We’ve found thirteen floor tiles that now scream in pain when people step on them instead of feeding back footstep sounds.”

“You’ve found thirteen floor tiles, so far!” Dave grinned and then, remembering himself, he shook his head and looked sad about it. “I can’t imagine how that could have happened.”

“Indeed,” she glared at him. “Instead of pulling stupid pranks, perhaps you should concentrate your efforts on repeating what happened on the tour.”

Chapter 4

What happened on the tour

Rob glared at his new room-mate. They had been sharing a room for only a few nights and so far it hadn't been as bad as he had at first feared, dreaded or even dared to imagine. However, there was something about Dave that promised things could become unbearable at a moment's notice, presuming he was lucky enough to get any notice at all, and that things weren't already utterly unbearable.

It was a little like handling a horribly unstable bomb that was loaded up with a devastating charge of stupid and was inexplicably biting at his fingers in the hope that he'd drop it, even though that would mean an instant, but somewhat entertaining, death to everyone involved.

Dave pulled on his uniform jacket and looked over with a cheery grin that suggested that not a great deal was happening behind his eyeballs. "Morning," he smiled and appeared very much like an actual person saying the actual things an actual person might say. "You want to go and get some breakfast from the lounge?"

"I don't know. Do we have time?" Rob was careful not to let down his guard for a moment, fearing that a moment was all it might take.

"What's the rush?" he grinned some more. "Do you think the Alliance is going to collapse if a fat passenger gets his sausages served by a different guy he doesn't give a crap about? Perhaps the horror will be too much for him, since there might not be a fluffy enough towel available to wipe away his tears."

“I see your point,” he grumbled, and sighed openly at the depressing nature of his job, the meaningless nature of it and the crushing soullessness of what had now become his existence. “I don’t want to get into any trouble, though/ I’ve not been aboard long and I’m trying to make a good impression on my supervisor and keep the abusive shouting down to an absolute minimum.”

“Your supervisor is Ruth Meadows? Right?” Dave laughed. Rob nodded that, indeed she was, and waited for some insightful revelation. “She’ll be in the crew lounge until 8 am herself, drinking tequila and telling stories about how much she hates her ex-husband to anyone who’ll listen. If you catch her around 3, then there’s a good chance she’ll offer you sexual favours. Around 7, there’s a poor chance of you escaping her sexual favours. Please don’t ask how I know this.”

Rob allowed a flicker of a smile to flash across his lips, “That doesn’t seem very difficult to imagine. Yesterday, she asked me to shape the mashed potato into hearts for three male customers. Aren’t there any normal people aboard this ship?”

“There’s me!” Dave somehow managed to keep a straight face.

The crew lounge was teeming with a vague approximation of intelligent human life. Breakfasts were being served from hatches, and heavy, alcohol-absorbing greasy food seemed to be the order of the day. The smell was quite enough to put you off your food.

Dave took his usual seat at the bar and Rob joined him dubiously and with only several slight reservations to add to an overwhelming collection of huge ones. “I think the staff here drink too much.”

“I’m going to tell you what I think,” Dave told him, rubbing his unshaven chin thoughtfully. “For a man who aspires to the

dizzying heights of delivering recycled faecal matter to customers, with whom you share a complete lack of mutual respect, you do an inordinate amount of thinking. I have noticed also that it seems to get you precisely nowhere, meaning you're not even very good at it."

"I'm just doing this for a year," he said firmly. "Next year, I'll be going back to my studies to qualify for an engineering degree."

"That will come in very handy when you're asking if they'd like fries with their burger order."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rob asked sulkily.

Dave pointed to the far corner of the room. "Over there is Lucas. He's a qualified business executive with an excellent understanding of human nature, he tells me. Now he works in the maintenance department as a cleaner. He hates his life. That's why, every night, he drinks too much, and not just too much but usually with a succession of Slam-Hammers until his brain is pounded to within an inch of giving up and going home.

"Sometimes, he drinks so much that he tells people that he can see what they're thinking and likes to describe the process in exquisite detail. He's never been close to right, except the time he broke down crying after telling an attractive young woman from the sanitation department that she hated him and thought he might be better off dead. One time, he tried to describe me and came very, very close to having me lose all respect for him, but managed to guess correctly that I have a very slight problem with authority, which did redeem him slightly. You see, that fact it true, and something I don't openly share with others.

"Most times, he avoids large and impressive psychotic episodes and he just throws up on himself while shouting that he used to be somebody--"

“OK,” Rob stopped him. “I guess you’re going to tell me everyone here has a story and in the end I’m going to end up just like the rest of you.”

“No. Most of the people here are just here because they’ve got nothing better to do. I just wanted to show you Lucas because he’s a big angry drunk and if you get near him after 11 pm, there’s a high probability he’ll want to beat the crap out of you because he believes that you are thinking the worst of him.”

“So what are you doing here, Dave? What’s your story?” Rob grabbed up the breakfast menu. It was a laminated plastic sheet with various options printed on a much-worn card beneath. The dancing animated faces looked as if their hearts just weren’t really in it and he could hardly blame them for that. None of it sounded particularly appealing, especially now that the thought of it being recycled human excrement was foremost on his mind, where Dave had left it.

“I’m just passing through,” Dave said and smiled wistfully. “I have been for seven years now. Like the macaroni, I pass through every slowly. I guess you really are what you eat, huh?”

“Macaroni?” Rob sighed.

Dave nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

“When I originally came on board, I wanted to qualify for the public relations team. They had a great training program which would have helped me to get a proper job back on Earth. Also, I would have got the opportunity to travel. This ship stops off at some interesting places and that appealed to me at the time.”

Rob found it disturbingly out of character that Dave had managed to form an entire sentence that didn’t contain a single insult, stupid comment or glib sweeping generalisation. “So what happened?”

“Nothing,” he sighed. “I got assigned to one stupid job after another, I had too many beers, I earned enough to have a lot of fun on planetary stopovers and the fact that I had nothing on Earth to go back to, continued unabated. So here I am.”

“Well, it’s never too late to do something with your life,” Rob told him, not entirely sure that in Dave’s case this was totally true. It occurred to him that he had just made a stupid, glib sweeping generalisation of his own.

“What would you have me do? Meet a girl, fall in love, have a little family, study hard, get a better job, buy a house, pay the bills, work until I’m too old to lift a finger and slowly rot away while I moan to other people, who can no longer urinate in a natural way, about how appalling my life was?”

“I’m doing something better than that,” he said sadly and looked away. He frowned to himself and said softly, “I’m very busy not turning into my father.”

The airlock chamber door slid open with a louder than usual hiss that sounded vaguely as if someone was actually saying the word ‘hiss.’ Behind the thick metal skin to the shuttle docking latch stood two burly gentlemen, amidst a plume of curling white vapour.

One was shorter, older and clearly the superior of the two. He was dressed expensively but without flair or style, sporting greased-back greying hair and possessing a pair of intelligent, steely eyes that flicked about, missing nothing. They were the eyes of a strong, determined man, seasoned with many years of brutally unyielding service and loyalty to a cause greater than himself, or else they were those of a child whose parents never got him the puppy he wanted for Christmas. He seemed to exist solely in his own universe, a creation borne of his self-confidence and tempered wisdom.

The other stood a respectful step behind. He was younger, stronger and wore thick black glasses with equally dark lenses. His line of sight was narrower. It went from directly forward and then to the other man and rarely deviated from the two.

“Welcome to the Nebulous,” the chief passenger-liaison officer said sweetly, stepping forwards and beaming a friendly smile. She was hiding behind a grandiose title which basically disguised the fact that she was qualified to talk to strangers and had a certificate to prove it.

For just a fleeting moment, she paused. She reeled back and then she captured and forced down her feelings, assured in her own mind that she had managed to hide her worst fear. She measured them up, their confidence, their absolute authority and, in the darkest corner of her mind, she realised that her worst fears may have come to pass.

These men were some kind of accountants!

The smaller man stepped forwards and his eyes swept her body. With clear reluctance tempered by genuine disinterest, he reached out his hand to shake hers.

She took it and squealed with delight, “It’s wonderful to have you aboard. We’re all very excited.”

He turned to the younger man who gave a tiny, almost imperceptible shrug and then carried on with the difficult business of staring fixedly forwards with such a degree of professionalism that he managed to make it look easy.

“I’m Senior Officer Lynch,” he told her. “This is Officer Carver.”

“Ma’am.” The younger man nodded to her respectfully.

She beamed a happy smile and struggled to contain her bubbling enthusiasm. “We’ve arranged guest accommodation for you

both. The entire ship's facilities are at your disposal and we've added a few extra surprises to make your stay even more special."

Indeed, it would have been difficult at any given time for the officers to pin-point precisely where her voice was coming from, as she appeared to be constantly darting around this side and that, and dashing between their legs like a toy poodle that had been eating coffee powder. Calming her down would have been akin to catching a greasy pig at a carnival, something neither officer had any specific desire to attempt. In Carver's case, a very similar experience had resulted in the end of his second marriage.

"That won't be necessary, Ma'am," the younger man ventured and then looked to his superior, flinching as if mentally scolding himself for taking even the slightest initiative.

"What my young colleague means is that we appreciate every effort you're making but we never expected such a warm greeting," he sneered professionally.

The chief passenger liaison officer giggled with delight and skipped around between them with seemingly boundless energy. "It's our pleasure," she enthused still more, as if she was a machine powered by approval. "We're very keen to make your stay here as comfortable and as memorable as possible."

"We've had a long shuttle-ride," Officer Lynch told her flatly, his voice as expensive and dull as his clothing. "If you would be so kind as to show us to our quarters, we'd appreciate the opportunity to rest and prepare ourselves for the work we're here to do."

"That's no problem." She clicked her fingers angrily and frowned at her staff until they realised that she actually meant for them to be doing something. They ran forward and took the officers' luggage.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to your rooms. Breakfast can be brought to you or we can arrange a complimentary table in the officer’s lounge.” She stopped for effect and turned to the one in charge, beaming him a huge smile. “That’s the exclusive lounge right at the top and front of the ship. It’s by invitation only and we’ve arranged a special table for you by the window.”

“Perhaps later,” he told her. “For now, we’ll go to our room and if breakfast could be brought along, that would be perfect.”

“Nothing is going to be a problem,” she told him, almost exploding with delight at being useful. “I’ll get that sorted for you right away.”

The elder officer turned to his junior associate and said, “Well, this wasn’t quite the welcome I was expecting.”

He shook his head and muttered something in agreement.

The box had been closing in on him. Too many hours spent staring at the functional sterility of his budget cabin had made him decide that it might be time to do something far outside his nature—far outside the nature of any right-thinking individual, in fact.

Phil Bothan had decided that he was going to be a tourist. It was a tough choice, but, once the initial shock had subsided, it didn’t actually sound all that bad. He had registered and joined one of the many guided tours of the Nebulous, where a selected member of the staff could lead a person around the vessel, while explaining how fascinating everything that really wasn’t, really was. He suspected that most people who signed up probably needed little convincing of this, and felt oddly lucky that at least some of the many tours scheduled for that day hadn’t been cancelled through lack of interest.

The tour guide flustered around awkwardly, trying to present an image of finding every tiny detail amazing and enlightening, but just very barely pulled off the facade of being just very barely awake.

“This pipe here,” he sighed, and half closed his eyes for a moment. “This stretches all the way along the full length of the ship. That’s almost a full kilometre from end to end.” He then remembered to point at the pipe.

An Asian couple—the only other people on the tour—nudged each other excitedly, and the male of the pair took a holographic image of the pipe for reasons that escaped Phil. The reasons did not seem particularly apparent to his partner either.

“The pipe is made from a very rare metal, ‘bluetonium,’ which is bright red in colour and impervious to any kind of radiation. And because it’s so rare, it’s one of the many parts that were salvaged from wartime vessels.

“This particular one was originally part of ‘The Emissary,’ the ship that carried the leaders of Earth to the alien Proxili homeworld towards the end of the war, in order to present the peace treaty they had drafted. Against regulations and at great risk, she did the highly dangerous run with her shields, weapons and tactical sensors switched off, to show her peaceful intent.

“Despite sustaining critical damage after accidentally colliding with a navigation beacon, she was recorded in the annals of history as among the most significant vessel of the war. The pipe in question was used to deliver a chemical compound that helped to rebuild the aliens’ atmosphere after years of bombing: it was a gift to the anxious aliens, and one of the events recorded in history as being the turning point that ended hostilities.”

“What does the pipe do?” asked Phil.

The guide glared at him as if he'd killed his favourite kitten, cooked it in a dirty toilet bowl, and was offering a piece to him on a dirty fork, or menu-option 17, as it was commonly known.

"I don't..." he blustered, "I believe... it has water in it, but that's... that's really not the point. The point is... we have a really big pipe, on one of the biggest ships in space. Do you have a really big pipe?"

"No," admitted Phil to his shoes, uncertain as to why he found such an admittance shameful. "I don't have a really big pipe."

The Asian tourists made a noise suggesting they were impressed, and nudged each other once more.

"That macaroni cheese was delicious!" Dave said, licking his lips and nodding in satisfaction, despite not actually finding it delicious, satisfying or being entirely certain it actually was macaroni cheese.

"Really?" Rob poked his half eaten breakfast with his fork. "As breakfasts go, it is right up there with going hungry. It's as if they aimed for 'disappointing' and missed."

Dave shook his head solemnly. "You have to keep telling yourself until you believe it. It's one of many things that will help you not end up like this lot!" He gestured out to the lounge where the apathetic crew were already starting to deal with the horrendous prospect of starting their shifts, which had actually started some time earlier; quite some time earlier, in fact.

"We are like them," Rob shrugged. He saw little difference between himself and everyone else who wasn't relishing the idea of a day of mundane, thankless activities followed by food that was beyond second rate, before consuming enough alcohol to help them forget how bad their lives were.

“You’re like them!” Dave shook his head at him and scowled. “I aspire to greater things. The more you keep me down, the more I spread my wings and soar.”

“You mean the more your life gets bad, the more you do horrible things to other people to make yourself feel better?”

“That’s what I said,” he agreed and nodded happily. “You soar your way, I’ll soar mine.”

“Actually, I’m looking forward to today!” Rob smiled. “It’s going to be fun.”

“Fun? What?” Dave grimaced. “If this is a joke, then I don’t understand it. If it’s not a joke, then I still don’t understand it. Explain yourself before I start making jokes about your hair colour, even though we’re all bored with them by now.”

“I’ve actually been looking forward to this tour,” Rob told him. “It’ll be a nice break from serving customers at the upper cafe.”

“The tour!” Dave winced. “Is that really happening? Is it really a thing? I really thought I’d just imagined that or made it up to punish you for having an orange head.”

“It’s happening today,” Rob told him. “Really, really happening.”

“Why wasn’t I told?” Dave flustered angrily. “You should have reminded me.”

“I reminded you last night. I told you again this morning, four times, the last time only five minutes ago when you started eating your pasta.”

“And when you have breasts the size of water-melons, I might occasionally take some notice of what you say,” he said, straightening his uniform. “How am I meant to show people around the engineering decks? Somebody deserves to lose their job for this.”

“I probably will, I guess.”

“Don’t worry: it will be fine,” Rob told him. “I’ll do the actual talking. You just follow on behind, make the occasional witty comment and tell the visitors which way we’re going. It’s not rocket-science.”

“It is rocket-science,” Dave said and frowned at him. “We’re giving a guided tour of the engineering section of a space-ship. What could be more rocket-science than that?”

“It’s far beyond rockets,” Rob laughed. “This ship is powered by anti-matter, generated with a controlled fusion reaction.”

“It could be powered by pixie-dust and harsh language. I still wouldn’t care enough to understand it.”

“Well, maybe that would work.” Rob rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I could tell the officials how everything works and you could make some kind of clean joke about how complicated everything is?”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Dave nodded in agreement. “What could possibly go wrong?”

The chief passenger liaison officer minced excitedly up to the entrance of the most exclusive passenger area of the ship. The executive deck was exclusively available to the most important people that ever came aboard. Since the rooms were phenomenally expensive, the only criterion with which they measured importance was how much they were able to pay.

She clutched her hand proudly to her heart and her fingers wrapped around her name badge. Since her grandiose title was so long, her name had had to be excluded but it didn’t matter to her. People knew what she was and that was what was truly important to her.

She pressed the button on the intercom panel and it let her clients know that she wished to speak with them, if to do so was convenient, of course. She had a large portable terminal which served little purpose except to make her feel still more important.

She took a moment to marvel to herself at how far she'd come. Once, she had been nothing more than the daughter of a farmer, a mere cog in the wheel of a machine that made food grow out of the ground (subject to licensing laws) and now she spoke to people on a space-ship. Finally, she felt that her life truly mattered.

The door slid open with an expensive, and deeply satisfying, whooshing sound and Officer Lynch stood in the doorway.

She smiled meekly, "Is everything to your satisfaction?"

"Perfectly," he told her, without any perceptible emotional context in his expression, or in the tone of his voice.

"Excellent," she smiled. "We have arranged a guided tour of the vessel for your amusement. Our engineering department have selected two of our finest crewmen to show you around and they are at your disposal at your earliest convenience."

"A tour?" Lynch raised an eyebrow. "You've arranged a tour?"

"Yes, Sir," she enthused, suddenly empowered with her own sense of self satisfaction. "It was my idea, actually. When we heard that two officials from the Alliance services were coming aboard, I took every measure to make you both feel as welcome as possible to our fine vessel."

"A tour." Lynch seemed amused for a moment but the moment passed quickly. "A tour might be interesting."

"I knew you'd think so," she said and made an excited gesture, clapping her hands together and dancing on the spot like a monkey on a frying-pan. Of course, in her head, no monkeys were dancing on

any kind of pan. "I can have my people ready to show you around whenever is convenient to you."

Lynch looked inside the opulent lounge at his colleague who was running through data and finishing off a plate of eggs and toast. "These good people have arranged a tour of the ship for us," he called out.

"A tour?" Carver frowned. "Do we want a tour?"

"I think it would very educational to have a look around the ship," Lynch told him. He turned back to the chief passenger liaison officer. "We'll be ready in one hour."

"One hour!" Dave sighed at the communication pad, specifically Rob's communication pad and the one he had been looking for, for several hours.

"That's my pad!" he protested weakly.

"Yes, I know."

"I was looking for that all morning."

"Yes I know."

"And you had it all the time?"

"I'm glad I could help you find it," Dave told him with a shrug. "You're welcome."

"Well, you knew I was looking for it. Why didn't you tell me it was in your pocket?"

"It wasn't," Dave assured him earnestly, as if Rob was talking absolute nonsense. "It was in your pocket."

"I just saw you," Rob cried out and pointed accusingly. "You just took it out of your pocket."

"It's your pocket," Dave smiled. "These are your trousers. I stole them this morning as they were cleaner than mine. I do

apologise for any inconvenience that might have caused, if indeed it has caused any inconvenience.”

Rob shook his head and looked around the dishevelled masses of the crew as an uncomfortable realisation dawned on him. “I’m going to have to stop regularly washing my clothes, aren’t I? This is how it begins, isn’t it? Did all of them start out as your room-mate?”

“It’s funny you should say that, but I wish you’d focus on the more troubling matter at hand. We have to meet the officers at the executive deck in one hour to begin the tour. We’ve got to show two fat, self-important morons from Alliance head-quarters how kettles work,” he sighed. “I don’t even know how kettles actually work, Rob!”

“Excellent,” Rob smiled. “I’m going to the toilet. I’ve actually been looking forward to this.”

“I can see that,” Dave grumbled and glared at him as he left to the toilets at the rear of the lounge. “I presume this means you’re on drugs, which is deeply unsettling as nobody has offered any to me. And you people wonder why I feel that I have to steal things.”

The crew took a certain pride in the knowledge that the staff lounge toilets were the most horrendous and unhygienic place on the entire ship, which was largely to be expected since it was maintained by the very same crew that went to the lounge to hammer Slam-Hammers into their brains. This state of affairs had been confirmed in the last six annual inspections after claiming their dubious title back from Dave’s kitchen.

Every time a team was sent to clean them, they came back several hours later, smelling of something not entirely unlike beer, with stained purple teeth and complaining in a slurred voice that they’d forgotten to take a broom and would try again tomorrow.

Things had got so bad that, two years earlier, it had been decided that something more drastic simply had to be done.

Staff were regularly calling in sick after a brief visit to the rest-rooms, often purely from the psychological shock, and it was all costing the company too much in lost working-hours. After a long, complex and expensive round of corporate meetings to discuss the matter, it was decided that the company should invest in a small, autonomous robotic cleaner to maintain the toilets, colloquially known as 'the electric brush.'

A round of financial projections were made and it was finally decided that the cost was just too high when compared to simply making the crew do it, even though it was widely accepted that they wouldn't do it, even if they paid them. And so another round of meetings was scheduled to decide whether or not they actually did pay them and, if so, why exactly weren't they doing it in the first place.

It was somewhere around this point that a young management executive saw a possible opportunity for a profit and so, instead, the condom machine was replaced with an antibiotic dispenser to help keep things at least moderately clean on an individual level.

A year later, eighty-four of the female crew, classified as being of 'lower intelligence,' had left the service due to unexpected pregnancy, several being complicated by the onset of toxic contamination from an 'unknown chemical source,' since the dispenser was at least equally as reliable as the condom machine and several orders of magnitude more effective than the crew.

This ended up costing the company many hundreds of times the price of an electric brush which, three meetings later, was decided was quite unacceptable.

The final solution was to demote the management executive who had come up with all this to the cleaning staff, but he had since developed a drinking problem and was now frequently referred to as the ‘forgotten broom,’ although his actual name was Lucas.

A meeting was later held, the outcome of which was the total agreement that nobody really cared what the crew lounge toilets were actually like. As an epilogue to this, a further meeting was scheduled to try to work out why this had all started in the first place, the outcome of which was that it was all something to do with poorly-made sandwiches, or something.

Dave wondered why he had ever looked all this up and why he was now remembering it in such graphic detail. It was as if he was reading it straight from the Wikiweb pages.

“I knew no good could come of sharing a room with an orange person!” Dave crossed his arms and frowned and began to sulk like a small, spoilt and emotionally fragile child, only slightly larger and with a far more pungent smell.

“Hey, Dave!” A brunette approached him. She sat in Rob’s seat and all thoughts about him vanished instantly. She was attractive, in a very obvious way, which was Dave’s favourite way for women to be attractive. Her make-up was heavy, her uniform had a revealing button left open, her hair was fussy and she moved with a certain sexual confidence, which he had already unconsciously decided to remove from her in a way that wouldn’t easily be forgotten.

“Hi,” he smiled, and tried to act as if he was more sophisticated than a man who professionally checked devices that provided no useful function. “I don’t know who you are but I’m going to make it my mission in life to find out.”

“My name’s Shelly,” she smiled.

“OK. Mission accomplished,” he said thoughtfully. “That was actually a little easier than I thought it would be. Perhaps I should do this professionally. I have been told I should do something professionally, just once to see what it’s like.”

“My friend told me that I should come and talk to you,” she told him.

“Your friend was right.” He leant in towards her and smiled warmly. She didn’t back away like most people, small animals, and sometimes even inanimate objects, often did. “I’ve been looking for someone to have a drink with tonight.”

“We have this passenger on level four,” she explained. “She’s really annoying and has been driving us all crazy. She moans about everything.”

“I was more thinking of you, to be honest,” he shrugged. “Is she attractive?”

“No.” She laughed at what she quite incorrectly assumed was a joke. “My friend said that you might be able to make her calm down a bit. She said you were the man to come to.

“I’ll pay you in beer.”

“You want me to talk to a passenger?” Dave rubbed his chin. “The Captain said I should stop doing that, but she’s not offering to pay me in beer, I guess.”

“Thanks, Dave.” She smiled and reached out to touch his arm. “It’s Mrs Davenport in room 407. I owe you one. Maybe two.”

He watched her leave. She cast a little glance back at him and waved as she went.

Rob came back, frowning deeply. “Have you seen the toilets here? They’re appalling.”

“Have you seen the toilets here? They’re appalling!” said the female of the pair of Asian tourists, loudly to the tour guide. She wiped her hand on her appallingly tasteless jacket, and glared at him as if he had personally gone in and vented a brutally vicious curry everywhere other than where the designers had intended, just to spite her.

“Yeah, they’re amazing aren’t they? The crew lounge toilets are the pride of the ship, but they’re not part of the tour ‘cos they’re off limits to the ... er... passengers...,” he huffed to himself, running a hand through an untidy mop of bright yellow hair. “We’re in the cargo area now. We don’t normally get a lot of passengers down here, because nobody really, you know... cares.”

“The cargo area?” Phil sighed mockingly. “Do we get to see the engines, the bridge, the escape pods, security, anything even remotely interesting on this tour?”

He thought for a moment, his glazed expression remaining largely unmoved as his brain sort-of half-worked on the question, and sort-of half-did absolutely nothing at all.

“Not really. They’re all off-limits, too. Even if I, like, wanted to go there, I don’t think they’d let me without a pass. I’d have to get that from security, but I don’t think I’m allowed in there... either.”

“Cargo area it is then,” Phil mumbled quietly, smiled and reminded himself that the point of this exercise was to eat up a little time between meals, and not for any kind of actual value. Rather like the time spent eating the meals in fact, he mused in silence.

“The cargo area is, like, the key place in the whole ship.” The guide rolled his eyes as he tried to remember anything worth saying. Thankfully, his portable terminal was already on the case, and had put up an on-screen, fact-filled script, custom-designed for this precise scenario. “Any supplies that we can’t make on the ship are

stored here. Now, there is, in fact, an interesting story about the cargo bay.”

The Asian tourists suddenly perked up from their amused incredulity, and their cameras were elevated to a full standby position. Phil remained incredulously bemused.

“The cargo bay was originally designed by Brigadier Brad Bratwurster, inventor of the long-range-bewilderer which, as we all know, was used during the war to confuse the enemy, and was the first of the less-lethal weapons that Earth deployed.

“They light up the sky with a brilliant display of fireworks, distracting the troops who stop to watch enthusiastically. They then release toxic metal fragments that eat away brain tissue in a matter of minutes, leaving them unable to fire weapons, plan attacks, or maintain bladder control.

“It’s no coincidence that the enchanting pyrotechnics of the bewilderer’s dazzling light-show were designed by the Brigadier’s third wife, twice removed on his mother’s side, Dr. Shirley Crabapple, specialist in skeuomorphics, and author of best seller, ‘Turning the page, and other everyday phrases with unbelievable origins.’ Her aesthetic flair is similarly evident in this very cargo area, if you’ll notice the artfully discoloured ‘welding scars,’ ‘protruding ‘rivets,’ and ‘corrugated’ plating reminiscent of some dark bygone era where utilitarian look and feel was tinged with the macabre.

“On a practical level, this type of cargo area was originally intended for large-scale troop deployment hardware, and is designed to be virtually indestructible, even if it were to crash into an iceberg.”

The cargo bay had, in actuality, been recycled from 14 gigantic metal boxes bound seamlessly together. The boxes had once contained many thousands of long-range-bewilderers, and

consequently the cargo crew were still required to wear breathing apparatus while they worked. They frequently didn't and this went some way towards explaining the mess in the toilets.

The chief passenger liaison officer looked the pair of them over, slightly in disgust. "You two aren't exactly what I had in mind."

Dave and Rob looked at each other. It was pretty clear that they weren't exactly what she had had in mind.

"I've heard about you," she pointed to Dave accusingly, her brow furrowed, her eyes peering out angrily.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he told her, and her brow furrowed some more in response.

"And you?" she turned to Rob. She seemed as if, in the real world, she might be quite a pleasant person whom he could relate to readily. Of course, for that to be true he would have to be so drunk he couldn't walk and she would have to be sober and trying really hard to seem intelligent.

"My name's Rob," he offered. "I'm two years into an engineering degree and have a very thorough understanding of the basic principles of stellar matter inversion propulsion, reaction-based energy conversion and thermodynamic recycling."

"What did he say?" the chief passenger liaison officer asked with a fluster and then frowned and turned to Dave.

"It's his way of saying he doesn't have a girlfriend."

"I was trying to say, I'm more than qualified to give this tour." He balled his fists and dug them into his sides, angry at everyone, up to and including himself. "I might be the only one on this ship that knows what he's doing, which is certainly the impression I get most of the time."

“So your supervisor selected you because of your background?” she smiled and looked relieved. “At least someone around here knows how to do their job.”

He sighed, pointed at Dave and said accusingly: “Actually, he chose me for the job because he finds my hair colour so offensive that he thought I should be punished for it, and he didn’t want to be around me.”

“True story!” Dave nodded and smiled.

“But then how come you’re here too?” she narrowed her eyes defensively and glared at him.

“Karma?” he shrugged. “I don’t know how these things work. I don’t know how anything works really.”

“What?” She frowned at him.

“I’m just saying that I don’t really know how the universe works. It’s almost as if someone is writing the story of our lives for his own amusement and we’re just characters who exist only at the whim of another, quite cruel, being. Also, nothing seems to be happening in chronological order and that’s starting to get confusing.”

The chief passenger liaison officer shook her head and chose to ignore him, since everything else was getting her nowhere. “Come and meet the officers,” she said.

Suddenly, she stopped and turned to them. “These two gentlemen were sent here from Alliance-Command. I don’t know why and I don’t care. Whatever it is, it’s important, so, if you screw this up, I guarantee that I’ll make sure you both end up with the worst jobs on the entire ship.”

Rob and Dave looked at one another and laughed. Rob said, “Good luck with that.”

The officers were darkly dressed and were large and imposing, and would have been even if they were dressed entirely in clean, crisp white sheets; perhaps even more so.

They glared at the crewmen with contempt, as if they were beneath their concern, as if they were an automated system for cleaning their shoes or religious people knocking on their doors. They were not at all what Rob had expected, but Dave had learnt to manage his expectations from life, and was far less disappointed.

“These gentlemen have a route planned which will show the highlights of the whole ship, but with a special emphasis on our wonderful engineering section,” she told the officers. “Of course, if there’s anything additional you wish to see, it would be their pleasure to arrange it for you.”

“In fact, nothing would bring us more pleasure,” Dave added sarcastically. Rob glared at him. The subtleties of sarcasm were lost on the chief passenger liaison officer who was busy flustering to a professional standard.

“Of course,” Officer Lynch added, quite pleasantly for a man who rarely had cause to be anything other than unpleasant. He looked to the two crewmen and gestured for them to begin.

“Gentlemen?”

“Here we are in the weapon system room, where nobody is allowed to look.

“Gesture inside the weapon room.”

The tour guide looked confused for a moment, before realising that the closing quotation mark in the script was a cue to stop talking. He raised a hand and gestured inside the vast empty space that unfolded before them.

“Over here, we have the basic weapon equipment alcoves, and, next to those, an assortment of disruptor cannon openings. Laser targeting stuff could be fitted there, thermal sensing field modulated ripperboom smashshredder things fit in bay 17, and along the wall a variety of mêlée weapon stuff for close combat could be hung on the left hand side of the wall, next to the emergency exit sign.

“Across to the right we see the shield generator thing panel, that’s removable if we ever needed to fit one. A whole bank of sophisticated computer things that controls the armour-plating stuff frequency could be stored on the left, all operated by the remarkable and competent crew persons we see over there.”

Someone waved: other someones were too asleep to do so.

“Of course, real weapons are rarely used these days. Occasionally, we have to destroy a rogue meteor with the laser thing, but that’s only in the event that the navigator is really bored. The close-quarter weapons we do have on board were used once in a crisis four years ago, when 360 vegetarians all came aboard for a conference and all of them ordered the salad.

“Of course, what weapons we do have are trained on Switzerland if we’re in Earth’s orbit, as local laws require us to do so at all times.”

Phil pondered to himself what brilliant minds could have concocted this tour, but his pondering was brief and rather pathetic.

“If we had another war tomorrow, these ships could easily be made to fight. All we’d need to do would be to add the weapons, shields, better engines, modern sensors, armour plating, structural reinforcements, automated repair systems, sophisticated computers to the areas I indicated, and to bring in a competent crew to operate them all, and this ship could potentially serve as a military transport, so long as it was escorted by several modern armed vessels.”

Phil tried to compare the experience of staring into the completely empty cabin, to the visage of an empty room that might one day be filled with something, if something happened that nobody wanted to happen. It was a tough one and his imagination was not up to it.

“Do you ever actually use this room?”

“Me? No,” said the guide, over the insanely enthusiastic noise of cameras clicking behind him. “I’m pretty sure we’re not even meant to be in here.”

“Let me rephrase that. Is this room ever used for anything?” Phil winced inwardly at the banality of almost everything around him.

The tour guide shrugged, and an uneasy grin spread involuntarily across his lips. “Sometimes, sure. There’s not many places on board, you know what I mean?”

“Not really.”

“For couples,” he continued. “You know, for them to go and, you know, do stuff.”

Phil looked around at the large empty space. It was carved from reinforced metal with hard points for mounting things that left natural dark crevices. It smelt vaguely of lubricant, and hummed slightly as low growling rumbles reverberated right through the metallic plating. Romantic, in any way, it was not.

“I’ll wait outside,” he said finally, rubbing his temples in exasperation. His footsteps clanked over the exposed floor-panelling as he trudged wearily, heavily, to the bulkhead door. For some inexplicable reason, as his left foot hit the floor a loud, pained shriek screamed from where he was treading. He paused motionless, rooted to the spot in surprise. The only thought in his head was that the

scream may have... no, could only have originated within him, and that it was utterly, totally and completely justified.

Rob gestured to a large metallic door frame. “This is the entrance to the engineering section. The entire section can be jettisoned in an emergency and this doorway can be sealed to prevent the atmosphere escaping. In addition, the doors can be sealed in the event of coolant leaks or to seal radiation.”

The officers seemed unimpressed and this wasn't lost on Rob, and was about to be ruthlessly capitalised on by Dave.

“So it's a door.” Officer Lynch turned back to his junior associate and made a sarcastic expression that further cemented the fact that the tour wasn't entirely captivating so far.

“To the untrained observer, a door might seem like the most boring thing on board this ship, with the exception of my friend, Rob,” Dave said, as he stepped forwards and gestured to the frame. “It's a little known opinion that these doors actually make no sound whatsoever and we add the noise electronically. Why we do this is anyone's guess, but, if you stick the maintenance probe into the scan port, you can change the noise from a hiss to the word, ‘sandwich.’”

The two officers looked to each other and raised an eyebrow.

“This was once done as an experiment, as I believed it would increase demand for lunch-based snacks in some kind of amusing way, which would briefly distract me from the crushing boredom of testing devices which are essentially anachronistic in nature.

“Doing so earned me an official reprimand and the results of the experiment are still considered to be inconclusive. However, ‘Retarded Dave,’ who makes the sandwiches did make a protest which took the form of wrapping slices of bread around his head and

running around deck 7 naked while shouting that he was the king of cheese.

“A causal connection hasn’t been formally established, but I feel that it’s a promising sign and is worthy of further study.”

There was a moment of confused, and possibly horrified, silence.

“Is that true?” Officer Lynch frowned.

“Perhaps we should move on,” Rob suggested, keen to avoid any more of Dave’s brand of things.

“Indeed,” Dave agreed. “We have to warn you to walk between the yellow lines at all times. Doing otherwise could be extremely hazardous, possibly fatal.”

The junior officer looked around in confusion. “There are no yellow lines.”

“The red lines, then,” Dave told him. “It doesn’t matter what colour they are. You’ll still be vaporised in a second if you were to cross them.”

“There are no red lines, either.” The officer looked around, even more confused.

“There might be later, but they are generally invisible, so as not to cause panic. It’s only common sense when you think about it, as panic is prohibited in much of the ship, except of course the panic-rooms,” Dave told him. Another moment of silence passed.

“It’s a good job you’re both male. Some of the engineers down here have never seen a real live human female. There’s no telling how they might react. Did I mention that Rob, here, is an engineer?”

“Is that true?” Lynch almost smiled.

“Opinion is divided,” Dave cut in, before Rob could speak for himself. Rob looked at him expectantly, hoping he wouldn’t say anything too damaging. Of course, it had always been too late for

hope. “He says he’s seen a real live female. He even claims to have had a girlfriend. While I find the suggestion preposterous, I have seen pictures and it seems to me that if a person was to have had any form of contact with such a creature, then they’d be more likely to lie by denying it, and possibly have new, better eyes installed for next time.”

The younger officer began to smirk and then quite quickly regained his composure. He pushed his dark glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose. Officer Lynch looked back, shrugged and continued along with the tour.

“Are you gentleman engineers?” Rob asked, trying to cut down on Dave’s opportunities to speak.

“If I was, I wouldn’t be comfortable admitting to it,” Officer Lynch told him.

“If you gentlemen would like to follow along,” Dave gestured forwards with unnecessary extravagance, “we’ll take you to meet our chief engineer, where you can see for yourselves the horrible price mankind has had to pay for ever moving out of caves.”

Screwing up his face with the effort of appearing to care, the professional tour guide gestured to the array of windows along the side of the wall.

“No tour would be complete without a look at the transit sails.”

The Asian tourists nudged each other and gasped. The vast lounge was empty at this time of day, other than for the sound of a few staff members arguing over who had to mop the floor. Huge windows were set along the wall offering an impressive view out into space. They also showed the transit sails—vast metal structures which turned raw energy into powerful gravity fields which could

manoeuvre the ship in any given direction. For once, the tour was actually quite impressive. The sheer scale of the engineering and the stunning achievement in applying such technology was staggering.

“Do the sails drive the ship past super-luminary speeds?” asked Phil, gazing at the gigantic panels through the window, almost unaware that he was edging ever closer, almost in awe of the spectacle before him.

“Erm...” the tour guide tilted his head with a narrow-eyed look of vacant thoughtfulness. Even his portable terminal was coming up blank. “I think the engines do that. I think we get power from, erm... hydrogen or something? Some gas, I think, or other.”

Phil sighed and glared at him. “But do the sails give us hyperdrive, or just manoeuvre us at lower speeds?”

The tour guide swallowed nervously and kind of ignored him, as his terminal flickered back to life, hopefully with the answers.

“The design of the sails is based on those of the great battleship, ‘Endurance class,’ the most powerful warship built during the hostilities.”

Although it had escaped his awareness, ‘based on’ was a euphemism frequently used when entire sections of a ship had been literally ripped out of another vessel and bolted onto a new one.

The others were taking turns to stand in baffling poses in front of the window, while the other took picture after picture.

“Transit sail technology was invented by accident when a laser was used to create an electro-magnetic field between two small, circular superconductors. It was noticed that the mass of the conductors changed while in the field, and the transit sail was invented.”

Phil went back to ignoring him, and actually cursed his own stupidity for venturing a question to someone so low on the food chain that most vegetarians wouldn't hesitate to eat him.

"It's well-known in engineering circles that far from trying to invent a new technology for space travel using gravity waves, researchers were simply trying to perfect a means of stopping shirt buttons from coming undone."

Phil checked his watch as his frustration level continued to soar. A rumbling in his stomach drew his attention. "Maybe it's lunchtime," he suggested.

"Lunchtime!" repeated the tour guide with hazy reflection. "Now you mention it, I've been feeling hungry ever since we went through the door to this lounge. If you'd like to follow me to the food-hall, we can take a break for some delicious and nutritious food or food-substitutes."

The guide led the very excited tourists as Phil skulked behind, even more fed up than when he began the tour. As the doors slid effortlessly open for them, they were accompanied by a slight hiss that sounded remarkably like someone saying, 'sssssandwichessss.'

"What we're really interested in is how the technology of the ship interacts with the passengers," Officer Lynch said, with a wry glance at his colleague. "I'd be interested to see how a passenger aboard this ship might send a message back to home, for instance."

"Interesting," Rob said and raised a finger. "At our hyper-luminal velocity, we have to create a contact channel through the lower electro-magnetic realms of the universal fabric. Once we do that, we can transmit message pulses which can contain detailed communications."

“I see,” Officer Lynch grumbled and frowned. It seemed he had plenty of information but no answer. Instead he turned to Dave, who was likely to offer plenty of answer but no information. “So how does one do that on this ship?”

“One goes to the SCAR office and gives them two credits. One then prepares themselves for disappointment which generally won’t be long in coming.”

“I see.” Lynch smiled to himself. “And what about the passengers coming aboard? What kind of security checks are made?”

“Usually on a vessel of this kind, people are scanned routinely to ensure they’re not carrying any controlled substance or weapons,” Rob told them.

“Yes,” Dave agreed enthusiastically. “It’s a well-known fact that, for all passengers on long-distance vessels, like this one, it’s illegal to bring weapons and certain drugs through customs control. This is primarily for commercial reasons, as they were available to buy on board and taxed quite highly.

“My personal experimentation has shown that it’s not entirely impossible but the bribes tend to be larger than the profits a person can turn from the amount of controlled substances I can fit in someone else’s anal-cavity. The problem is compounded when the object is a Samurai-sword!”

“What about identity?” Lynch asked. “How do you confirm it? How do you stop the wrong people coming aboard?”

“Well, to be fair, most of our security is focused on stopping people from escaping once the doors are closed,” Dave said. “We are, after all, discussing the security of a vessel which allowed me on board and left me in a position of authority for seven years.”

Lynch allowed himself the tiniest of smiles. “Do you keep a record of who comes aboard?”

“I can certainly find that out for you!” Rob suggested.

“Good man,” Lynch told him. “Why don’t you do that now while we continue the tour with this fine young crewman?”

“Sir?” Rob looked at Dave and then back to the officer. He looked at Dave and back once more. Then he looked at Dave again. “You want this information now? Right now?” he asked nervously.

“Yes.” Lynch wasn’t the kind of man who was likely to have been widely known for his patience. Rob looked at Dave once more and then headed off to find a communication relay so he could do what he’d been told to do. His conscience was nagging at him. The possible repercussions of leaving Dave in charge were quite literally staggering and his mind balked at the prospect of considering how bad things might get.

“Where to now?”

“Well,” Dave shrugged with disinterest. “We’re still in engineering, so there’s a growing danger of falling asleep from boredom. I could show you security if you like. The detention cells are on the next level up. It’s an area I’ve seen before once or twice.”

“Why not?” Officer Lynch agreed. “It might be very informative. Don’t you think so, Mr Carver?”

“Very informative,” said Mr Carver.

“Since you’re interested in security, perhaps I could offer you fine gentlemen some controlled-substances of a lower quality, and suspiciously higher price, than those available in the gift-shop?” Dave suggested obviously.

Officer Lynch looked both surprised and a little confused. He said simply, “Not right now, thank you. Perhaps just the security department for now!”

“Sure!” Dave agreed happily. “After that, I could show you the main kitchen. With three kettles and four microwave ovens, they have some of the most advanced technology on the entire ship.”

Officer Lynch seemed oddly fascinated with the details of the escape hatches. Every deck had several small openings which led to an emergency escape vehicle capable of holding ten personnel. In theory, there were enough for every man, woman and child to escape, but, in practice, most were located around the more expensive accommodation and in, the event of an emergency, the lift systems were designed to automatically shut down.

Of course, the company wasn't entirely callous in this regard. Emergency survival suits were supplied around all social areas and these were theoretically suitable for keeping a human alive for up to four hours. Unlike the escape pods, they had no automatic entertainment apparatus, but there was a coin-operated system on the forearm which could let you listen to a variety of contemporary music while you waited for rescue, or, more likely, asphyxiation. If all else failed, then a third option was available in the form of a partial refund of the ticket price.

“Escape pods have built-in retractable bunks, a wide variety of music, video files and pretty decent ration packs.” Dave described the pods like a man impressed with every detail. “Also, the fronts have windows so you can see out but nobody aboard the ship can see in.”

“You seem fairly well appraised with the operation of the ship's emergency escape equipment,” Lynch noted with not just a hint of surprise.

Dave rubbed his hand along the access panel lovingly. “Oh yeah. I've had a few dates in these things. They're the perfect way to

get away from a room-mate who does nothing but obsess over his horrible life choices and into the arms of a beautiful woman of poor moral-fiber, and who probably thinks you're going to call her in the morning."

"I take it the other gentleman is your room-mate?" Lynch afforded him a wry smile.

"Yeah!" Dave agreed, wondering briefly how he'd drawn that conclusion. "I meant other room-mates, though, ones I've had before. You don't think he's going to end up like that as well, do you?"

"I think there's a possibility that you don't entirely bring out the best in people," Lynch told him diplomatically.

"You got that right!" Dave laughed. "My mother used to say I was like a living curse and that the day I was born a part of her soul died." He suddenly stopped laughing.

Rob rounded the corridor and walked up to the group as quickly as he could. "I have your information," he gasped through heavy, ragged breaths. "I had to go to the control deck to get it. I had to go through 17 different security protocols to get in, so I apologise that it took me so long."

"Excellent work, young man," Lynch told him with distinct undertones of condescension.

"Did you meet Big P?" Dave asked.

"Ummm," Rob mumbled and shook his head, waving his hand for him to stop talking.

"Yeah," Dave turned to the officers. "You go through five doors, three checkpoints, you're bio-scanned for weapons, held in a stasis chamber while you're background-checked, you're decontaminated and then all ambient magnetic fields are polarised.

“Then you finally get inside and it’s all run by a giant Rastafarian called ‘Big P’ that smokes hash all day and tells you all he knows about in life is steering towards the light.”

“Is this true?” Lynch glared at Rob disarmingly.

“Not entirely,” Rob assured them with an awkward smile. “He said his philosophy in life was that getting down is the only way up. He wouldn’t give me any information until I told him a philosophical truth.”

“What did you tell him?” Dave grinned.

“I don’t think that now is really the time,” Rob said, glaring back at him “Perhaps later.”

“I’m also curious, young man,” Lynch told him. “Please share.”

“I told him there are people in life who only exist to test your ability not to kill them.”

“That’s deep, man!” Dave told him.

“My information?” Lynch aimed the question at Rob.

“Yes. OK! Everyone who comes aboard is bio-metrically scanned and compared with their records. The logs are kept for three years. We maintain a database of everyone who comes aboard during that time,” Rob told him. “The ship automatically follows the biometric frequencies in case of emergency, so we know where everyone is at all times, even though it’s totally illegal to do so.”

“Excellent,” Lynch almost smiled. “You two boys are doing a wonderful job.”

Rob broke into a relieved smile.

“You know, it’s about this time of day I like to slink off from doing something productive and get down to the crew lounge for something to eat and a couple of bags of beer,” Dave told them.

“Perhaps I could invite you important looking gentlemen along to pay for us?”

“Perhaps another time,” Lynch told him.

“And perhaps not,” Carver added grimly.

“There are a few more things I’d like to see, actually,” Lynch said, as he cast a knowing glance at his colleague. “I’d still like to visit the security section. I’d like to check out the department responsible for the safety and security of the passengers, meet the team who enforce stellar law and liaise with planetary enforcement.”

“That might be difficult.” Dave checked his watch. “Bernard usually likes to get a few hours of sleep before lunch. I’m not sure if we’ll catch him.”

“Bernard?” Lynch sounded surprised.

“Yeah,” Dave nodded. “You can’t blame him. He’s not a young man any more. I think it all gets a bit much for him.”

Rob stared at his bowl of macaroni. “Well, that was an unmitigated disaster.”

“What was?” Dave looked up with uncharacteristic interest.

“What did they put in your pasta? I asked for fish, I swear to the gods of beer and shuttle-racing.”

“I meant the tour,” Rob scowled at him accusingly.

“What tour?” Dave shrugged.

“The one you ruined! You made the whole ship look like it’s run by an incompetent bunch of completely disorganised fools.”

Dave opened his mouth to speak and stopped himself. He raised an eyebrow quizzically and gestured around the crew lounge at the other staff.

“I know...” Rob sighed and poked his pasta with a fork. “I was just hoping it would go well. I don’t want to spend my whole

time here as a waiter. I thought that this might lead to better things, a more interesting job maybe.”

“Rob...” Dave began. His voice changed: his demeanour became more serious as he leant forward to his depressed-looking room-mate. “There are no opportunities. You’re not a human being that’s going to be rewarded for your successes in this place. This is a closed community and it runs on people’s arrogance and stupidity. You can let that crush your spirit for a year while you deliver endless plates of crap or you can learn to deal with it.”

Rob shrugged dejectedly, “Deal with it?”

“Don’t let it get to you. Treat it as what it is. It’s not a job. You’re not a human place-holder for a mundane task that doesn’t need doing. You’re a person who’s using this ship as a way to see the galaxy. You’ll leave this terrible ship to finish your studies and you’ll look back and laugh. Make sure you do things in that year that give you something to look back and laugh about.”

Rob looked at him in surprise: “Let me buy you a bottle of the good beer.”

Dave smiled. “I think that was worth two but I will let you have one of them!”

Officer Lynch lounged back in the relative opulence of a huge sofa in his exclusive quarters. His junior colleague sat down next to a window where stars in the distance tumbled lazily by.

“Well,” he said, “what did you think of the tour?”

He frowned and poked his dark glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. “I think this ship is run by an incompetent bunch of completely disorganised fools.

“I think it was a complete waste of time, Sir.”

“I think you’re right.” He nodded thoughtfully and gave a little smile. “However, we now know that communication off the ship can only be done through a single office, the shuttle bays can only be accessed by certain key personnel, the escape pods can’t be activated without authorisation from the control deck, we can track anyone through the ship’s internal scanners and security poses no threat to anyone whatsoever.”

Officer Carver smiled back as it occurred to him that his senior partner was quite correct, as usual.

“Also, if you kept your wits about you, we’re now familiar with the layout of the ship.”

“We are, Sir,” he acceded. “I admit I didn’t think of it in those terms.”

Lynch grinned and lounged back easily in his chair. “You’ll learn. Now, while you’re digesting today’s lesson, why don’t you jam external communication from the SCAR office. Then I think we’ll settle down for a spot of late lunch.”

“Yes, Sir,” Carver snapped back and nodded, unpacking a complicated-looking item from a metal briefcase. “Consider it done.”

Dave furrowed his brow curiously. “What have I done wrong this time?” He’d largely been behaving himself lately and, while he was hardly a positive role model for anything more sophisticated than a mentally-incompetent chimpanzee, he hadn’t done anything extraordinarily bad that he could remember.

That was a very different thing from his not doing anything extraordinarily bad, and the subtlety of the distinction had not escaped him, and certainly wouldn’t have escaped the Captain.

She fixed him with a disarming stare. “Contrary to what you might think, and what the records of your visits to my office seem to suggest, punishment for your imaginative transgressions isn’t the only function I perform on this ship. I’m also concerned with the prevention of bad behaviour, especially in your case. In fact, prevention of your bad behaviour is why I called you here today.”

“Are you going to have me killed?” he asked suspiciously and not entirely unreasonably.

“No, Mr Brown,” she sighed wearily. “I’m not having you killed, as much as I’d very much like to, and even though the petition to do so collected nearly 4000 votes, six times the number of staff we have aboard at any one time.”

“Then I don’t quite follow...” he shrugged, not quite following.

“This vessel is now parked in orbit around the planet Cirrus 3.” She told him what he already knew and he was starting to get nervous, as realisation pricked at him as a conscience might have, if the stories about such things were actually true. “Cirrus 3 is one of the founding colonies in Alliance space. They are a dignified people with a rich culture.”

“And strip-bars. Lots of strip-bars, where girls with exceptionally poorly defined moral fabric remove their clothes for

the amusement of the discerning gentleman,” Dave told her. She frowned. He frowned. He shut up. She didn’t.

“According to the rota, you qualify for shore leave. The shuttle bus leaves for the planet surface in two hours,” she said and scowled at him. “I believe you’re planning to go down there. I take it that my information is correct?”

“I have been looking forward to it,” he told her with a certain grimness that belied his usually severe lack of grimness.

“I don’t want a repeat of last time,” she told him firmly. He breathed a sigh of relief that it didn’t appear that she was exercising her right to cancel his leave. “Consider this a warning. If I find out that you’ve been arrested urinating on a monument, insulting a member of the high council or had intimate relations with the daughter of a high ranking law enforcement officer, who then decides to hunt you down and kill you, I will not be happy.”

He smiled and shrugged to her. “Do you really think I’m stupid enough to do that again?”

“Yes!” she told him bluntly and without a hint of sarcasm. “And I had better be wrong about that. If I’m not, I’ll have you confined to your quarters for the duration of this tour and I’ll have your quarters moved to the broom closet on the central human waste recycling deck.”

“That’s probably more of a punishment for Rob,” Dave told her earnestly, or at least as close as he could get. “I promise to basically behave myself. Mostly.”

“You had better,” she told him, pointing accusingly.

“Can I go?” he shrugged.

“Get out,” she told him. “Dave. Behave yourself. Your future on this vessel depends on what happens down on that planet.”

Chapter 5

What happens down on that planet

A happy version of Dave breezed into their quarters. “The Captain didn’t want to tell me off. She just wanted to warn me to behave myself.”

“That’s a first,” Rob replied. “Are you planning to behave?”

Dave smiled and shook his head as if such a suggestion was ridiculous, or as if he was trying to dislodge a particularly clingy kind of hat. He didn’t bother actually vocalising an answer, since such a ridiculous question didn’t seem fit to warrant one.

“Well, I wish I was joining you,” Rob sighed. “With everyone off, I’ve managed to land a double shift on the upper cafe. Breakfast through to dinner.”

“That sounds like a very special kind of hell, but be careful what you wish for,” Dave grinned at him. Rob nodded weakly in agreement.

“It’s a good job you don’t have to do it. You’re coming with me, of course.”

“I wish I could,” Rob told him.

“Seriously,” he said, as if he was telling the truth “Call your supervisor. The new boy always gets to visit the planet. It’s an unwritten rule or something. Clearly, when it comes to rules, I’m not the man to come to with questions, but, in any case, my grasp of the concept is firm.”

“I checked yesterday morning. The rota was set in stone.” He shrugged and looked at Dave suspiciously.

It had certainly seemed to be literally set in stone, since the ship’s central computer core was a gigantic chunk of what had used

to be 'Stone-Henge' which had had to be demolished when someone realised, quite correctly, that large, straight objects erected by men were really quite offensive when you had nothing better to do than stop and think about it.

"You're still not quite used to life on a space ship. Nothing is set in stone. Nothing is particularly important enough to be set in anything much softer than stone, when it gets right down to it." Dave told him. "Get out your finest civilian clothes, that haven't been borrowed by someone more handsome and charismatic than you are, and get ready for a day on Cirrus 3."

"I'm going to call my supervisor to tell her that you're trying to play a prank on me and that nobody is stupid enough to believe you." Rob regarded him as if he was something that should never be entirely trusted, which was, of course, precisely what he was. The smell, lack of style, and behaviour befitting a rabid-dog enjoying a particularly unpleasant trip from a particularly potent hallucinogenic compound, was something of a bonus.

"You do that. I'm going to get something to eat at the lounge and work on my idea for a motorcycle defence cannon. Meet me there."

"A what?" Rob struggled to make sense of these words, which didn't seem particularly concerned with making any.

"Yes, I've had this idea for a cannon machine that you fit to the front of your motorcycle to defend you against the Swiss. It fires a kind of very cold water, so cold that the water is as hard as concrete. You would never have to look for ammunition or ever have to hunt around for a toilet again. My hope is that it could be used to make motorcycling through Switzerland safe enough to be attempted without having the motorcycle secured inside a tank and concealed with holographic camouflage."

Rob shook his head as a fresh wave of utter confusion washed over him, “What?”

“I know. It’s genius, right?” Dave enthused.

“Dave, what is a motorcycle?” Rob felt a second wave, but this one edged more toward disdain.

Dave huffed. “That is where the idea falls down, of course.”

Phil Bothan sat in the increasingly familiar SCAR office. He struggled to maintain a polite façade as his patience was becoming a thing of the past, and increasingly a thing of a quite distant past.

The same young girl gave him much the same look. “No,” she said, saying much the same thing in much the same way. “We’ve got channels but there’s too much corruption. We can’t get a line out at the moment.

“I am sorry. You’re welcome to wait.” She gestured to a pile of very worn-out magazines.

“But we’re in orbit!” he said angrily. He took a deep breath and calmed himself. “You told me that, once we stopped moving, we should get a clear communication signal.”

“I know,” she said apologetically, without sounding as if she really meant it, or didn’t mean it, or really cared very much either way. “Maybe the thing is broken?” she shrugged.

“What thing?” He asked the perfectly reasonable question and she simply shrugged again while a little smile flashed over her lips.

He closed his eyes and tried to control his temper. “Is this temporary or are we not likely to get a signal all the time we’re in orbit?”

She shrugged her reply yet again.

“You don’t know?” Obviously!

She shook her head and shrugged apologetically again.

“What do you suggest?” he sighed. “Should I write a message on paper and stick it on a pigeon?”

She blinked at him and obviously hadn't got a clue what he was talking about.

“What about the planet, Cirrus 3? Do you think I could make a call from there?” he asked, rubbing his temples in weary exasperation.

She nodded and smiled. “Probably. So long as there's no gravitational discharges. I think it's probably best to stay away from those anyway, especially if you're wearing a skirt.”

“You've been very helpful, as always.” he told her sarcastically.

“No problem. Glad we could help.”

Big P inhaled the final drag on a highly questionable cigarette that was only a little smaller than his massive fingers, and then discarded the remains in a waste-paper bin, which had caught fire fourteen times in the last three months.

In front of him was a vast display screen showing the view directly ahead of him. Usually little more than the blackness of space with stars streaking by, it now showed the majestic sight of the arc of a lush green world with a pair of gigantic stars lighting the horizon. He stared at the screen and gave the vista an impressed, satisfied nod.

He reached out to pat his pet brick. It was just a single brick he'd rescued from keeping open a toilet door, somewhere in Istanbul. He'd recognised that fine, musty smell, the unmistakable aroma of computer resin the first time he'd seen it.

Someone, at some point, had painted the brick, turning it into a potentially powerful computer. It had nothing connected to it. It had never been part of a larger wall, never programmed; just a lone brick

with the capacity for thought that had then been left to evolve its own mind. What might be going on inside it? What dreams, what imaginings, could be living inside the mind of that one, lost, single brick?

It was a single thing inside which a whole universe could be dreamed. It was a thing without limits, perhaps a god inside its own mind. Big P had spent many long evenings simply staring at the brick, pondering what might be going on in the life it dreamed for itself. While he didn't know, the possibilities were truly boundless.

Now, the brick no longer held open a door. Now, it sat on the control panel of a space-ship with one of the most spectacular views in the galaxy right up there in front of it. Its existence was unlimited now in two universes, he mused to himself. With that thought, he was truly, deeply moved to roll another cigarette.

A green light flashed on his console. He pressed it and the main screen jumped to the image of the chief engineer, his face beaded with sweat and his clothes uncharacteristically slightly dirty, marked with the occasional oily stain.

“Dylon!” the chief began, catching his breath.

Big P held up a hand for him to stop and shook his head solemnly, chuckling softly to himself in his huge, deep baritone voice.

“Mr Humphries...” the engineer tried again.

Once more he shook his head. He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the console lazily.

“You know my name, Goldberg,” he told him with a thick Jamaican accent. “Don't be using my given name: use my proper title.”

“Big P,” the engineer sighed, huffing in annoyance. “Are you detecting an instability in the gyroscopic alignment plane?”

“I’m detecting a major instability in your gyroscopic alignment plane,” he told him with a wide grin that showed off several gold teeth.

“I’m serious.” Chief Engineer Goldberg rubbed his temples in exasperation, leaving slightly dark oily imprints on his skin. “If the instability persists, our orbit could decay by 3% in the next five hours.”

“No!” Big P laughed a deep, heavy, sarcastic laugh. “3%? Whatever we gonna do, man?”

“This is serious,” Goldberg snapped angrily.

“Ah ah ah!” he said, as he shook a huge finger at the screen in admonishment, and the heavy gold bands he wore clinked together making a dull ringing sound.

“This is serious, Mr Big P,” Goldberg grumbled, as he closed his eyes and sighed wearily.

“No it aint!” he shrugged. “A point four blast of thruster pack six for zero point five seconds will correct the decay, man. If I does nothing, the orbital decay won’t be critical for seventy nine hours. We’re leaving in twenty three.

“Why you even gotta bring this to me? I was already on this hours ago.”

“Big P,” Goldberg began, “I know you’ve probably got a navigational remedy plotted, but I want to flush the gyroscope, just in case.”

“Flush your gyroscope,” Big P told him and laughed once more, waving his hand at him.

“It takes both yours and my authorisation to do that. Can I take it that I have yours?” Goldberg asked.

“Tell me a philosophical truth and then me let you ‘fart’ your engines,” Big P grinned.

“Can you please take this seriously for once?” Goldberg frowned, as he furiously rubbed his temples.

“No.” He shook his huge head and his long black and grey dreadlocks bobbed behind his back behind the electronic brain augmentation device that had been grafted surgically into his skull.

“Philosophical truth?” Goldberg scratched his head. He was a man of science, not of ideas. Philosophical truths were figments of imagination to him, raindrops in the ocean. “I suppose that space is the final frontier for man to overcome.”

Big P laughed heartily. “We work in space, man. We’re driving a flying hotel to the edge of the galaxy. Space ain’t no frontier for us no more.”

“Mr P,” Goldberg began in exasperation.

“Fart your engines and leave me in peace!” The screen flashed off and Big P shook his head at the engineer. Both of them were men of science in one way or another. The difference was that, for the engineer, it was a cage; and for Big P, the science was simply the key that had set him free.

Rob took a seat next to Dave in the lounge and regarded him even more suspiciously than before.

“What are you doing?” he asked, as Dave had an uncharacteristically focused expression as he read through some complex-looking material on a portable pad.

“Revising,” Dave told him simply. “I have an exam coming up in a few days. I like to be prepared.”

“An exam? You?” Rob made no attempt to disguise his surprise.

“Well, a psychological evaluation,” he said.

“You don’t revise for an evaluation. You just tell the truth and they tell you if anything’s wrong inside your head,” Rob told him. This all rather suggested that there was, of course.

“You have to do everything the boring way,” Dave sighed at him. “It’s well established that there’s something not quite right inside my head, but medical science has never been able to define quite exactly what that is. You see, every time I have one, I brief myself on the symptoms of a completely different mental illness so the diagnosis is completely different from the time before. This time I’m going to have a paranoid delusion that my entire life is actually a completely fictional story that someone else is reading. Cool, huh?”

“Why would you do that? Why would anyone do that?” Rob could find no sense in any of this.

“Because there’s something wrong inside my head, Rob. Are you not following this correctly? It’s not that complicated really. Maybe there’s something wrong inside your head?” he suggested.

Rob simply shook his head and decided there was no sense to find. “You were right about today. They don’t need me for my shift. My supervisor said I can go. She said I’m free for the rest of the week.”

“Good!” Dave grinned and eyed up Rob’s dull and unadventurous clothing that looked as though someone had stolen it from an annoying older uncle that nobody liked leaving their children alone around.

With a sigh, he conceded to himself that they would have to do. It was unlikely they would survive unscathed in any case, much like Rob himself.

“Have you ever been on a drop-pod shuttle before? They’re completely safe and nothing ever goes wrong. It’s quite an

experience, you see, although I could say much the same thing about being beaten to death.”

“I’ve heard about them. I’ve read that they’re not very pleasant but that’s all part of the experience, right? I hear they’re actually pretty safe with an almost flawless safety record.”

“Sure,” Dave said sarcastically. “What could possibly go wrong with making planet-fall on a vessel with no means of propulsion, no landing gear and no life-support? It’s good that you’re focusing on the positive and not dwelling on the untold horrors that await you.” He frowned and added, “Horrors that await us all.”

“You don’t sound like you’re particularly looking forward to it.”

“Nothing worthwhile is ever simple,” Dave told him uneasily. “Down on that planet are glasses of beer that taste like the ingredients with which the beer was meant to be made; bars with entertainment befitting discerning gentlemen; and food that isn’t recycled from food that has already been eaten and recycled a dozen times before.

“There is grass to walk on and fruit to eat; and it’s possible to do it the wrong way round without being violently sick. The sky is the right colour, and in the right place, and doesn’t turn off when you close the door. I think the sacrifice of a drop-pod is a small one for all of that.”

Dave shuddered. A small sacrifice it may be, but it was indeed not something he was looking forward to. His convincing arguments were mostly made for his own benefit, although an argument from him wasn’t particularly convincing, especially to himself, who was more keenly aware of how unreliable he was than most people. Various parts of his brain pointed out these various details until it all just went quiet, except for the suspiciously loud noise of cats singing.

Rob just assumed he was joking, or more likely, trying to unsettle him. He tried to ignore all this.

“Have you ever heard the kind of screams that you know will haunt your nightmares for the rest of your life? The kind of nightmares you have while still wide awake? The kind of awake where you can feel other people’s eyes drilling into your awareness? The kind of awareness where you can feel the horrified screams of the dead?” Dave asked, quite uncharacteristically casually.

“No. Why?”

“No real reason,” he muttered.

The guest-shuttles were fully booked and expensive at any rate. Phil chewed his lip thoughtfully. The travel office aboard the ship booked organised tours and excursions to the various planets they stopped at, a very awkward gentleman with oddly empty eyes told him.

He seemed strangely unfocused and then utterly focused a moment later and never quite on the right thing. He had a moustache of sorts, a patchy thing that stretched beyond the normal confines of his face. He wore a fedora with a band around it that was far too brightly coloured. It didn’t seem to work properly, since it was slightly too small for his head—and also because it was a fedora.

“I can get you a nice trip to the western hemisphere to see the flying Fleshredders,” the man suggested euphorically, holding up a brochure with a picture of a ferocious monstrosity ravaging a massive carcass on the front cover. “They tie a space-cow to the front of the anti-gravity shuttle so they come to you. It’s quite a thing to see, I imagine.” He frowned to himself, his attention wandering off to who-knew-where. “I always wondered why they called them Fleshredders since they’re mostly blue.

“Also bluetonium is mostly red. We live in confusing times.”

Phil took another look at the brochure. The picture of the creature tearing the head from an animal with a single bite would haunt his nightmares, and the thought of having that happening right outside his window was not an experience he was terribly keen to endure. The inadequacy of the wire mesh window, that seemed to be held closed only by a simple latch mechanism, had clearly not gone unnoticed by the passengers who were huddled and squeezed as far on the other side of the shuttle as it was physically possible to get. The monstrosity also had opposable thumbs, and appeared to have its eyes fixed on two young, crying children inside.

Phil gulped and shook his head, as the euphoria continued for the fedora-wearing man, who was now making animal noises, staring up the ceiling and giggling. He stopped suddenly and stared fixedly back to Phil, before averting his eyes downwards nervously.

“I can, of course, just create the experience for you and inject it into your brain with a really big needle,” he suggested. Of course, it wasn’t really a big needle, which would have been barbaric: the device was actually a really big drill.

The entertainment industry had realised, many centuries before, that it needed to move along with the times. While they were still trying to sell disks with movies on them, the audience had realised that they could just download the thing with less hassle and without paying anyone anything.

The industry had responded by having a bit of a tantrum like a petulant, spoiled child and demanded something be done to protect their profits, instead of a more mature response such as making better films, so that people actually wanted to go to the cinema to see them.

To cut costs, content was entirely generated digitally, which reduced production costs down to nothing. The principal place where

the digital content was produced was a disused studio building in a city that used to be Hollywood, in a country that used to be America.

The walls were treated with computer paint to turn the building into a gigantic super-computer. Then the studio busied itself creating the experience of having been entertained, so that subtle memories could be delicately implanted in people's soft cerebral tissue by sticking an electric drill into it.

It was much quicker and more efficient than actually being entertained, although physical recovery times did vary quite drastically, depending on the skill of the operator and the size of the brick that was controlling the drill. Largely, the technology was judged to be a success, since the minor brain damage of having a drill repeatedly smashed into your skull was less than the net damage of watching a large number of Hollywood movies.

The same system was also applied to music and books. This had become largely a necessity since the early part of the millennium, when digital media had begun to catch on and huge amounts of poorly-written science fiction books with incredibly rude, poorly-conceived and highly offensive main characters were suddenly freely available for the price of a cup of really good coffee – sometimes even free! The price of the experience of a really bad coffee remained oddly quite expensive and many people just preferred to drill a hole in their own skull and be done with it.

In a rare business move that actually showed someone hadn't had too many drills smashed into their skull, the studio was rented out as storage and actually showed a net profit just for the act of existing, further reducing the industry costs down below nothing.

The studio that produced entertainment content, currently in a town that used to be Hollywood, in a country that used to be

America, was now filled with a shallow pool of unprocessed faecal matter so, in many ways, nothing of note had really changed at all.

Phil explained wearily while the fedora-wearing man was off exploring his own little world: “I just want to get to the planet. I want to get to a city or a large town. Anywhere I can place a call from. I don’t really care about going on a tour.”

“We have an office here,” the assistant beamed, a happy, if slightly lop-sided smile. “It’s called the SCAR office. It’s right down the hall. Have you tried them?”

“No!” Phil shouted, suddenly plunging the office into silence while his temper seethed and his face reddened. “I just need to get to the surface. Please.”

“We have four buses, but they’re all full. I just remembered.” The assistant backed away and regarded him warily. “You need to book at least a day in advance to get a seat and even then it probably wouldn’t be a good seat. It might be near the toilets, perhaps. Maybe no Fleshredders for you?”

“Is there any other way for me to travel to the planet?” Phil growled through gritted teeth.

The assistant shook his head, never taking his eyes off of his angry customer, or at least never taking them off his angry customer’s shoes. “There’s only the drop-pods the crew use.”

“How do I get on a drop-pod?”

Drop-pods were indeed an unpleasant concept and few people got aboard one with a smile on their face; fewer still left that way. They were little more than air-tight metal tubes, with redundant thrusters to keep them stable and a crude set of electronic beacons to signal the surface. Once the passengers were aboard, the tube was jettisoned into space towards a planet. The space-port would latch onto the pod

with a tractor-beam and create a gravity-neutral tunnel with an electro-magnetic field.

In theory, the pod would drift gently down to the surface and make an effortless landing on a soft cushion of anti-gravitons at a parking depot several minutes later. This was precisely what never happened.

In the safety-cartoon that was played as the vehicle descended, all the passengers smiled to one another and had discussions about the weather. In practice, the passengers cried for their mothers and had discussions about theories concerning an after-life; or vomited until the blood vessels in their throats ruptured and they began heaving up their own innards. In fact, drop-pods had become a strong religious symbol, after so many of their occupants had found comfort in various gods while aboard one of them.

The gravity field was necessarily pulsed so the ride would be anything but smooth; and the lack of a proper life-support system meant the pod would become extremely cold when jettisoned and extremely hot during the descent. The internal air supply was considered to be sufficient for the few minutes during which they plummeted out of control towards the ground, if the people on board breathed normally. Unfortunately, the experience was more conducive to blind panic and the air was, consequently, frequently stale by the time the pod landed and generally had the unmistakable aroma of bodily waste.

The safety cartoon mentioned that passengers should move quietly toward the emergency exit in the case of an uncontrolled landing. There was only one hatch at the rear of the pod and, if the gravitational field should fail, it was likely to be buried a kilometre underground, several fractions of a second before the failure could even be detected. In the unlikely event of a failure, the passengers

were therefore invited to make a formal complaint to the company in writing and each case would be judged on its own merits.

“Drop-pods!” Dave grumbled and frowned at the entrance. The crewmen who were free to enjoy a brief respite from the ship looked at one another dubiously as they stepped on board.

“It won’t be that bad,” said Rob and slapped him on the back playfully.

“Not for you,” Dave shuddered noticeably. “There’s a good chance this might turn your hair white. This might end up being the best thing that ever happened to you.”

“Stop being such a baby,” Rob laughed. “You don’t see anyone else making a fuss.”

The people strapped themselves in with complicated webbing harnesses and looked at them as they came aboard. The faces of the crew showed expressions of abject terror and Rob slowly began to feel a little nervous himself, or at least highly unsettled.

“Take your seats, gentlemen.” The Pod Commander gestured to vacant chairs just inside the door. He handed Dave a terminal and he signed his name and passed it to Rob.

“What’s this?” Rob frowned, as he struggled with the webbing.

“It’s a disclaimer,” Dave grimaced. “They make you sign it in case anything happens. Are we filling you with an abundance of confidence yet?”

He muttered something to himself and handed it back to the Commander. “It can’t be that bad. I mean, you’re here. You must have made hundreds of drops on this thing, right?”

“No!” the Commander laughed openly. “Are you kidding me? I just make you sign the form and then I go back aboard and press the

launch button. I'm not crazy enough to ride on one of these. I get paid well enough to take the bus."

"That's very helpful, thanks," Rob grumbled, scowling up at him, still fumbling with the webbing but with a greatly renewed sense of urgency.

"No problem. Have fun on your way down," he said sarcastically. "I hope you don't die!" He slammed the door shut and it closed with a metallic crash, before the sound of bolts sealing on the outside clattered through the hull.

"OK!" Rob huffed loudly. "I officially don't like this."

Suddenly, and without warning, there was a rush of movement and they were thrown back into their seats. The force seemed to build. Rob couldn't move his arms or his legs. The G-force pinned him back forcefully in the chair with such pressure that he momentarily couldn't close his mouth and started choking on his own tongue as it was rammed backwards into his throat. Then, slowly, he became aware of his weightlessness and his world settled into a sense of peacefully reassuring calm. The pod moved slightly, settling in the approach vector with more metallic clattering and groaning from all around.

"Why don't these things have windows?" Rob mumbled, his voice thin and weedy.

"The same reason I'm not going to bother answering your question," he told him. "For once, I will avoid saying something incredibly rude, poorly-conceived and highly offensive. Just for once."

"It's because I don't want to know, right?"

Dave nodded.

The pod jolted suddenly and lurched to the side. Then, a few seconds later, it lurched to the other side, spun around full circle and

lurched back again with a disconcerting bang. Then the shaking began in earnest. Left and right, forwards, backwards, up and down. It flipped over and into free-fall head first.

Amongst the blood-curdling screams, somewhere towards the front was the unmistakable sound of someone vomiting and the anguished cries of whoever was seated opposite in the temporarily weightless environment.

“This isn’t so bad really,” Rob tried to convince himself, and failed miserably. Sweat pooled on his brow: his hands were awash, as he clung desperately to the hand-rail; and his chest was tight as his heart pounded away inside of him.

“You’re the kind of guy that can deal with anything,” Dave shouted at him amidst the chaos. “You were born with ginger hair. You’ve grown up dealing with the worst that life can throw at you.”

“Ginger jokes, I thought we were all bored with those!” Rob cried out, the last few words vanishing in a chorus of screams from the other passengers.

“That was earlier and this isn’t chronological!” Dave shouted in reply. “I’ve lost track, to be honest.”

The pod seemed like a lift that had had its wires cut. It seemed to speed up, wrenching the passengers upwards and then it slowed down again, forcing them back down. The sensation of moving seemed to abate with a discernible groaning of metal, as the panels were violently pulled around and the hull flexed accordingly, threatening to tear itself apart.

“I think we’ve stopped,” Rob said with notable relief. Then the pod lurched once more, accompanied by more vomiting and screaming, as it began to move downwards with the combined force of the planet’s gravity and the artificial pull of the surface technology.

He screamed. He screamed for all he was worth.

“Well, that wasn’t so bad,” Rob said, as they stepped out of the parking depot.

“Not for you,” Dave shrugged. “It’s a good job I wasn’t sitting directly opposite you, though.”

“Yeah,” Rob agreed, as he turned to him and bit his lip anxiously. “She seemed like a really nice lady. I feel really bad for her.”

“I think we all need to focus on the positive aspect of all this, which is that it wasn’t me that it happened to,” Dave told him. “I can’t imagine how she must have felt with your breakfast erupting towards her in a zero-G environment.

“Knowing that a stream of slow-moving, undigested pasta is flying directly for you, like a foul-smelling missile, and not being able to move because you’re strapped in for your own safety, must have made her day extra-special.”

“Wasn’t she the chief passenger liaison officer, or something?”

“You know, I think she was,” Dave said as he grinned.

“Luckily, she signed a disclaimer and I think they have showers available.”

“So, what now?” Rob looked around the depot. The sky above them was blue, the air was fresh and there was a gentle background hum of human activity. He breathed in deeply and relished the feeling of solid ground beneath him. He hadn’t realised how much he had missed it.

“Up to you, I guess,” Dave told him.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I am kind of hungry.”

Birds were flying high in the cloudless blue sky and were singing cheerfully, until giant flying lizards grabbed them with their talons

and ripped them to shreds. A cat walked lightly along the path on six legs and ate a rock lying in the gutter.

“It’s the little things that make a difference, isn’t it?” Dave sat back lazily in the little cafe as the world passed them by. They had chosen a table outside beneath the suns, in a little backstreet away from the centre of town. The street had the appearance of an old European village, somehow quaint and antiquated, despite being less than half a century old and built from prefabricated parts, even if they were prefabricated parts designed to look like an old European village.

“I like it here,” Rob mumbled, as he sipped at an ice-cold glass of something green and bubbling. It tasted like sunshine, albeit sunshine on ‘Ricktus 5’ where the sun really was green and bubbling.

“Wait for this evening,” Dave told him. “This town comes alive after dark. Bars, and the girls in them, compete for your business, each more accommodating than the next.”

“If I say I don’t like the kind of bars where women take their clothes off, you’ll make endless jokes that question my sexuality, won’t you?”

“I will, Rob,” Dave said, with the certainty of a man eating a curry and who knew that tomorrow morning was going to be moderately unpleasant.

Rob picked up the menu and perused it leisurely. His eyes soon fixed on an attention-grabbing pronouncement in the top right corner. Trying to suppress a laugh, he said, “Check this out. You wouldn’t see this in the Upper Café!”

Dave leaned over to read the menu more closely, “We proudly serve vegetarians.’ You probably don’t want to order that,” he told him.

“What do you mean?” said Rob, tilting his head quizzically. “I imagine the vegetarian steak’s going to be fantastic!”

“It’s not what you think,” Dave told him more forcefully.

“But I like vegetarian food,” Rob huffed indignantly.

“The law on cannibalism is more relaxed here, you see.

Vegetarians can be cloned, you see,” Dave told him.

“Oh,” said Rob, as he was hit with a fresh wave of disgust.

“Oh...”

He caught the waiter’s eye and held up the menu. The waiter came over to write down their order with a pencil on actual traditional hemp paper. Rob smiled at the wonderfully arcane scene. “I’d like a snorl burger with extra bleugg.”

“Excellent,” he said in a slightly odd accent. “And for you, sir?”

“I think the Grollgim. Can you hold the Flumg snorkk and have a double tuymgle of denndik rogg? Can you do it with a side of Grrrag snotttud polorgag huuugg?”

“No problem, sir,” the waiter told him with a polite nod.

“Odd choice,” Rob said.

“I’m on a diet,” Dave told him with a shrug.

Rob nodded that that now made perfect sense. He held up his glass of bubbling green liquid and took another sip. “So this has alcohol in it? It doesn’t seem to be very strong.”

“You’re drinking it all wrong,” Dave told him and picked up his own. “You have to drink the whole thing down in one single gulp. Think of it as a delicious gunshot to the head and treat it accordingly.”

“OK.” Rob held up his glass. “What shall we drink to?”

“Getting drunk!”

Officer Lynch took another sip of coffee. It wasn't the kind of coffee that came out of the dispenser on the wall. This was the kind of coffee that came out of a bean, although the bean had, in turn, come out of a different dispenser in a different wall. He closed his eyes and savoured the wonderfully rich flavour.

"How much do you think this would all cost if we actually had to pay for it?" he asked rhetorically. "Two hundred, three hundred credits a day?"

"I don't know, sir." Officer Carver demonstrated his usual level of usefulness, in which terms he could genuinely be replaced with a full-sized picture of Lynch's mother on a bad day.

"Have you tried the coffee? It tastes like coffee. The milk must have actually come out of some kind of cow." He allowed himself a tiny smile as he stared appreciatively at the cup.

"I have, sir," Carver agreed.

"And?" Lynch prompted.

He shrugged. "It's good coffee, sir."

He shook his head at the young officer. "You know, Carver, there's more to this job than mindlessly blundering around following orders. There's an art to what we do, an appreciation of the world around us.

"There's a reason I'll never be replaced with a robotic stick with a gun on it. It's the same reason that you very well could, and perhaps should, be."

"Sir?" Carver frowned.

"Put down your computer and appreciate something," Lynch told him, sniffing at his coffee and drawing the aroma deep into his chest.

"I'm not sure I follow you, sir..." He furrowed his brow curiously. "I'm just checking the calibration of the electro-magnetic

field to throw the gyroscope out of alignment as you told me. I'm not sure I could appreciate things much more than this."

"I mean put down the automated equipment and be a human for a moment."

Carver sat back from his instruments and looked around him. He picked up an apple from a bowl of fruit behind him and took a bite. He nodded in satisfaction and grunted simply, "It's good."

"How is it good, Mr Carver?"

"It's sweet, it's tasty," Carver said with a dismissive shrug, looking increasingly confused and disturbed by this line of activity.

"You can't make apples on board." Lynch sipped his coffee and allowed a teasing smile to cross his lips, one of smugness and superiority. "They can't be made in a recycler."

"They bring them aboard?" Carver frowned. He looked as if he began to suspect where this was going, since he was actually not the fool Lynch took him for, nor was Lynch the genius he supposed himself to be. "And they need to be fresh so they must bring them aboard every time they stop."

"And?" Lynch smirked.

"And we've cut off all lines of communications," Carver said as he smiled back. "We've given him no choice but to go down to the planet. He won't use the public channels as they're too easy for us to trace. He'll use the service routes."

"Good boy," Lynch told him. "Eat your apple and then we'll have a spot of lunch. After that we'll see which biometric signature is not accounted for and no matter what false identification this person is using, we'll have him identified."

"And then what, Sir?" Carver asked.

"Do you fancy a trip to the surface?" Lynch smiled cruelly. "We might have some situations to clean up, I expect."

Rob's head was spinning in a most pleasant way. Whatever the green stuff was, it had worked alarmingly well, but he was far too pleasantly spinning to concern himself with being alarmed at that exact moment. "I like it here," he managed to slur, forcing himself to sound as sober as possible, and managing to fail with resounding success.

"It's a nice colony," Dave told him thoughtfully. "It's one of the first three planets we colonised, even before the war. Most of the people who came here were from the science and research division, but it was so close to Earth that there really wasn't much to study.

"They thought they were going to come here and find the cures to all known diseases and solve all of Earth's problems. In the end, it was just like adding another lane on a fast road. It makes things slightly easier in the short term but then both lanes fill up again and you're exactly back where you started, only with slightly less space to build new roads."

"So it just became a second Earth?" Rob asked, slurring quite badly. He was OK with that. He didn't believe there was very much wrong with the first one.

"Except this one was full of suddenly very bored and disappointed scientists with access to advanced terraforming technology," Dave explained, his own slurring far more masterfully concealed.

"So they created this place? A highly specialised environment fit for humans." Rob looked around in satisfaction that the tiny, fragile human species could tame entire planets and create an environment for themselves out of whatever they found.

"They created a highly specialised menu!" Dave told him, the distinction being quite an important one. "This place has the tastiest animals anywhere in space and the booze is the best I've ever tasted,

which is actually high praise indeed, since I've tasted a lot of it, but less high when you also realise that I'm the sort of person who has tasted a lot of booze."

Rob laughed, nudging another glass of frothy green stuff.

"Yeah, it is good, but are we thinking of you as a person now?"

"It's not actually saying that much when you compare it to the alcohol in the outer colonies. On Patrienatal 4, they brew wine by pouring battery acid into artificial fruit juice. It actually tastes worse than it sounds."

"That's a mostly French colony isn't it?" Rob asked.

"Yes, it is," Dave agreed.

"So what now?" Rob took a deep breath and filled his lungs with the fresh, clean air.

"We need to find a monument to the original settlers. It's a majestic thing, made of black onyx and polished white marble. It depicts the first landing of the seed ships and shows the men overlooking the barren lands with nothing more than their tools and a dream," Dave told him, wistfully gesturing with his hands.

"That sounds cool. We're going sightseeing?" Rob asked.

"No!" Dave told him with a smile. "I need to take a shit."

Phil Bothan did not enjoy travelling by drop-pod but that was a surprise to nobody, since customer satisfaction was fairly low on the design requirements. He sat in the travel lounge with a really strong mug of black coffee and gently nursed his shattered nerves. His legs had failed him twice since exiting the pod, and his stomach was warning him that his bowels may soon follow suit. The colony seemed friendly, and, more importantly, it seemed organised. He was relatively confident that sending a message from there should be no

more difficult than it would be from Earth, a place where things mostly managed to make sense, without forcing them to do so.

The waitress came over to him along the counter. "Are you alright?" she asked sympathetically.

"I'm OK," he told her. He held out a hand that still shook slightly.

"Drop-pod?" she smiled knowingly.

He smiled back thinly and said, "How did you guess?"

"This might shock you, but you're not the first person we've had in here, white as a sheet and shaking like a leaf after being thrown into space inside one of those things," she told him with a wry smile.

"I have to go back on one of those things," he said, grimacing at the prospect.

"It's not as bad on the way back up, I hear," she said.

"Really?" he said optimistically. "You're just saying that to make me feel better, aren't you?"

"Yeah," she laughed. "Did it work?"

"A little bit," he admitted with a smile. "For now."

"Well, take your time, hun. No rush."

"Thanks," he mumbled. "Actually, I'm down here to get a sub-space communication home. Is there a relay office here?"

"Sure," she said and pointed into the space-port complex.

"There's one right down there. I'm sure they'll be able to help you."

"Brilliant!" he told her. "That's the best news I've heard all day."

"So what do you like to do after desecrating a national monument?" Rob smirked, as Dave came back from round the back of the statue,

still zipping up his flies and proudly smiling as if he'd really achieved something special.

“We could go sightseeing. Maybe we could hire a guide-dog?”

“Guide-dog? You're such a tourist.”

Guide-dogs had become very popular over the last three decades. Dogs, specifically proud Golden Retrievers, were genetically engineered with a second brain which was biologically hard-coded with all the relevant sights around their local city. There was even a wireless feature so with a tourist's ear-piece you could hear the local history as you took a leisurely walk in the company of an obedient and well-behaved dog.

There had been some difficulties in the early stages of the program, of course. Certain words had had to be removed from town planning so that the dogs behaved themselves properly. This was slightly problematic on Cirrus, as the first two people who set foot on the planet were the brothers John and Pete Walkeez, and the current mayor was Sir Hughbert Snausages.

All of these matters were easily resolved by simply having the tour ending at an animal-recycling plant where all problems could be simply and conveniently made into new opportunities to solve still more problems.

Dave briefly wondered why the mention of guide-dogs had brought such a vivid thought process to the forefront of his mind. Ignoring such things, he simply grinned and said, “Well, last time I was here, I went on a guided tour of the local government building.”

“You did? That sounds a little touristy for you,” Rob told him.

“The tour guide had the biggest breasts I've ever seen. I got a lot of pictures.” He held up his hands to his chest to demonstrate the sheer magnitude of what he was describing.

“And suddenly it all makes sense!” Rob laughed.

“A lot of pictures, Rob,” he smiled wistfully.

“OK,” Rob said. “Move along.”

“While I was in there, innocently minding my own business, as I often am, I might have made a slightly inappropriate joke to a slightly inappropriate person after consuming a highly inappropriate amount of a highly appropriate green liquid.”

Rob shook his head in wonder that this person continued to be alive.

“I got banned for life from the government building, so there’s nothing left for us to do but go to a bar.”

“A bar sounds good,” Rob agreed with a hearty slur.

“I have one in mind!” Dave told him.

The bar he had in mind was not at all what Rob had expected. It was sombre and the atmosphere was reserved, so reserved that he felt as if they weren’t entirely welcome.

There were beers on tap, but they all had grandiose titles and behind the bar were many spherical bottles of expensive wine. As they went in, the mood darkened and people in expensive suits glared at them, making Rob even more uncomfortable still.

Someone grumbled just loud enough to be heard: “Letting in strays now, are we?”

“We’ll just stay for one,” Dave told him, as if the greeting had been a positive one.

“You like it here?” Rob leaned against the polished wooden bar which had little towels on it that bore the names of the beer. He had got used to the low standards of the crew lounge and was feeling more than a little awkward.

A senior gentleman approached them from behind the bar. He had the look of a man with significant standing in the local

community and regarded the pair as being something that didn't really belong there.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" he asked, managing to make it sound more like an insult than a question, and emphasising the last word pointedly.

"My dear sir, what do you recommend?" Dave leant towards him across the bar and smiled courteously.

"Perhaps another bar?" he said and then guffawed at his own razor sharp wit.

"Excellent!" Dave smiled, possibly not as impressed as the barman. "My compliments on a truly hilarious pun at the expense of ourselves. Wherever did you come up with such witticism? Somewhere, a Christmas-cracker will be missing its joke.

"You're in danger of putting slightly-bewildered comedians out of business. Whatever will happen to the Irish now?"

"Really, you are quite the comic talent."

The barman looked at him with growing contempt and frowned suspiciously.

"My friend and I would like a mug of your cheapest beer and two straws, please," Dave told him.

"I'm afraid you will have to buy a drink each or I will be forced to ask you to leave." The barman's face adopted a look of severity. "Perhaps that might be best all round?"

"I think we should leave," Rob told him. "I'll buy you a beer down the road."

"OK, well, perhaps a beer each then. I'd also like a photograph of your wife and a bucket to throw up in, for my friend."

"I think your friend may be right," the barman frowned at Dave angrily, his face reddening. "You should leave before I call the police and have you dragged out."

“So we’re not good enough to drink here?” Dave seemed crestfallen. He slumped onto the bar in dismay.

Rob put a supportive arm on his shoulder and told him, “It’s OK. Let’s just go and find a better bar. It’s no big deal.”

Dave nodded sadly. He looked up at the barman. “I’m sorry,” he sighed. “It’s moments like this when I realise that I’m not half the man your mother was.”

“What?” the barman snapped, thumping his fist down onto the bar. “What did you say?”

“Sorry, were you too busy trying to evolve into a human to hear me? I just said how much I respected your mother. You have to admire a prostitute who can put their past behind them, don’t you?”

“My mother…” he began to choke on his rage, his face contorted into an expression of pure fury and he slammed his hand down on the bar top.

“I’m sure she was a saint,” Dave told him. “Like Saint Bernard, only not as attractive, obviously. I picture her with a little more hair, especially around the face.”

“Get out!” he growled, his face flushing angrily. Everyone in the bar had now stopped to watch and people were shaking their heads in disgust. Rob looked around and swallowed nervously.

“Have you thought about hiring your face to people whose arses are having a day off?” he asked. “I’ll be your first customer.”

“Get out or I’ll call the police.”

“Try and get one with an attractive daughter. That way I can kill two birds with one stone. I know it’s shallow of me to talk about attractiveness. I’m sure such things don’t matter to you any more than they mattered to your parents.”

“We’re leaving,” Rob told him and took Dave firmly by the arm.

“Have you any idea who I am? I’m a peer of the planetary government,” the barman screamed in his outrage. “I’ll have you barred from this entire world for this.”

“I know!” Dave shrugged free from Rob and grinned back at him. “I looked you up. You’re Minister Grogal Stummp. You retired three years ago and bought a bar. Now your friends from the council drink here. It’s their favourite spot.”

The barman frowned at him, his anger giving way to confusion.

“We’re leaving,” Rob said loudly. He firmly led Dave to the door.

Dave tuned to call back: “Is it true your birth certificate is an apology letter from the hospital?”

Rob pushed him out and slammed the door behind them and faced his friend, his face white and drawn, his breathing heavy.

“What the hell was that?”

“Tradition!” Dave told him simply, grinning as if everything was as perfectly fine outside of his head as it was inside. “The Captain specifically told me not to do three things. That’s two down off my list before dinner time.”

“If the Captain gives you a list of things not to do, then it’s not a scavenger hunt. It’s not a challenge.”

Dave seemed surprised at his attitude. He frowned and told him firmly, “It is to me.”

“I need a beer,” Rob told him, wiping the nervous sweat from his brow.

“Can I ask you something?” Dave began. Rob nodded dubiously. “Is your father a high ranking enforcement officer on this planet who’s frequently given to acts of violence?”

“What?” Rob exclaimed.

“I thought not. That’s going to make the last item a little bit harder.”

Phil Bothan could feel the rage rising. He controlled it as best he could but he could feel the swell reddening his face and his hands were already clenching involuntarily.

“I’m sorry sir,” the otherwise helpful young man told him. “This happens all the time, I’m afraid.”

“So you’re telling me there’s no way for me to get a line of communication from here?”

“That’s right. A ship in orbit has fired a gravitational pulse. That’s going to upset our communications for hours. They call it an ‘engine fart.’ It resets the calibration of the sensors or something. I’m not really sure, if I’m totally honest.”

“And there’s no way to get a line from somewhere else?” he growled.

He shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way. The ship must be directly overhead to knock out our lines. We only have access to certain satellites at certain times of the day. This means we’ve lost our slot until the morning.”

“I don’t believe this,” Phil grumbled, as he glowered at him angrily. “Do you know what I’ve had to go through to get down here?”

“Sir, if I could help you, I would,” and when he said it, he sounded as if he meant it.

“I had to bribe a chef to let me take his place on the drop-pod. It cost me one hundred credits to get down here in a giant metal dustbin, freefalling through the atmosphere. All that so I can make a two minute call to my sister.”

“I can only apologise,” the young man offered earnestly. “I can let you send a message. As soon as the lines clear it will get delivered.”

“The messages never get through,” he growled through gritted teeth.

The assistant shrugged and smirked as if they were sharing a joke, “They always get through. Maybe you have trouble on a ship but it’ll be fine if it’s sent from here.”

“Really?” Phil stood up straight suddenly; and some of the tension seemed to lift.

“Sure,” he nodded. “I’ve never heard of a problem.”

“I’ll do that,” Phil said with relief. “Thank you.”

“No problem at all, Sir.”

Ugly, thumping music played mutedly in the background. The air stank of stale sweat and long-forgotten dreams. Heavy red light reflected thickly all around the dimly lit bar and, occasionally, women in a state of undress, and with a large part of their soul already quite dead, walked past them.

“Don’t you worry about getting in trouble?” Rob slurred as he swung about his half drained glass of beer.

“No!” Dave admitted earnestly.

“Never?” Rob looked at him suspiciously.

“No!” he said again, just as certainly as the first time. “I’m used to it. I get in trouble all the time. So what? Nothing ever really comes of it. Nothing ever changes. Nobody ever got executed for being a bit silly, slightly offensive or making some ill-conceived observation about someone’s mental health that they hoped you’d never mention.”

“But...” Rob furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “You’re right. So what? So why am I so worried about getting in trouble?”

Dave shrugged and gave him the dubious benefit of his insight. “You’re conditioned to. You grow up thinking the rules are so important because everyone tells you they are. You’re taught to colour inside the lines, to do what your teacher tells you, to always look both ways before crossing the road.”

“You probably should always look both ways before crossing the road,” Rob told him.

“One out of three,” Dave slurred. “That’s not a very good score for a sophisticated system of intergalactic government, when you really think about it.”

Rob shook his head thoughtfully and sat for a moment in silence, trying not to stare at a naked woman across the room, but not making a very good job of it.

“If they can’t even get that right, can you imagine the mistakes they make when it really does matter?” Dave added philosophically.

“You’re a very strange man, Dave,” Rob told him. Dave raised a glass and nodded in proud agreement. “I’m going to be more like you, Dave,” Rob said drunkenly.

Dave laughed out loud.

“Seriously...”

“I believe you,” Dave told him, clearly meaning the exact opposite.

“What’s this last thing on your list of things not to do?”

“Just shut up and watch the strippers!”

Phil slumped down into the lounge and watched the stars flickering in the night sky on an actual window made from actual glass. It was a large but mostly empty room, with seats bolted to the floor and the

walls painted in the most neutral colour imaginable. The seats were too small to sit on comfortably and he wriggled around trying to find a way to make his wait as painless as possible.

In the corner was a dark haired young man, slightly the worse for wear, and a ginger one lying on the floor, probably dead, or so close to it that the distinction hardly mattered.

“Is he OK, mate?” Phil called over. “Do you guys need any help?”

“He’s fine!” the dark haired man told him. “He’s just had a big day. By morning he’ll just have a nasty headache, a few stomach cramps, involuntary shuddering, anal seepage, welts, a slight rash over most of his body, permanent minor organ damage, some blood in his urine and a little bits of minor permanently-damaged organs floating around in his blood. He’s only a waiter, so all this is neither here nor there, really.

“Most people can usually still count to ten after drinking here.”

“That actually sounds quite bad,” Phil said with a frown.

The young man simply shrugged and nodded. “Life actually is quite bad. I’m not sure why that comes as a surprise to so many people.”

“This is the right place to wait for the pod for the Nebulous, isn’t it? I’m Phil, by the way.”

Dave nodded and checked his watch. “You’ve got about four hours to wait yet so you better make yourself comfortable.

“I’m Dave. I’m not retarded and I don’t make sandwiches, and my friend here is Rob and his hair really is that colour. Sorry if he offends you. He offends me if I’m honest.”

“I see,” Phil said, and took a momentary pause at what might have been among the strangest introductions he’d ever heard. “How come you’re so early?”

“We’re hiding,” Dave admitted, as if such a thing was entirely normal. “Some people might decide to kill us. Actually, they might have already decided to kill us and we’ve considered the idea and decided that we’re against it.”

“Really?” Phil was more than a little worried.

“It’s a long story. It’s all pretty complicated. People think that the life of a waiter and a man who delivers towels is a simple, uncomplicated thing, but I work hard to make sure that nothing could be further than the truth.”

“I’ve got time,” Phil laughed. “Can you make it last around four hours?”

“I have this tradition, you see, and it really all comes down to tradition when you think about it. Tradition is important and it’s what sets us aside from the animals—at least, the ones that can’t learn anything and therefore can’t find gainful employment in circuses.

“The first time I came to this planet, I got into trouble for urinating on a statue of the first President, for insulting a government official while on a tour of the state building, and I had one other little bit of trouble, too.

“I got to second base with a very attractive young lady, who turned out to be the daughter of a high ranking law enforcement professional who decided he was going to hunt me down and beat me to death with his own bare hands, presuming he could drag his knuckles off the ground long enough to do so. Ever since then, I try to do variations of the same things whenever I get down here”

“Why?” Phil shrugged in amusement.

“It drives the Captain crazy and it gives the old girl something to do!” Dave admitted evenly, as if it really should be quite obvious.

“So I managed the first two this time without any difficulty, but the last is always the hardest thing to manage, as you can imagine. I always try to improve my performance. Improving your performance is what separates us from the animals, not the really good ones, but the usual ones, animals that taste good between slices of bread.

“This time I didn’t stop at urinating. I went the route less travelled and left a dark reminder that pasta on a space-ship is a grim thing that does horrible things to the insides of a person.

“Then I found myself a government official to insult and he owned a bar which just proved that fate is a beast with a very wry sense of humour. With him thoroughly insulted, my work was nearly done. I just had to find someone willing to try to kill me which is, oddly, not at all difficult in most circumstances.

“So tonight we were in a strip club. Rob is barely functional by this point and his befuddled brain is thinking that Dave might just be the ultimate role model. The crowd is bustling and there are girls everywhere, music thumping, drinks flowing. And then I see her!

“She’s across the room, a thing of beauty: long, golden hair and with a body so perfect it’s almost a match to my own. Then I watch her and she turns to a bouncer. They’re talking and she looks around. She’s just taking a quick check to make sure nobody’s looking and then she turns back and gives the guy a kiss. Now this guy is as big as an election campaign lie and uglier than a Bulgarian super-model. He looks as if his hobby is stepping on rakes and then eating them afterwards.

I know, without the slightest doubt in my mind, that I’ve found her. She’s the end to my evening and, for once, it’s simple. Second

base is easy and the bouncer is going to get really angry at me, that part's even easier.

"Now, I'm not as stupid as I look, or as tests indicate. I get us another beer and I watch. I see the bouncer coming and going, I see the girls. I go to the toilet and I figure it all out. I know what I'm going to do, I know my escape route. I'm going to cause all sorts of trouble and I'm out through the toilet window into the night like the stench of a bad curry."

"Really?" Phil began to laugh uneasily. "You really did all this for fun?"

"No!" Dave shook his head and kicked the drooling body of his fallen comrade. "You see, the best laid plans of mice and men are what separate us from the animals."

"Except the mice?" Phil suggested.

Dave nodded thoughtfully, looking oddly as if there was something on his mind. Whatever it was, it passed rather quickly. He looked down to Rob, whose breathing was quite a long way from healthy.

"Yeah, well, it all went wrong this time. This idiot gets himself hammered on the local beer, far more hammered than I would have predicted. I tell him what I'm going to do and he thinks I'm crazy.

"I tell him, 'Rob, you're going to have a great story to tell in the morning and a year from now you're going to look back on this and laugh your head off about me.'

"So Rob sits back in his chair thoughtfully and he stares up at me with his glassy green eyes and just a little drool slipping from his sickening pale lips.

"Then he tells me to wait here: he's going to get us some beers. I like the way he's thinking, so I sit back and wait. I hear raised voices and I look around like everyone else. Rob has his

tongue down this stripper's throat and his hands are all over her. She's obviously disgusted, as anyone would be, so she pushes him off and gives him a slap, but now the mountainous region of pure anger that she's dating is on the scene and thinks Rob is going to be a nice bit of foreplay before he takes the stripper backstage and finishes the job Rob started.

"I remember my window in the toilet and decide that it's going to be me with the funny story in the morning and an afternoon spent looking for a new room-mate.

"I find, to my surprise, that I can't do it. Rob's going to get himself killed and I know the Captain is going to blame me, which is a nuisance.

"I run over and tell them he's retarded. It's not a tough story to sell. He's grinning like an idiot and nobody can make out a word he's saying. The bouncer goes to hit him and I stop him and tell him not to lay a hand on my boyfriend in my best squeaky voice.

"That surprises him and he starts to laugh. I tell him he's going to get a proper slap in the morning for the way he's behaved and all the other bouncers start laughing, too.

"We make a dash for it through the toilet window and I pile this idiot into a cab. I figure he's done for the night, so we came back here to hang out in case the club's security change their mind and realise that this planet really would be better off with Rob on it."

"Wow!" Phil laughed. "You do this every time? Are you crazy?"

"Well, not this time... He screwed it up for me," Dave pointed to the gently murmuring shambles lying in a heap on the floor.

"What do you do out in the Frontier colonies? Do you have any traditions there?"

Dave nodded and gave a very odd little smile, “On Grale 2 I always plant a tree.”

Doctor Barret leaned back in his chair and exercised a measure of his legendary patience, which was being tested, if not stretched, and stretched, if not broken.

The patient challenging his patience was the most challenging patient that had ever challenged his patience. He was often spoken of in hushed voices. The medical community considered him something of an urban legend, a myth, a rumour used to scare young prospective psychoanalysts into eating their vegetables.

Dave sprawled back on a fairly comfortable reclining chair at the other side of the room. He fiddled along the edge of it and suddenly the back went crashing down noisily, so it ended up completely horizontal with Dave sprawled uneasily across it grinning inanely, as if proud of his accomplishment.

The Doctor rolled his eyes, sighed, and counted to ten. The chair was being tested if not stretched, and stretched if not broken. Then suddenly it was broken and, with a subsequent cracking noise that put him in mind of a rib-cage collapsing under the wheels of a truck, the chair seemed to lose the will to live altogether.

“Sorry about that!” Dave told the Doctor, without managing to sound as if he meant it and with an expression rather implying the exact opposite, and that, in fact, it had been done quite deliberately.

“That’s quite alright.” The Doctor tapped his fingers together in front of his face, breathed deeply and pretended he didn’t care. “One of the things I appreciate about you is the way you experiment: you’re reckless in a way that borders on fearless. You just do things without any consideration of the consequences. This was nothing more than another example of your personality asserting itself, so it wouldn’t really make sense for me to be angry about the methodology behind your chosen method of expression, now would it?”

“So it’s OK for me to break things now?” Dave asked, hoisting himself and the back of the chair into a more comfortable position, for him at least. The chair had seen the last of the days in which it would ever be considered comfortable. The Doctor stared at a poster of a human brain and huffed absently to himself.

His mother had recommended him not to study human psychology. She had told him it was a dying trade: nobody cared how people worked anymore. So long as they showed up to their jobs on time, and didn’t cause too much trouble, everything was fine. He realised now that he should have listened, as his patient started clicking away at a cigarette lighter and clearly had no reservations about using it.

“Would it be alright if I set fire to your desk? My personality is feeling a strong motivation to assert itself in exactly that manner.”

He rolled his eyes and told him flatly, “I don’t think you have any intention of doing so. You just enjoy getting a reaction from people.”

“That sounds like a challenge,” he said with a grin. “But, in any case, I’m impressed. It’s as if you know me as well as almost anyone I had a few beers with once. Science is amazing, isn’t it?”

“It wasn’t a challenge: it was just a statement,” the Doctor grumbled and smiled reservedly. “Even science has its limits and the inside of your skull does appear to be a challenge it might not quite be up to.

“However, you can speak freely. You’ve got nobody to impress in here, you know.”

Dave looked over to him and grinned. “Yeah, that’s certainly true.

“I think I’ll pass on the fire, in any case. People seem to have an issue with fire for some reason. I accidentally set fire to my last

room-mate's bunk once while I was cooking sausages. He woke up in a horrible mood but it's not as if his eyebrows were never going to grow back."

"Imagine my relief," the Doctor said sarcastically. "As discussed many times, I know you don't really like me. That's a well-established fact already and it has no bearing on our relationship."

"Are you going to tell me that my hostility can't be taken personally, because you understand that I merely perceive you as a manifestation of my resentment towards authority?"

The Doctor frowned at him and began drumming his fingers on the desk. "I would never presume."

"Shall we get on with it?" Dave told him and lay back on the remains of the couch. "Are you going to ask me about my parents? You probably know more about them than I do, but I can make something up, if you like."

Dave frowned thoughtfully and then suddenly snapped up and asked, "Did you know your parents? I bet they were never invited to parties. Are you invited to parties? I mean fun parties. My favourite kind of parties are the kind where nobody wears clothes and everyone regrets not wearing clothes in the morning."

The Doctor sighed loudly. "You do realise that every crewman on the ship has to have a routine psyche evaluation on a regular basis. We're not singling you out in some special way."

"I thought you were a dentist!" Dave frowned accusingly.

"Dentists rarely carry out the regular routine psyche evaluations on the crew."

"At least not as regularly as they seem to be carried out on me," Dave reminded him. "Even really good dentists."

"Not every crewman is in trouble with the Captain as regularly as you, either."

“I make no judgement for their lack of creativity.” Dave smiled judgementally.

“Why don’t you tell me about your day on the planet yesterday?” the Doctor said, hoping this would all just end.

“It was pretty routine stuff, nothing really out of the ordinary,” Dave told him earnestly with a knowing grin. The Doctor frowned and made a note on his screen that Dave’s lying might be pathological.

“Well, why don’t you tell me about the day before?” he said. “Was that also routine?”

Dave turned to him with sudden interest, “No, that was a little different. I think it’s a story I might keep to myself, but I’ll happily make something up that sounds entirely plausible if you’re bored.”

“Why is that? Why not tell me what Dave really did, the day before yesterday?”

Dave stared off thoughtfully for a moment at a poster showing a human brain. His mother had once told him that people would always need to know how other people worked and he should apply himself to his studies, so that one day he might have a job as an important person in a position of authority.

Mind you, she also told him the Earth was really flat and run by alien gods who demanded frequent blood sacrifices. He had been forced to concede at age 8 that she wasn’t a reliable source of information. When she tried to feed him a bowl of stainless steel allen-bolts with a topping of caustic soda, it became immediately apparent that she wasn’t a particularly good source of anything.

“You’re right. I’m going to tell you what really, more or less, may, or may not have actually happened the day before yesterday. Maybe.”

Chapter 6

What really, more or less, may, or may not have actually happened the day before yesterday. Maybe

Rob woke to the sound of the alarm chirping away in the background. It was designed by a crack team of engineers to give a rousing start to the day, to install a sense of optimism and gently usher a person from a refreshing sleep to a readiness to fulfil their duty. To Rob, it seemed more like a hangover on the wrong side of his skull.

He grumbled his way to consciousness, spouting a string of half muttered expletives to himself and pulled the sheets up over his head to block out reality, which was fast taking hold of his brain and flushing away the very optimism the alarm was meant to instil.

Every morning, the alarm woke them at 6.30 am but rarely was 6:30 ever at the same time two mornings in a row. Both the clock and the alarm were automatic functions controlled by the ship's computer, and the precise time it deemed to be 6:30 fluctuated by anything up to 2 hours per day in either direction without warning, due to inadequately compensated temporal compression. They had no ability to influence it and the sound came from no discernible source, so that it couldn't be blocked and the speakers couldn't actually be disconnected, since they didn't exist and hadn't for several centuries.

Dave had tried to do precisely that on many occasions, and the only results of his efforts were an unusually focused sense of purpose inside his skull and very slight permanent damage to the walls. One of the most recent had caused a particularly unpleasant concussion but only a slight red mark on the metal surface that could be easily

removed with a damp cloth. Consequently, the mark had remained in place several months later and the entire experience was referred to by Dave as the ‘concrete hangover.’

Dave, in fact, had a particular loathing for the temporal dilation effect, as it could easily cost him several hours in bed. He had written a formal complaint to the Captain on the subject, explaining that, while asleep, he was at his most productive, if you consider that logically he was at his least destructive. This had not only earned him a special reprimand but had seen him become the first human in the history of the Alliance Trade Authority to be legally classified as ‘employed livestock.’

His rants on the subject were legendary and almost on a par with his utter loathing of the colour purple, which was much harder to make any kind of sense of, and he often claimed he had given up trying himself. He would sometimes note that it was no coincidence that cheese never came in purple, as if this explained anything beyond why he now had the legal rights of a chicken.

Rob had tried, on several occasions, to explain that all this was simply a fact of the physics of space travel, and hadn’t been invented by the evil scientist, Alberto von Einshtein, as a way to annoy the waiters, towel-delivery personnel, and alcoholics of the future. Dave, however, chose instead to believe the poorly-conceived, un-researched, biased, grammatically disastrous, inflammatory and libellous Wikiweb entry he had written in Rob’s name, while drunk.

Rob wasn’t quite sure why he had been receiving so many hate-mails, death threats and solicitors letters on the matter over the last few days. He was almost, but not entirely, convinced by Dave’s suggestion that it was spam from a close-quarters protection company. They reportedly offered their services to ginger people after an outbreak of what had become known as white, black, brown

and yellow on orange hate crime, or more recently named the ‘Angry at Orange Rainbow.’ Perhaps, not ironically, these hate crimes had originated from a suspiciously poorly-researched Wikiweb entry that blamed time space fluctuation and irritating morning alarms on the ‘Ginger Menace Paradox.’

“Morning!” he grumbled blearily, the alarm clicking off now that both of them appeared to be functioning. “Here’s to another joyous day in the service.”

“Sarcasm! I like where your head is at!”

Rob snapped up suddenly. Something was wrong! Something was very wrong. He looked in shock and awe that Dave was vertical. Not only that, he was dressed and not doing something that would give the average person a headache if they tried to make sense of it.

“You don’t smell like a homeless person eating rotting banana skins out of a dustbin. You don’t even look like a homeless person eating banana skins out of a dustbin. In fact, you don’t appear homeless at all, and don’t appear to be eating any kind of skin out of any kind of filthy receptacle!”

Dave smiled back at him, a normal smile, not the smile of a person whose brain was filled with cartoon animals trying to destroy one another with giant cartoon hammers.

“I mean...” Rob stammered. “You’re up.”

“Very perceptive, Rob,” he told him dryly with a little sarcasm of his own. “I think you might be ready to work on the difference between left and right. Do you feel ready, Rob, or should we do some extra revision with up and down first, just to make sure we’re really mastering the basics?”

“Why are you up before me?” Rob dragged himself to a seated position in his bunk and glared out blearily from his tired eyes, rubbing them furiously while his brain screamed out for coffee — and

lots of it. “Is there an emergency of some kind? Is something terrible happening?”

“An emergency?” Dave laughed openly. “An emergency that only I’m qualified to handle? It’s the broken toilet-plungers day off today? Somewhere a walnut needs to be opened for the good of the vessel and nobody can find any safety goggles?”

“Then explain this outrage,” Rob told him sternly, frowning with a pair of languid and reddened eyes.

“I have a busy day today,” Dave explained with a shrug, as if this explained everything. “I need to make an early start so I got ready early. Life can’t all be fun and games, you know!”

Rob frowned suspiciously, wholly unsatisfied with the entire situation.

“I do have some degree of responsibility, you know,” Dave told him, putting the finishing touches to his readiness.

Rob shook his head and said, “You don’t: at least, none that you take seriously enough for them to actually qualify as responsibilities.

“According to your personnel record, you don’t even qualify for ownership of a goldfish, even an electric one. You told me yourself that you’re actually quite proud of that. You said you once managed an ant colony so badly that they openly revolted, forced you out of your own home, and which now has a stable representative democracy with free elections, embassies in several nations, and a functioning capitalist economy that uses granulated sugar as the basis of its currency.”

Dave frowned. “No, I think one of us just made that up. Listen, Rob. Flouting one’s responsibilities is not evidence of their absence. Today, as it happens, I’m taking my responsibilities seriously,” he said succinctly.

Rob found this all highly disconcerting—horribly disconcerting, in fact. His brain screamed at him that this was happening; but it couldn't be happening.

“And the day will come when I reclaim the sugar that is rightfully my own,” he added with a horribly, frighteningly, normal smile.

“I don't like this. I don't like any of this. Give me ten minutes to jump in the shower and I'll come with you for breakfast.” Rob rubbed his eyes and hopped down to the cold metal of the floor gratings.

“No time for breakfast,” he replied cheerfully. “Sorry. I can meet you for lunch later if I'm not too busy. Maybe two o'clock? I'll contact you if I can't make it, but it should be fine.”

“OK.” Rob watched in silence as Dave gathered his things and headed for the door.

“See you later,” Dave waved in a sickeningly normal way that caused no damage whatsoever and challenged none of the tenets of normalcy that Rob held sacred.

“Bye,” Rob muttered, staring in confusion. He didn't notice that his eyes had narrowed and he'd started slowly shaking his head. “See you later.”

Dave's first port of call was the engineering department, a place that was the target of a great deal of the scorn that was left over from his new favourite target, Rob.

His daily schedule was programmed onto a portable terminal which also had other connections to various areas of the ship and, while trying to find Tetris, he had accidentally done considerable damage to the bit that controlled passenger entertainment. Any other member of the crew would have reported the matter and left it at that,

but he decided to repair it, safe and secure in the knowledge that his efforts would be appreciated.

Luckily, and from painfully acquired experience, he'd accessed the computer anonymously in order to make the repairs; of course, with absolutely no idea how to make such complex repairs, or even simple ones.

Consequently, and rather predictably, the repairs weren't entirely successful and now everyone who accessed the computer did so anonymously and was forced to speak French. For some inexplicable reason, so did everyone in Germany, where every inquiry could only be replied to with a game of Solitaire, where even more inexplicably the opponent was reportedly a sentient carrot named Roberto. It wasn't strictly anonymous, either, because the ship's computer, as well as every computer in Germany, now simply referred to everyone as 'Dave' and occasionally sang, 'Daisy, Daisy' very slowly. Of course, this more or less defeated the whole point entirely, as this happened to be his name, if he remembered correctly.

As there was no point dwelling on any of this, he didn't. He was confident the problems would all go away, all by themselves. That was, after all, why we have engineering departments, presumably.

He picked up his terminal with the interest that one would normally give to a baby brought to work at a particularly busy period by a staff member on extended leave.

His scanner probe, a black wand that lit up in a very satisfying way when it was waved about, attracted more of his interest. It even changed colour sometimes, for some reason. Whether it did anything beyond that, or was yet another feedback device, Dave had no idea and he regarded it very slightly suspiciously for that very reason,

remaining otherwise content with this degree of personal and professional ignorance.

“You’re early,” Kendra Gower told him, as she flustered around the office trying to hide her breakfast and coffee, so she could appear to be more efficient and, perhaps, more responsible than she actually was. In fact, she had only just barely qualified for ownership of an electric goldfish three months earlier.

“I have a long day: I just want to get started,” Dave told her earnestly, getting the distinct impression he was going to be hearing people voicing their surprise a lot this morning.

“It’s not like you to do things properly, or even at all,” she told him, her eyes narrowing. “I like it. You’re starting to develop some good habits from spending time in Engineering.”

“I still don’t own a single item of chunky knitted clothing and distinctly remember kissing several girls that I’m not related to.

“There was one time when I kissed a girl that I was related to but we’re blaming that on alcohol and counting it as a partial win.” Dave checked over the rota, which wasn’t as heavy as he had feared. He smiled to himself.

“Perhaps it’s a whole new me,” he told her insincerely, with a slightly devious smirk that she would probably assume, correctly, was an attempt to disguise flatulence. It could be blamed on alcohol and considered a partial win, he thought to himself.

“Or maybe you’re up to something,” she said suspiciously and narrowed her eyes at him a little more.

“That would seem more in character with the old Dave,” he told her thoughtfully. He waved the tools of his trade at her and bid her farewell. “I’d love to stay and chat but I have to get on with something, possibly something productive and not at all soul-crushingly pointless.”

“You behave yourself today,” she told him sternly, but in a whole different league of sternness to the Captain, and the effect it had on him was consequently diminished to the point of effectively being ignored.

“Me?” he said innocently.

“I’m busy today. I don’t have time to run about after you. I have to fix the computer. It can’t tell who anybody is, for some reason, and speaks in some weird foreign language,” Kendra told him.

“Really? It seems to know who I am. Myself and a girl named Daisy it keeps singing about. Is she ‘Retarded Dave’s’ girlfriend because, honestly, that would make a lot of sense?”

She frowned for a moment. “This had better not have anything to do with you,” she said.

“Of course not,” he assured her, with an exaggerated expression of unflappable innocence. “I’m confident you can put all the pieces together and make the problem vanish, even if you have to do it all alone.”

“Of course we can. Do you think we spend all day playing Tetris and Solitaire like your mates in customer services?” she said with a tut. “We’ve got a ship to keep running, you know?”

“And you’re doing a fine job, apart from all the problems that I don’t appear to be in any way responsible for. Well, I’d love to stay and chat, but my many tasks of questionable sanity won’t remain utterly pointless by themselves.”

She watched him leave and picked up her coffee. She’d never seen him so focused before. She’d never seen him remotely focused before. She’d couldn’t remember ever seeing him anything but completely and utterly helplessly unfocused before.

She shrugged and went back to her breakfast, making a mental note to check up on him later during the day, if she had the time in her busy schedule to do so. She then picked up a newspaper and noticed that her favourite celebrity had had a haircut.

His greatest challenge stood before him and he had decided to deal with it first, and in a head-on kind of way. Any lesser man might have been daunted by what lay ahead, if indeed a lesser man was a thing that could possibly exist in any universe, even a completely fictional one that only exists inside the mind of a sentient brick, and one that's trying a little too hard to be a bit silly.

Dave approached the issue with firm resolve and strength of character, a thing he was trying after being almost completely sure he'd read the description correctly on the Wikiweb.

All information that was considered true was held on an almost inconceivably gigantic network called the Wikiweb. Like its ancient forebear, it relied on unemployed people writing, and then editing, the articles themselves as new facts were invented by the media.

The entire concept of what was considered true was open to debate, of course, but the debate had been ended by a media article that stated that not believing in the facts they'd established, and had had enshrined for them by fat, unpaid workers on their own network, was a kind of mental illness.

Mental illness was a difficult thing to live with. It guaranteed that you could never be truly accepted as part of society. Many people diagnosed with it saw this as a benefit and went off to live unbelievably amazing lives of adventure in the burgeoning new galactic civilisation, while others just ended up delivering towels.

Whether the actions Dave was considering actually demonstrated fortitude or idiocy he wasted little time considering, except to consider that the same lack of consideration strongly implied the latter. This entire thought process made his head ache, so he stopped immediately and went back to pondering whether or not the meaning of life, the universe and everything was actually 'cheese.'

Certainly, the Wikiweb was clear on the matter; and there were now 178 articles with variations on the title, 'I don't know who Dave is but could someone tell him that the meaning of life, the universe and everything can't be cheese.'

Dave walked in without knocking. He stood in the doorway, as the challenge glared back at him with bubbling hatred, tempered by a modicum of apathy. For a moment, he felt a flicker of doubt as to the good sense of such a direct approach, but he already knew that this would not be easy. It was not meant to be: nothing this important ever was.

"What do you want?" Supervisor Martin sneered at him, as if he was a horrible, disgusting thing he'd discovered on the floor of his personal toilet. This wasn't lost on Dave and he felt it slightly unreasonable. After all, he really should have forgotten by now about what had happened a week ago last Thursday.

"Martin, I want a favour," he told him coolly. He went in and sat down without being asked, just as the Wikiweb article had advised, if he remembered it correctly.

As a matter of surprising fact, he had remembered it correctly, but had forgotten that he had been drunkenly reading an article titled '101 social mistakes that only a retarded moron would make, that are guaranteed to annoy people,' in order to further irritate Rob. In that respect, it was working perfectly.

Martin couldn't help but laugh and so he didn't. "You want a favour from me? You have to be joking—or insane."

"I can be both!" he said defensively. "It's just a little one," Dave told him earnestly, and held up his thumb and finger apart with just a tiny gap to illustrate just how little it was.

"You've got a lot of nerve, Dave," Martin told him with a frown.

"I have, that's true. Apparently, if you put all my nerves end to end, they'd reach from where you finished doing it all the way back to the coffin I was going to have to then be buried in.

"I think I read that somewhere. Science is amazing, right?"

"I suppose Kendra Gower sent you here, did she?" Martin leant back in his chair, determined to make this as hard as possible for his former supervisor, towards whom he harboured a not insignificant degree of perfectly reasonable resentment.

"Actually, this is personal," Dave told him with a smile. "I don't mean I need a professional favour. I mean that I, personally, Dave, need a favour."

"Get out," Martin hissed at him.

"I could do that. But if I do, neither of us gets what they need, when there's a perfectly good opportunity here for both of us to get what they want."

He frowned at him in confusion, beginning to be mildly intrigued by his brashness. His eyes narrowed, "What are you talking about?"

"I know we're not friends, Martin," Dave put it mildly, "But, in the vastness of the known universe, there must be something that you want. There must be something that you'd rather have in your hand that's more important than very slightly irritating me."

Martin frowned at him. He was now thoroughly intrigued.

“What I need from you is something I could get somewhere else if I had to and with actually only a little more inconvenience. It’s a small thing that will cost you nothing. What I’m offering is a chance for you to make me do something in return for you. I’m offering you a chance to have something you want and to know that you gave me a very bad day getting it for you.”

“You’re not quite the idiot you appear to be, are you?” Martin noted and began rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“I find that remark slightly offensive,” he told him. “I consider myself every inch the idiot I appear to be. Possibly more so, and if you find a way to measure me accurately, then I’m sure we’re all keen to know for sure.”

“So what exactly are you offering?” Martin asked thoughtfully, while rubbing his chin. Dave knew that he had something in mind and the battle was effectively already won.

“What is it that you want, Martin?”

He grinned at Dave, showing uneven teeth and a slightly lopsided mouth, “Can you get me a bottle of twelve year old single malt whiskey or a date with the Kendra Gower?”

“It depends how hard you want to make it for me,” Dave told him. “It depends if you’re more interested in making my life hard or in having the thing you want; unless making my life hard is the thing you want, in which case we might end up trapped in a recursive loop, with neither of us getting anywhere.”

“Also, I don’t think you really want a date with Kendra Gower. I can’t imagine anyone ever would. I can’t imagine a blind man with an impaired sense of smell, a passion for laughter that sounds like a horse being anally brutalised, crushing loneliness, the likes of which could only be caused by having a mullet haircut and living among intellectually normal people, would want a date with Kendra Gower,

even if his penis was on fire and she was the only wet thing around within a ten mile radius.”

Martin bit his lip and sat back in his chair regarding him dubiously, opening his mouth to speak and then stopping himself several times.

“I want...” he paused and rolled his eyes thoughtfully. Dave leaned forward expectantly. “...I want to pass the level 4 exam.”

Dave wrote some notes on his terminal. “I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about, Martin.”

“I’m doing the level 4 merchant crewman exam,” Martin told him. “With that behind me, I can get a promotion to a division chief. I’ll get my own proper office and I’ll never have to deal with another customer ever again.”

Dave held up his hand for him to stop. “I don’t need your life story.”

“And what do you want in return?” he scowled.

Dave showed him his terminal with his requirements on it.

“That’s it?” he flustered in surprise, as Dave simply nodded.

“That’s all you want? This is nothing.”

“You set that up for me and authorise it when I deliver your stuff. All done in good faith,” Dave told him.

Martin frowned at him as he got up to leave. “I’ll be in touch later and I’ll get you what you want!”

Gregory Grayson was the passenger services division chief and today it was his turn to have his sensory feedback devices checked, Dave decided. He knocked politely on the office door and impolitely let himself in without waiting to be asked.

Gregory looked up from a report, with his eyes peering sternly out from under his brow. “Can I help you, Mr Brown?”

“Call me Dave,” he said. He waved his terminal about as if it meant something, and lights began to flash on it. Whether they meant anything was doubtful: whether they meant what Dave thought they meant was far more doubtful still.

“I’m here to check your sensory feedback devices. The ones in your office, not on your actual person, of course. Apparently, this is a real thing and not a deliberate waste of everyone’s time, up to and including, but not exclusively, yours.

“It’s much more important than you think, apparently. Unless you really do think it’s important, in which case it’s much more important than I think. I’m getting a headache now so it’s probably time to stop talking.”

“I see.” Gregory spoke with a flawless English accent and his appearance was equally polished. He was a man who had a certain presence, a person who floated above his station and exuded authority.

“I’m quite busy. Does it absolutely have to be now?”

“I’m jolly afraid that it does, old chap,” Dave replied, imitating his accent sarcastically.

The chief regarded him dubiously and breathed a weary sigh. “You may proceed, but make it quick, if you would. In any case, they all seem to be functioning normally, I’m not aware of any issues.”

“Well, they’re actually designed to create issues, so if you’ve not noticed any then that might be that they’re not functioning normally at all,” Dave said. “It’s all very complicated. I don’t pretend to really understand the point of any of this. I’m not even sure there is one. I sometimes wonder if they wonder if there’s any point to me or if I even really exist at all.”

Gregory returned the majority of his attention to his reports. “I had heard you got yourself demoted again.”

“You heard correctly, it seems,” Dave told him, “the first clue being that a former supervisor is crawling around your office floor poking a flashing green light at your flower pots.”

“How did you manage it this time, Mr Brown?” Gregory asked, sounding as condescending as possible.

“It was easier than you might think,” Dave said as he sat up. “I think the Captain’s out to get me.”

“That would be highly unlikely,” he told him firmly. “What exactly are you meant to be doing down there?”

Dave pointed to the probe as if the question was rather redundant.

“I’m probing your flower-pot. All plant life is sterilised when it’s brought aboard. The smells are added artificially and I’m checking to make sure the smell is correct. Any deviation could bring about the total collapse of the entire galaxy. Possibly even, but probably not, the entire universe. It could be the end of cheese as we know it.”

“You’re checking for smells with a plastic tube with a light at the end?” he asked sarcastically.

“I did say I don’t pretend to know how it works,” Dave explained, giving the probe a suspicious glare.

“No, you really don’t, do you? To check the sensory feedback devices, you need to set the terminal to ‘Peripheral Calibration,’ select ‘Closed-Circuit Device,’ press the ‘Sample’ button, then move the wand slowly in the vicinity of the device until the gauge registers full. Your terminal is currently set to ‘Traffic Marshalling,’ which would only be ideal if my flowers were heading to the ship at full power and asking for permission to land.”

Dave shrugged and smiled awkwardly.

“I was told you were demoted and given the worst job on the ship,” Gregory allowed himself a totally efficient smile.

“Oh no!” Dave told him firmly. “That would be yours. Keeping control of all those idiot supervisors. I wouldn’t do your job if they paid me. By the way, how much do they pay you?”

“It’s rather a lot,” Gregory told him and laughed out loud. “You’re such an idiot, Dave. Why are you always getting yourself into trouble?”

“It’s a talent,” he said with a shrug. “I don’t pretend to know how it all works. I don’t pretend to know how anything works. That’s why I’m so good at what I do, which is essentially nothing. At least, nothing useful.”

“I tried to help you, you know,” Gregory told him. “I sent a report to the Captain, telling her I believed you were competent and not to confuse excessive sociability with disruptiveness.”

Dave nodded his thanks and said, “I thought you’d try to help, but I think I went slightly too far this time... Again.”

“Well, all my supervisors are idiots. What I liked about you is that you didn’t pretend you were anything else.”

“There wouldn’t have been much point pretending,” he noted quite correctly.

“You’ll be a supervisor again before you know it. Just behave yourself this time,” he told him with a smile. “I’ll always put in a good word for you after what you did for me.”

“I’m glad you mentioned what I did for you. I was wondering if you might do something for me in return.”

Gregory tutted and rolled his eyes. “I see. It was rather too much to hope for that you just wandered into my room to help my petunias to dock correctly. What did you have in mind?” He sat back in his chair and waited for it.

“I need the answers to the level 4 crew exam,” Dave said with a hopeful grin.

“What are you up to?” he asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously and leaning forward.

“Me?” Dave clapped his hand to his chest, as if the very suggestion had wounded him deeply.

“I can’t just give you the answers to an exam,” he told him. “What are you trying to do, get a promotion? You’d have to already be a supervisor to qualify to even take the exam.”

“It’s just a little project I’m working on,” Dave told him. “It won’t come back to you in a bad way. I can promise you that.”

“It had better not!” he said and pointed an accusing finger at him.

“It won’t!” Dave assured him and began to grin some more.

“Sometimes, I have to make a copy of forms for official reasons,” he began thoughtfully. “I leave things on the corner of my desk while I go for a coffee break around 3 o’clock, sometimes. I guess I can be pretty forgetful; and if there was a bottle of expensive Polish vodka there when I got back, then I’d be so excited that I’d probably forget all about my paperwork and never even realise I’d misplaced it.”

“These things can happen,” Dave said, while nodding knowingly.

“It always worries me when you get all focused and go off running one of your little schemes.”

“I don’t see why. That’s how you got your job in the first place!” Dave reminded him.

“Yeah,” he grumbled and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, “and you never let me forget it, do you?”

Dave grabbed his tools and turned to leave. He smiled and told him, “And I never will.”

“Aren’t you going to check to see if my drawers still squeak?”

“I’m sorry to report that, according to the flashing light, I couldn’t care less if they do,” Dave told him with a grin and a wink. “Enjoy your coffee.”

Getting a bottle of vodka on board a starship was a tricky thing, especially if you were the kind of person who had no intention of paying for it.

The ship was essentially a tube, hurtling through space at a velocity so far beyond human comprehension that it was essentially impossible to visualise for the average, or even moderately gifted, human. Under those conditions, deliveries of supplies were slightly difficult and bordering on logistically impossible. Food was made through the process of breaking down waste material and reprocessing it into various new things in a relatively simplistic way. If you wanted something that didn’t conform readily to the process, it had to be stored; and space was at a premium, when all you had of it was wrapped up in a metal box with an engine at the end.

Alcohol was stored fairly abundantly, but attracted a price tag in the ship’s gift shops that was so far beyond human comprehension that it was essentially impossible to visualise for the average, or even moderately gifted, human.

Dave’s wages were far easier to visualise and the only difficulty was eating regularly on it. It certainly didn’t afford him the luxury of walking into a shop and buying anything more expensive than a cheese sandwich.

Instead, he walked into the largest gift shop on the deck and waved his probe about as if it were something of enormous

importance. Perhaps coincidentally, there were around 252 minor traffic accidents in Germany at precisely that moment.

He held up his terminal and looked around the store solemnly. An assistant came up to him, looking slightly nervous.

“Can we help you?” he asked.

“I’m here to do an inspection of your sensory feedback devices,” he told him as if he understood it himself. The assistant looked horrified and clearly had no more idea what he was talking about than Dave did.

“The manager is off today. I’m on my own,” he gulped nervously.

“I know. Sorry, I mean, that’s not good. Very not good! It’s the opposite of good!” Dave told him and made a note on the terminal.

“Bad?” the assistant ventured.

Dave nodded and flashed him a little smile. “Thank you for noticing,” he said.

The assistant watched in confused silence, as Dave scribbled away on the pad for what seemed to be a very long time. He frowned at the notes worryingly and the assistant became still more nervous. Dave grumbled at his own pathetic efforts to draw a dog walking on a pair of stilts and turned his attention back to the task at hand.

“Not good at all. Very,” he carried on, muttering to himself. “I’m starting to think that dogs really don’t belong on stilts.”

“What?” the assistant asked, frowning to himself like someone convinced that they simply must have heard something incorrectly.

“What?” Dave replied.

“So what do you have to do?” he was sweating nervously.

Dave began to see a whole different side of this job and the yet untapped potential it could possibly offer in the entire area of acquiring alcohol with no intention of actually paying for it. This

might work out even better than a dog on stilts, he thought to himself. Then he realised where he was going wrong. Of course! Cats had better balance. It was all so obvious!

“Is everything alright?” he stammered, gazing at Dave who was gazing out into the universe—wherever that was.

“I’m going to ask you a question,” Dave told him. “I need you to answer honestly and as quickly as you can. Your answer could be critical!”

The assistant looked as if he was about to collapse under all this responsibility. He sweated profusely and his face was glowing red, but he nodded in agreement in spite of it all.

“What sound do your doors make?”

“What sound...?” The man looked around the front of the store, a look of bewilderment on his face.

“Well...?” Dave snapped.

“We don’t have any doors,” he shrugged. “It’s a shop. The whole front is open for customers.”

Dave looked around and, sure enough, there were no doors. He made a note on his terminal and said, “He made a note on his terminal.”

“I don’t understand,” the young man mumbled, very confused, as if reality was no longer a thing solid enough for him to stand comfortably on. “Why would you say that out loud?”

“Probably an error in the printing process, or something went wrong with the formatting,” Dave told him. “It happens all the time. Publishing is a very human process.”

The man’s mouth opened as if to speak, but his mind was only filled with rational thoughts and none of them quite seemed to fit.

“Did you know that modern glass isn’t glass at all?” Dave snapped suddenly, pointing the probe at him which immediately flashed red. The man backed away as if the thing was horrifying.

In Germany, a man on a bicycle was hit by a bus.

“We call it glass but, actually, it’s a composite of recycled razor-blades, the breath of a rare kind of llama and a key ingredient used in the manufacture of green curry.”

“Really?” The man frowned, but looked unconvinced.

“Quite possibly,” Dave said and nodded with a quite serious expression. “This means that when you tap it, it makes no sound at all since doing so would actually be quite unnecessary and show a worrying lack of efficiency.”

“OK,” the assistant agreed, still looking unconvinced but at least able to follow along with this.

“We add the sound artificially for the sake of customer convenience.” His explanation was as good as any and he almost believed it himself. He believed the universe was probably just that stupid. “Even its ability to shatter into horribly dangerous little glass blades is added artificially for safety purposes.”

“So you’re testing all our bottles to see if they make the right sound? Is that all?” He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Apparently so. That’s going to be fun for me, isn’t it?” Dave sighed, as he looked over the walls of bottles. Perhaps it would be easier to just pay. Perhaps it would indeed, but Dave was a victim of his nature, and there was a greater chance that a jewel encrusted lion would appear from his anus and dance the bolero, while juggling pregnant male cats, each dressed in motorcycle armour that wasn’t quite waterproof. Dave knew this only too well, and proceeded with a sigh.

Phil Bothan picked up a cheese sandwich which was alarmingly expensive. Tasty, it was not. He had eaten three already that week; and the packaging that said that it was a filling, fresh and delicious sandwich was an outright lie in almost every instance.

He wandered aimlessly around the store, just killing time, rather than for any other more practical reason. He picked up an album by one of his favourite bands, 'grammaticAL Disaster' and absently read the back of the case.

Music was no longer stored on a physical medium of any kind and had transcended the digital realm a century before. The case contained a disclaimer form and a delicious cardboard disk. Most bands thought it would be hilarious to have a 3D hologram of massively offensive things printed on the cardboard, but this band had only a lack of punctuation on the warning sticker.

He decided that, for only four credits, he would give the album a try, as it would use up even more time later on.

The disk was intended to be eaten and, once absorbed, it would encode the music to the user's DNA and could easily be read by a headphone-scanner set. The music industry had been rather proud of this innovation, as they claimed it cut down piracy. This wasn't entirely the case, and in several of the Frontier worlds you could buy a small plastic clip that attached to the headset of most music scanners. These were designed to accept a severed finger, nose or eyeball. The industry chose to pretend that this never happened, while quietly making little plastic clips to sell.

The industry enjoyed the additional benefit that very few customers asked for a refund. It could be arranged on the return of the cardboard disk that you had eaten but required three months in a radiation tank having your DNA recoded.

Few people survived.

The disclaimer inside the case warned of the harsh penalties against software piracy, which was only theoretically possible if you ate the brain of someone with an original recording. The penalties were far more severe than other legal concerns that might arise from such an act, even on some of the Frontier colonies, where murder and cannibalism were only frowned upon. It also warned in large letters that the contents were very likely to give you indigestion and, in very small letters, possibly space-cancer.

As the music was encoded permanently to the DNA of the user, people had become slightly more selective of the bands they listened to and Jazz had become virtually extinct. The only notable problem was that an increasing number of parents were reporting that their child's first words were somewhat inappropriate.

"grammaticAL Disaster? They're 1 of my (favourite bands)" the assistant nodded in appreciation. "its a great album. i loved it"

"I ave several other's of theirs. nIse to meet a felow fan?" Phil replied.

The assistant rang it all for him and the price floated holographically above the counter. "Y iss that man tapping all you're bottles?" Phil pointed to where Dave was rapidly losing the will to live.

"security chek 2 make sure they al make the right safety noise," the assistant shrugged. "I dont realy no."

"Impressive!" Phil seemed impressed. "I wish the SCAR office was as efficient as your security."

"That will be 8.4 credits, please."

"Here it is!" Dave held it out before him. "There's always one that doesn't make the grade and it's my job to find it."

“And it’s broken?” The assistant looked at it fearfully, as though Dave was holding out the decaying remains of a dead rat, full of diseases that could liquidise human flesh in minutes.

Of course, he had little to worry about, as the majority of the rats were largely confined to the lower level waste management and food replication deck. Luckily, they were dealt with by a specially developed virus, delivered by weaponised hornets.

It hadn’t been an entirely successful campaign, since the rats had developed not just an immunity against the virus, but a taste for hornets. The solution was to add more hornets, which in turn caused a spike in the rat population. The eventual solution on board the Nebulous was just to stuff both the rats and the hornets into the food processors and raise the price of indigestion medicine in the ship’s pharmacy.

“If a customer had found this, we would have all lost our jobs,” he told him with a respectfully lowered voice.

“Really?” he frowned.

“Well, you would have,” Dave told him. “I would have had to sack you. Then, of course, you would have had to leave the vessel at the next space-port, or sooner, if we happened to be passing a suitably large rock.

“You would have to pay for your room up to that point, which would have been moved to the VIP quarters on the bill and to the crew’s toilets in a more real sense. It’s never pretty to have to see, and consequently I never have.”

“They do that?” the assistant gasped and seemed horrified.

“Doesn’t that sound like the sort of thing the company would do?” Dave shrugged.

He nodded that it was and Dave nodded with him. It did seem vaguely plausible, perhaps even likely.

“So I’m going to take this bottle down to security and have it destroyed humanely. There’s obviously a huge safety concern that this bottle might not have the artificial capacity to shatter into a thousand deadly shards of razor-edged unpleasantness.” Dave held up the bottle of expensive Polish vodka, really expensive Polish vodka.

This bottle was so expensive that the vodka in it very likely had come from Poland. This was even more likely since ‘Poland’ was the name of a small town in Northern China that specialised in copying low-end vodka that frequently made women grow beards. What it made men grow was far worse.

“OK, thanks,” he said and smiled in relief, backing away from it as though it were more dangerous than a venomous snake with a suicide vest strapped to it, or anything built in small towns in Northern China. “Just leave me the certificate.”

“What?” Dave stopped in his tracks.

“The requisition order!”

“The repetition what?” he managed to somehow repeat incorrectly.

“The S45 certificate from security for the price of the bottle. I have to cash it out of stock.”

“That’s a nuisance,” Dave said thoughtfully.

The security office was the heart of law and order for the entire ship. Consequently, it was a tiny thing, poorly equipped and staffed only by Bernard, the security guard, who had no idea what he was doing and even less idea what everyone else was doing.

He was armed only with a short stick with which he was allowed to point angrily. He could be found in the afternoons snoozing in his office between his routine patrols. It was still only

lunchtime but Dave was confident the same would be true, as it was essentially always true.

“Bernard?” Dave called out. The office was tiny. It had only a desk and a computer terminal, and along the opposite side of the room was a pile of cluttered spare parts and tools. The engineering crew regularly stored their tools there for safety. The reason for this was that nobody ever went to the security office and at least this way somebody used it for something other than having a little nap.

Bernard roused from his slumber, darting his eyes wearily about and checking his uniform was straight. It wasn’t and it remained that way, despite his inadequate and somewhat meagre efforts.

“Who? Who?” the weary old man called out angrily, wincing and squinting his eyes.

“My name is…” He thought about it carefully, since a mistake at this delicate juncture could ruin the whole plan. It was a time for subtlety, he decided. “Satan, from passenger services.”

“Is there a problem, Mr Satan?” He looked, not quite excited, but slightly interested, and slightly more awake than before. Certainly, he was slightly more awake than a man who had, for instance, spent a quiet day drinking warm milk laced with sleeping drugs, counting endless fluffy sheep as they passed listlessly by, while being very gently and soothingly battered around the face and neck with a large plank of wood.

“No,” Dave told him. Bernard slumped back in the chair and began muttering something unintelligible. He made out the words, ‘never is’ and possibly the word, ‘oranges.’

Dave sat down on a pile of engineering equipment worth more than a small island, but probably just one with a lot of giant man-

eating spiders. “I bet you must wish something would happen down here, don’t you?”

“Nothing ever happens down here,” Bernard sighed wistfully. “I’m less useful than that idiot who tests the sensory feedback devices.”

Dave frowned, “I hear he’s witty, handsome and charming.”

“That’s not what I hear,” the old man laughed, in a way that shook his whole body, before the laughter withered into a coughing fit that Dave felt he totally deserved. “I hear he drinks hot coffee out of paper cups.”

At this point in human history, this was the most cutting and hilariously clever insult a person could make. While this speaks rather poorly of this chapter of human history and seems utterly nonsensical to outsiders, it is worth remembering that in the twenty first century, people bought Justin Bieber records and believed what the government told them.

“Maybe something interesting could be happening that you’ve not heard about?” Dave suggested, leaning forward and winking knowingly, salvaging a shred of his dignity; and, to be fair, there hadn’t been much more than a shred in the first place.

“You got a tip for me?” the old man asked expectantly, his old eyes beginning to light up excitedly.

Dave rubbed his chin and asked, “What would a tip be worth to you, Bernard?”

“I guess I could make it worth your while,” the old man grumbled. His brain was chugging over the information carefully, but not actually quickly and much closer to the exact polar opposite of quickly, than actually quickly.

Dave smiled and leaned back in the chair. “Well, I do believe in law and order, for which I have the very greatest of respect.” It

was a testament to Dave's ability to lie and to Bernard's ability to fail to recognise such lies that nobody burst out laughing. Dave was rather proud of them both for this.

"You look like a good boy, Mr Satan," Bernard said, squinting for all he was worth. Dave nodded that of course he was. Of course he was!

"I just came down to collect an S45 certificate." Dave pushed a hand-written letter of authorisation across the desk. Where he had got the crayons from was anyone's guess. "As for the tip, I think I should just give that to you from one man who believes in law and order to our fine, upstanding head of authority."

Bernard grinned.

"I will just need to borrow your computer terminal for just a moment so that I can show you what I'm talking about."

Bernard stood up and gestured to it, actually gesturing somewhere quite a way from it, "Be my guest."

"I just need to set a little timer and use my diagnostic probe." He set it to glow red by waving it about a bit. "Oh, I just need your authorisation to access the security grid." Dave smiled innocently while Bernard typed it in impatiently and handed it back. "And the security cameras... It's all very complicated, isn't it? I hope I don't do anything wrong."

Something terrible happened in Germany.

Rob slumped down into his usual seat at the bar. He looked exhausted, over-worked, under-appreciated, fed up and slightly pathetic.

Dave slapped him on the back and told him precisely that, which ultimately was even more depressing.

“Are you ready for some lunch?” Dave seemed without a care in the world, as if his work was the least taxing thing he’d done since getting out of bed. In fact, he looked the same as always, only a slightly cleaner shade of dirty.

“Can’t you get me a job pointing a plastic probe at noises coming from things that don’t really make noises?” Rob sighed.

“I clearly have a huge influence with everyone on the ship, so that should be absolutely no problem,” Dave said, with a note of sarcastic seriousness.

“It’s a good job I wasn’t really relying on you for anything.” Rob smirked at him lethargically, as if the effort of doing so was almost too much.

“That would be a huge mistake,” Dave told him. “Unless you wanted to rely on me to get drunk and do something stupid. I’m pretty sure I could manage that without a great deal of effort.

“It almost comes naturally.”

“I would say I can do that myself, but you do it far more professionally than I ever could,” Rob told him.

He waved to the barman as he was passing and, although the barman tried to ignore him, it was too late. He came over grumbling.

“I will take that as a compliment, because it’s as close as I generally get!”

“No macaroni with cheese today,” Rob grumbled and frowned, closed his eyes and shook his head at the very thought. “Something different today.”

“No problem,” Dave told him. He turned to the barman. “Can I have cheese please, with macaroni in it? Twice please?”

“How is that different?” Rob grumbled at him some more.

“Have we learned a lesson here?” Dave waved a finger at him. “I warned you that no good could come of relying on me for

anything and yet you ignored my advice, which under the circumstances was precisely the correct thing to do for the advised reason.” He paused a moment and then admitted, “I’ve confused myself, Rob.”

“You did warn me. Good point,” Rob laughed. “I’ll eat the macaroni as a fitting punishment.”

“I actually have some good news for once. Really good news.”

Rob looked intrigued. “That’s good. I could really use some. Actually, I have some bad news.”

“You first!” Dave said.

“The ship won’t be stopping at the Grale 2 colony out in the Frontier on this tour. Apparently, there’s some kind of biological outbreak. All the wildlife is being attacked by a foreign infection of some kind,” Rob told him, clearly very disappointed. “I was hoping to go there. It was one of the highlights of the trip for me.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing,” Dave said with a grin. “We’ll probably divert to Grannymeer 4 instead. They brew a kind of whiskey that makes your toenails fall off. Also, the local girls are affected by the radiation from the asteroid belt and have the biggest breasts anywhere in Alliance space, with morals that would put the girls in the docking levels, and even your own mother, to shame.”

“I thought all that was just a rumour,” Rob said and raised an eyebrow.

“You know your mother better than I do,” Dave said with a shrug. “But, in any case, I guess maybe you’ll find out for yourself very soon.”

“OK.” Rob seemed to accept his fate and seemed to have accepted that his fate was no longer his to steer. “You mentioned something about good news.”

“Oh yes!” Dave snapped up. “You’re going to do me a favour!”

“Oh, that is good news,” Rob said sarcastically and sighed to himself.

“I need you to pick up a thing for me in the chief of passenger services office at 3 pm. There should be an envelope on the corner of the desk. I need you to collect that and drop it off at my old supervisor, Martin,” Dave told him.

He slammed a bottle down on the bar that had been wrapped in brown paper. “Leave this in its place. It’s his birthday and if he sees this, he’ll think it was me working and I’ll get away with it.”

“Why am I doing this?” Rob frowned.

“I’m sorry,” Dave told him without a shred of sincerity. “I’m meant to do it. Make sure the chief isn’t in so he doesn’t realise I’m skipping out. Tuck the envelope under Martin’s door so he thinks it was from me. It’s just next week’s rota but I’m going to be busy at 3. I have important things to do.”

“OK, I’ll do it,” Rob grumbled. “What are you going to be doing that’s so important?”

“I’m going to be asking Darma from ‘customer-relations’ out on a date,” Dave grinned.

“You’re such a selfish asshole, sometimes. You never think of anyone but yourself, do you?” Rob shook his head in annoyance.

Dave agreed.

“You’re going to make me late back to my shift just so you can have a shot with a girl with big breasts,” Rob moaned, scowling at him. “Does she have big breasts?”

“She has very big breasts, Rob,” he said, nodding in agreement.

“Fine!” Rob grunted.

Dave slapped him on the back. “Good man!” he said enthusiastically.

“She’s not going to go out with you!” Rob told him. “She probably has a brain!”

“I think you’re probably right.” Dave smiled and suspiciously nodded in agreement.

Darma was well known throughout the ship. The interior of a vessel was a thing of metal, plastic and practicality. Even the more aesthetic passenger areas were primarily designed by the demands of internal dimensions, costing, and other practical concerns. Other areas were little more than walls of repetitive panelling painted a reasonably attractive colour. In an environment as barren as this, a thing such as Darma shone out like a beacon of outstanding natural beauty.

She was apparently an intelligent girl, attractive and with a body that was kept lean by frequent maintenance in the ship’s gym, where she was a well-known attraction. What really set her apart was that nature had deemed fit to give her a pair of breasts that were totally out of proportion with her otherwise diminutive frame. Dave had noticed.

“Can I help you, Mister...?” she asked, as Dave sat opposite making only fleeting eye contact. The legend was true and brought a smile to his lips that wasn’t going anywhere any time in the foreseeable future.

“I’ve come on a personal matter!” Dave told her, mostly aiming the remark below her neck. “It’s Dave. Dave Brown. My name, Dave Brown.”

“Ok. How can I help you, Mr. Brown?” she prompted him to continue, already shifting uneasily under his unusually disconcerting stare.

“I’d like to ask you to have dinner with me tonight,” Dave told her, wrenching his eyes back up to hers with considerable effort.

“I don’t know you. I literally have no idea who you are beyond a representation of male oppression,” she told him, as if his suggestion was every bit as ridiculous as it was, but while seemingly trying to outdo him on the ridiculousness.

“You’ll never get to know me unless you have dinner with me,” he told her, perfectly reasonably, but still somehow making it sound unreasonable.

“I find your argument somewhat aggressive. I don’t wish to be oppressed by your gender-privilege and demand that you retract the comment immediately, since I can’t find a reasonable counter-argument for it!” She rolled her eyes. “And, in any case, I have a boyfriend.”

“I was more thinking along the lines of just the two of us,” he said with a frown.

“It’s unreasonable of you to assume that I’m simply mono-expressive and identify as gender-specific. Classifying myself as a single entity and one that conforms to your concept of gender opposition makes you an identity-violator. You’re violating my identity,” she said as words came out of her, some making a kind of sense, more or less.

“You have an interesting way of talking, which seems to involve a lot of mouth movements and noise, but which results in very little actually being said. However, I don’t think we should let that stand in the way of...” he paused and looked down again. “Let’s be serious: them.”

“Them?” She didn’t seem to like where this was going. Her mind cluttered with the latest batch of nonsensical keywords, but her brain didn’t seem quite able to arrange them into a sentence.

“You have the nicest breasts I’ve ever seen,” he told her earnestly. “I’m not going to let a boyfriend, or your strange rambling, stand in the way of true lust and even the slightest possibility of me being allowed to touch them.”

“I don’t believe I’m hearing this! You can’t have said what I thought you said. Imagining or even conceptualising a part of my body as non-male is power-vampirism. I could report you to the Captain for this thinking of the thoughts that you’ve verbalised,” she said, nearly vibrating with rage.

“I’m just saying what every man on this ship is thinking, although thinking might be too strong a verb as very few men have enough blood for both ends of our bodies to function properly at the same time, and you inspire the opposite end to our brains, or at least mine.

“Other male experiences might vary, of course.”

As much as she found his comments brutally offensive, a part of her seemed to have flushed with pride, as she maybe realised that he had begun to dominate her with his oppression, or some such nonsense.

“I think you ought to leave now and I will be filing a complaint with the recommendation that you be forced to undergo sensitivity re-education.”

“I’ll pay you,” he suggested, extremely calmly.

She didn’t seem to take that suggestion very well. Her face fell: she looked genuinely confused for a moment and then angry, furiously angry. She went very quiet and her expression hardened into something that hovered between rage and total indignation.

“I can offer you ten thousand credits.”

“Ten thousand?” she said in notable surprise at such a huge sum. Her voice lowered somewhat. It lowered from a piercing squeal

to a more normal level and she leaned slightly forwards to him.

“Really? Just to have dinner?”

Dave grinned at her. “So, now we’ve established what you are, all that remains is a negotiation regarding the price.”

“Get out,” she told him. “Get out and never come back here again.”

“Dave Brown.” he told her with a happy smile as he got up to leave. “That name again is Dave Brown. Have a nice day.”

Later that afternoon, Martin stepped into the Captain’s office with his portable terminal at the ready, loaded with the week’s job rotas and projections. Bernard, the security chief was already there, waiting for him alongside the Captain.

“Good afternoon, Mr Paul. Please take a seat,” she said with a voice that hinted, just hinted, that all was not entirely well.

He took the seat she offered and cast a very slightly dubious glance towards Bernard as he moved to his side.

“I have my rota for next week, Sir,” he said, handing the terminal over and placing it on the desk. The Captain sat staring back at him in silence. “Is everything alright, Sir?”

“No,” she told him earnestly. “I’m rather afraid that everything is not alright. We have a little problem.”

“Can I help?” he asked and cast a slightly more worried expression to the security chief.

Bernard reached down beside him and brought up a brown envelope which he placed on the desk on top of the supervisor’s terminal.

Martin closed his eyes as the unmistakable bloom of panic began to unfold throughout his entire being. Sweat prickled at his brow: he became dizzy, his face reddened and his stomach churned.

“I take it you recognise this?” she said.

“No, Captain,” he said, trying his luck.

“Well, it was discovered in your desk and we do have a video recording of you reading the contents and then dancing around your office, punching the air in victory,” she told him. “It appears to be the answers for the exam you’re due to take later on this week.”

“I have no idea how it could have got there,” Martin stammered, but his attempt to lie was appalling.

“Dave Brown did this!” Martin spat the words out. “He got them for me.”

“No, he didn’t,” the Captain told him. Martin’s face dropped as he realised something had gone horribly wrong and that thing appeared to be his entire existence. His whole life flashed before him and he found the experience quite depressing.

“We’ve already checked,” Bernard added.

“I don’t understand.” Martin was shaking visibly by now.

“The reports went missing at around 3 pm when Mr Grayson left for a coffee, according to the passenger services chief’s sworn statement,” the Captain began. “There was a strange blackout for five minutes in all the security devices on the entire ship. That requires putting the ship’s computer into diagnostic mode and to do that you must have a supervisor code.

“Unfortunately for you, Dave can account for his whereabouts at that time. Dave additionally doesn’t have supervisor access and you do. The evidence is quite overwhelming.”

“He’s lying,” Martin stammered.

“No. I wish he was, but he was being incredibly sexually inappropriate to a member of the crew who has made a very detailed report about his appalling conduct—excruciatingly detailed, in fact.”

she told him, rolling her eyes. “He is a petty nuisance, a minor pain in my arse, but he’s not a cheat and he’s not a thief.”

“I’m not a thief!” Martin pleaded, but he already knew it was hopeless. He had been caught by his own stupidity. Dave hadn’t the brains to set him up deliberately and clearly hadn’t the brains to get a copy of a set of exam results without causing a security incident, either.

He hated him. He hated him with a burning passion, but blaming him was as futile as trying to argue his way out of the situation. He had cheated: he was guilty of that, at least, and the consequences of getting caught were coming, whether he liked it or not.

“Please...” he said weakly.

“Hand over your identification,” the Captain told him. “The chief of security will escort you back to your cabin where you will remain until we arrive at the next dock. You will be removed from the vessel and will not be paid the remainder of your benefits. If you wish to dispute any aspect of the specifics of your termination, there is a wall near the landing docks on Cirrus 3 that you are more than welcome to go and talk to.”

“It was Dave,” he said softly, some feeble last attempt to argue his way out. “He said he’d get me anything I wanted.”

“Why would Dave possibly go to all this trouble?” she sneered at him. “Dave is just a minimum-wage idiot. He has a massive array of mental disorders, he plays stupid pranks, he annoys everyone, and he drinks too much and then collapses in the toilets all too regularly.

“According to the security scans, he’s currently on level 5, wandering around with a Mexican hat he found in a rubbish bin, telling passengers he’s from the future where it was discovered that pork tacos were the most powerful fuel ever known to exist.

“He doesn’t care about anything enough to do something like this. He literally doesn’t care about anything.”

“He wanted a favour from me and promised to get me anything I wanted. He wanted a favour,” Martin pleaded.

“You’re a thief and a liar. Get out of my office.”

Dave walked into the upper cafe with his terminal under his arm and waved to Rob, who was busily serving a plate of something unutterably appalling to people who appeared largely similar. He seemed surprised and shrugged at him, a gesture of curiosity as to why he might be there.

Dave held up his diagnostic probe and shouted, “I’m here to probe your supervisor,” loudly enough for every customer to hear; and various people turned to see what the fuss was about. Sporadic chuckling sounded around the room.

He let himself in through the door and saw Ruth at the other end of the kitchen, doing whatever it was that highly professional supervisors do, and doing it with the accompaniment of a large glass of rum.

The kitchen was little more than a bench with various serving hatches, where food was delivered in various forms to be assembled by people laughably described as chefs, who were adding slight imperfections to make the effect seem more realistic.

The nearest person was adding some garnish from a tray of sterilised pubic hairs. Of course they weren’t real pubic hairs: that would be disgusting. These were food-quality pubic hairs, grown on the back of genetically engineered rats that had been injected with DNA fragments of Turkish women.

“Dave,” she waved and slurred very slightly. “What brings you here to this little corner of paradise?”

“I have a favour to ask,” he admitted almost meekly.

“You’ve always got a favour to ask!” She gave him a well-meaning frown and then smiled at him. “Come on, then, let’s hear it, but this had better be good.”

“Well, we’re docking at Cirrus tomorrow. I was hoping you could let Rob off his shift so I could show him the planet. He is the new boy after all,” Dave said and gave her an optimistic expression, a face pleading for her help.

“Half the crew wants the day off,” she told him and shook her head. “I’m down to a skeleton staff as it is. I don’t think I can spare him.

“Sorry, Dave. Not this time.”

“No problem,” he said with a smile. He took out his terminal and flicked on the screen. He held it up for her. “Martin Paul swapped round the rota for me to give you extra cover. He loves doing me favours, you see.”

She looked at the rota which was perfectly in order and grinned at him.

“How did you get Martin to agree to this? He hates you. He said that the fact that you exist is proof that there can’t be a god. He said that there must have been a genetic experiment to cross the DNA of a particularly ugly chimp with a potato.

“He said he once heard you say that you thought that books were a convenient portable storage method for toilet paper with a fancy cover.”

“Perhaps he was talking about a different Dave?” he suggested. “Dave Brown is a pretty common name.”

“There aren’t many Dave Browns on the ship who look like a godless chimpanzee-potato,” she said, as she sipped a large quantity of rum and giggled to herself.

“The last one is actually true. Kind of,” Dave said, as he bit his lip thoughtfully. “But he must have been joking about the rest, since he gave me the staff to cover for Rob.” He grinned.

“OK then,” she huffed and then winked at him. “Just because he’s the new boy, you can have him for the day. You’d better make it two days, knowing what you’re like when you start Slamming the Hammers.”

“Thanks, Ruth. I like where your head is at,” he told her happily. “I owe you one.”

“Yeah, you owe me one,” she told him sarcastically.

The Captain stared grimly at her office terminal. Things were happening aboard her ship that she never thought she'd ever have to deal with. It was a sad day indeed and her expression was accordingly one of anguished resolution, slightly mixed with disappointed sadness, slightly tempered with utter frustration, with just a hint of melancholy. Luckily, frequent meetings with Dave had prepared her for just exactly this kind of thing.

She looked up from the reports as Dave walked into her office uninvited, the door sliding open with an annoying rasping sound that reminded her very much of a flatulent baboon.

"Mr Brown?" she challenged him haughtily, being in no fit mood for such nonsense, especially from something that also, oddly, reminded her very much of a flatulent baboon.

"Hello Captain." He glared at her with the same expression of pointed annoyance that she usually reserved for him. He was hardly a stranger to her office but was usually invited, often dragged there by a superior.

"I didn't call you here. What are you doing?" she demanded, irritated at the disruption and making no attempt to disguise it. "I am extremely busy, as you can imagine. I'm familiarising myself with the specifics of a quite horrible incident aboard this ship, so I can quite well do without your foolish antics today."

"I can imagine," he told her, sounding rather sarcastic.

"I imagine you've heard what's happened. Under the circumstances your usual mischief is now the least of my problems. Now, get out before I have security punish you in some horribly inventive fashion," she told him.

He frowned at her. "Yeah, a murder on board our own starship. Whatever next?"

“Exactly,” she snapped. “Go away, Dave. Whatever it is, it can wait.”

“Well, there’s a little problem with that,” Dave told her, as he leant across her desk and stared at her.

She looked up and was slightly taken back at his forthright approach, the hint of anger in his voice, the way he stared directly at her. She felt very much as if he was challenging her. It wasn’t like him, although she had often thought of him as challenging in a very different way.

“Mr. Brown?” she scowled.

“I know the truth about you,” he told her softly.

“The truth?”

“Yeah. The truth. I know it,” he told her. “I know the truth. Why don’t I tell you what happened today?”

Chapter 7

What happened today

The alarm went off, a searing blast of irritating noise that dragged Rob into a world that he was not entirely ready to go to. This was, coincidentally, much the same way in which he tended to think of Dave, in fact.

“Morning,” he muttered, rolling over and slowly, dimly, accepting that the breakfast shift loomed ahead of him like the warm and fluffy interior of a velvet noose.

“Morning,” Dave grunted wearily across the room. “I need coffee, ten more hours of sleep, a pair of huge breasts fitted to someone with poor self-esteem, a pillow stuffed with money, an endless supply of hash browns with cheese, a fruit-bowl full of amphetamines and a reason to live. I specifically put in a request for these things last night and I wake up to find I have none of them. Typical of the service on this horrible joke of a ship.”

“Damn the inefficiency of this place!” Rob told him, rather sarcastically, since Dave was largely responsible for a great deal of the inefficiency he was complaining about. He shifted himself out of bed and began taking pole-position in the race to use the shower, serious business as Dave frequently used it as a toilet and didn’t always confine himself to expelling urine.

“I really did put in a requisition order for these things with the division chief yesterday afternoon,” Dave grumbled, “and nothing. No sign of any of the things that I feel are essential to my emotional wellbeing.”

“Really?” Rob wondered why it still seemed unbelievable when Dave told him about the stupid things he did. “And you didn’t get anything in return? Honestly, that’s hard to believe.”

“I got another appointment for a psyche evaluation in two weeks,” Dave told him. “Although, I guess he does serve coffee, so I’m counting it as a partial win.”

“I’m going to jump in the shower,” Rob told him. “Why don’t you grab us a coffee each and then we’ll go for breakfast before my shift starts.”

“Why don’t I? Me? Why don’t I get the coffee? Me? I don’t even know how. Why would I know how?” he said in horrified surprise as he dragged himself up in bed, frowning angrily. “This is outside of my comfort zone. This isn’t how things work, and it’s not how they’re meant to work.”

In every crew cabin there was a dispenser that could supply a wide variety of liquid refreshment. The interface was a simple verbal system and all that was required was for the user to request the drink he required and to hold a suitable container beneath the nozzle. It was so simple that a child could do it, perhaps even a gifted dog. The emitter was cleverly self-cleaning so that there was never any cross contamination, although in practice everything tasted slightly of chicken soup, whether anyone had ever ordered that before or not.

Everything had been carefully thought out and the system was considered a fool-proof design, an elegant work of polished genius. Sadly, the production had been outsourced to New China, a Frontier colony known to substitute quality for a slight saving in overall cost. Although the savings in costs were slight, the substitution, in terms of quality, was quite severe.

In fact, from New China the production had been further outsourced to the most basic place imaginable where quality was as foreign a concept as personal freedom: Old China.

The production costs of the devices were cut even further by substituting the hoses and tubing for genetically-engineered lengths of modified material built from crossing the basic form of a snake to the more cost-effective form of a chicken, since the waste material could be sold to a fast food outlet which was selling, what was now considered, gourmet cuisine.

While trying to copy a German automotive headlight design, using parts of a genetically-engineered bat crossed with a carrot and a really big magnet, there was a slight accident which inexplicably created a stable temporal wormhole when the light was shone on any blue surface. Rather than use such a discovery for the betterment of all mankind, it was used in an attempt to cut costs further in the development of a very slightly cheaper drinks dispenser.

The design matrix of the dispenser was sent back in time several weeks in the hopes of removing the development costs entirely from the equation. While that was sort of a good idea, kind of, it was sent back using Chinese technology and consequently failed quite spectacularly.

In the accident that followed, it was believed that the entire design matrix for drinks dispensers was sent back in time several centuries which caused a temporal collapse that erased the technology completely from existence and created a new breed of bat that only ate carrots.

The only evidence that remained that any of this had actually happened was the cliché that all drink dispensers in history always dispense drinks that taste a little like chicken soup, and that the latest

version had development costs nine thousand and eighteen times higher than initially budgeted for.

Rob came out of the shower with a strange notion about the development of wall dispensers, even more strange since everything that occurred to him had been erased from history and he therefore couldn't have known anything about it. He was rubbing a towel over his short, terrible hair when Dave gestured to the small desk area at the foot of his bed and Rob glared back at him.

“This appears to be chicken soup. There appears to be a plastic nozzle floating in it.”

“With milk and two sugars,” Dave added. “Just how I presume you like it. Not that I would know because I never get the coffee in the morning on account of how that's your job. I believe these facts have been firmly established and, therefore, no additional explanation is required.”

“You couldn't manage coffee? It had to be chicken soup?”

“I'm sure the machine did its best. It's working under very difficult conditions. Perhaps it will taste a little bit like coffee? That's how it works, isn't it?”

“You're a very difficult person, Dave,” Rob told him.

Dave nodded solemnly in agreement that, of course, this was perfectly true and a matter of no small amount of pride.

“Who would have believed that I'd end up sharing a cabin with a person so utterly out of step with reality that I would begin to wonder if I was actually insane myself? Who would believe that I could go and take a morning shower and come out expecting a cup of coffee, to find my left shoe full of chicken soup with a broken nozzle floating in it?”

“With milk and two sugars,” Dave reminded him.

“Is this your way of telling me that from now on I have to get the morning coffee?” Rob shrugged.

Dave nodded. “You should probably arrange to have the dispenser repaired, too. I can’t be expected to do everything around here. I’m only human, you know.”

Rob took a deep breath, braced himself and then left the cafe kitchen. His area had a customer in it already. He was reassuringly normal looking, a human male, sitting patiently with a menu in his hand.

“Good morning. How can I help?”

“Morning,” the customer said back, frowning very slightly.

“You look familiar!”

“I do?” Rob frowned back and peered at the man more closely. Nothing particularly occurred to him.

“You were down on Cirrus?” the passenger asked.

Rob nodded and stared back blankly.

“I was back at the parking bay while you were passed out. You looked as if you’d had a good night.”

“Ah!” Rob winced at the still-painful memories of waking up covered in blood-tinged vomit. “Yes, that was a good day, although I don’t remember how it ended. My friend tells me it’s best I don’t know.”

“Well, from what I hear, your friend is probably right,” he told him with a smile. “I’m Phil, by the way.”

“Rob.” He tapped his name-badge which actually said, ‘Bob’ and was upside down.

“Your friend works in the engineering department, doesn’t he?” Phil asked conversationally.

“That might be over-stating it slightly,” Rob huffed to himself. “I think that’s more of a theory than a practice. In fact, every part of that sentence is completely wrong.”

“I wonder if he’d help me,” Phil asked. “I’m having a lot of trouble with sending and receiving messages from home.”

“Have you tried the SCAR office?” Rob suggested. Phil shook his head and winced.

“You could ask him, I guess,” he shrugged, hardly able to imagine how Dave could do anything but make a situation worse.

“Where would I find him?”

Dave found himself out of his comfort zone and that zone was a very large place. It encompassed violations of societal norms, total lack of morality and behaviour bordering on both side of the boundaries of criminality. It began where sanity ended: it started where reason finished and it was very comfortable indeed, if you happened to be legally classified as ‘psychologically hazardous.’

Whatever it was, this wasn’t it.

A passenger complaint had meant he was urgently needed to attend an emergency toilet repair. This was a not entirely welcome or unwelcome break from the usual routine and was actually sparking a little nostalgia for the good old days of delivering towels and making sure the conveniences were fully convenient.

The passenger in question was the fattest person he had ever met in real life. The toilet had failed just before the electronic flushing system activated and the team sent to repair it were discussing tactics while donning their Hazmat-suits and shaking their heads sadly.

“This is so embarrassing!” She was sitting on her bed, literally too large to fit into any of the chairs in her cabin, or any two of them

pushed together. She smelled quite appalling, the faint aroma of wet fur and old burger grease combined with inadequately cleaning herself with whatever rag on a stick she might have sometimes employed.

“Why won’t it flush? Why do these things always have to happen to me?”

“Have you ever stuffed so much food in your mouth that you were simply unable to swallow?” Dave told her sympathetically, but not very sympathetically. He presumed that she had, many times. He continued in his most sympathetic tone. “It’s just like that, only it’s a toilet, so this is a far greater accomplishment.

“You have literally climbed the Mount Everest of embarrassment and are proudly perched on the very foul-smelling summit. Toilet design and the basics of plumbing and engineering will have to be re-written. I’m honoured to be here at this historic moment.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” she snapped at him.

“Then I’m sure you can appreciate how we must feel,” he said, glancing over to the team. Four stout men were steadying their nerves and brandishing electronic plungers while waiting for the bravado to kick in. Straws were being drawn: regrets were being felt about choices they’d made in their lives. Suicide was being considered.

“This is your job,” she gurgled and may have scowled at him, but the rolls of flesh obscured much of her ability to express emotions facially. “I have a condition. It’s not my fault.”

“I have a condition, too,” he smiled happily and dragged a chair over. “My condition means I have difficulty controlling my behavioural impulses. I don’t really concern myself properly with the

outcomes of my actions. I don't empathise with the suffering of others but don't really care about it, either.

"Also, sometimes I dream about killing accountants. What does yours do?"

"Well, I'm large," she stammered, pointing at herself with her swollen appendages.

"No," Dave laughed. "This goes beyond large. This goes further than a little lack of self-control. I drink too much beer sometimes: that's a lack of personal discipline. What you are is a monstrosity of epic proportions. You don't get like that by making a little mistake once in a while. You get like that after many years of complete personal abuse and a total lack of personal responsibility."

"How dare you!" she flustered in rage, her arms flailing around like two little spoons stirring a bowl of porridge.

"You've never heard this before?" Dave laughed even harder.

The emergency team in their Hazmat suits were watching with morbid amusement, like bystanders at the scene of a slow-motion accident.

"You didn't realise that things had got a bit out of hand when the act of blinking gave you chest-pains?"

She began to wail angrily, kicking her legs around impotently and lolling about on the bed which creaked and groaned beneath her.

"Well, here's a wake-up call for you," he grinned at her.

"You've blocked a starship toilet so badly that it's going to take four men in hazard protection suits to unblock it. I've never even heard of this happening before, even when we serve Indian food."

She was starting to cry but was still flailing around helplessly.

"It's as if you have a super-power. You could fight crime," he told her earnestly, which in his head, probably made some kind of sense.

“You can’t talk to me like this!” she wailed at him, her voice barely audible as she choked back her tears.

“Why not?” He beamed a happy smile. “It doesn’t do you any good for people to wait in silence while you shuffle awkwardly past in painful slow motion before breaking into a round of offensive jokes about you amidst muted laughter. Endless counsellors telling you to just accept yourself isn’t going to make the problem go away, or magically stop everyone around you from thinking what I’m saying.”

“It’s not my fault,” she screamed through her tears. “I can’t afford the surgery.”

“That’s even more hilarious!” He slapped her arm as if they’d shared a joke. “It’s not your fault because you can’t shift the responsibility for your lack of control to someone else. It’s clearly never occurred to you that it is your fault, because you never took responsibility for your own actions.”

“But...” she whimpered and the thrashing slowed down.

“Surgery is an excuse. It’s letting someone else deal with your problems for you, instead of facing up to them. That’s what you’ve been doing with food: ignoring the real issues and never accepting that the blame is ultimately yours.”

“No...” she whimpered softly.

“Now these four brave gentlemen will have to do battle with a toilet that you’ve choked to death, a thing considered impossible,” he told her as she quietly began to listen to him. “They have to wade into an unfeasibly huge mountain of faecal matter because of you, and all you could say was that you found the situation embarrassing. It never even occurred to you that you have put these men in a horrendous position because of the choices you’ve made.”

“What...” she stammered. “I don’t...”

“Don’t you think it’s time you did something about it?
Something real...”

Bernard stood in the cabin doorway rubbing his chin. He had heard someone say, once, to be careful what you wish for; and now that phrase was haunting his mind, bouncing around his skull like a ricocheting bullet from a suicide gun.

The suicide gun was now illegal, of course, but several hundred years ago, around the beginning of the twenty-first century, it had been the fastest selling weapon in history. In simple terms, it was a pistol-grip with a single-shot bolt and a short barrel attached at the top. The barrel, of course, pointed backwards and fired a metal cap containing a heavy rubber ball that broke away after hitting anything solid. Too light to escape the skull once it had entered, the ball bounced around, shredding the brain in a matter of a few fractions of a second. Death usually followed quite swiftly, especially if you were using your brain at the time.

With the total financial collapse of the western world, these weapons were suddenly in huge demand and there were countless different models available. Some were cheaper, to appeal to the lower end of the market, for people already bankrupt; but there were also highly ornate and beautiful versions, which were usually given to bankers and politicians as retirement gifts.

It all went wrong, of course, when used second-hand weapons appeared on the market and there evolved a gangster style of using them against others by pointing the front of the gun at your own forehead in battle.

Mistakes were frequent.

Even this wouldn't have been so bad except that reversing the firing direction was actually quite a simple process. Once this was discovered, mistakes were suddenly even more frequent.

In the end, with redundancies occurring more often than suicide-gun accidents, these weapons were usually given out as part of a severance package in a government-sponsored attempt to cut back on benefit spending. Suspiciously, several political families owned shares in the companies that produced them.

Eventually humanity prevailed and they were banned because the kind of hard rubber used was known to cause a very nasty rash.

Bernard wondered why this had flashed through his mind in such detail, especially since nothing much flashed through his mind these days.

Two gentlemen from passenger resources had joined him to attend to the complaint and they stood uselessly by, gaping in horrified silence.

Bernard was an old security guard, a used-up man whose life was at another time and in another place. What was left was a shadow, cast from a better man whom he remembered only in fleetingly romantic fragments. Fortunately, as his brain was largely made of sand, he didn't remember it all that often.

On Earth, crime was largely a thing of the past, but out on the Frontier it was still a hard fact of life, or death, at least. He had served on a colony world as an enforcement officer after the war and had seen his share of death. At least, he thought he had.

During the conflict, he had once been a 'war-hammer,' but would no longer talk of such things without a great deal of alcohol, after which you couldn't really shut him up. They had been at the front line in space, the head of the battle fleets. After the Proxili

government declared war on Earth, he was part of the first wave of pre-emptive attacks.

His ship had been among the first to line up against a Proxili behemoth, a vast and intimidating vessel, bloated and red, hanging in space like a giant tumour. He and the other soldiers had cowered in the lower bays, never knowing what to expect. They were to be loaded into breaching tubes and fired from their vessel through the hulls of the alien ship so that the soldiers could attack from within.

He had never seen an alien before: none of them had. Suddenly, he was face to face with them. His brutally menacing plasma-cannon was pitched against their slightly stunned and confused expressions. It had not been a long fight – or a particularly fair one.

“I think she’s dead!” Ronnie from passenger services pointed to the girl. She was hanging from the ceiling by a rope around her neck. Her throat had been cut. She’d been disembowelled, shot three times with an incinerator-pistol, stabbed, beaten mercilessly around the head with a blunt instrument, her wrists slit and there was a bottle of poison near her feet. A gigantic poisonous spider was crawling up the opposite wall.

“I think this might be murder,” Bernard told him, accompanied by the sounds of vomiting from the other man. “Who could have done something like this?”

Phil found Dave outside the large passenger’s cabin where four stout men were trembling like frightened children. She had somehow managed to get herself into an upright position and was outside with him.

“...so the woman said, ‘I’m worried that if I eat that, my feet will smell like cheese and my noodles will make a happy life for

themselves in a galaxy completely occupied by sentient surf-boards called Ronald,” Dave said.

She laughed hysterically at the incredibly clever and insightful joke. Truly, it was one of the best either of them had ever heard.

“Thanks for everything,” she told him. “I guess I needed to hear that stuff earlier and I am going to change, Dave.”

“No, thank you,” he told her. “We recycle physical waste back into edible food. With that delivery you just made, we’ll be having a two-for-one sale tonight.”

She laughed out loud, her flesh doing a disturbing dance around her face as she did. “Only salads for me from now on. Plenty of exercise, too.”

“That’s the spirit,” he told her. “I’ll warn the kitchens that you’re coming so they have time to prepare you a bathtub full of lettuce. And, from now on, I’ll try to limit my beer intake down to excessive. No promises on that score, though. I honestly doubt I’ll make it to the end of this corridor before I give up on that one.”

She waddled back inside, supporting herself on the door frame as she hefted her mighty bulk along.

“Do you remember me?” Phil asked hopefully.

“Yeah, you’re the creepy man,” Dave smiled at him and reached out to shake his hand. “You were the only sober person that got back on that drop-pod ready to be shot back up into space. I don’t know what you were up to down there, and maybe I don’t want to know.”

“Nothing bad,” he assured him.

“What happens on shore-leave, stays on shore-leave!” Dave shrugged. “Except to the Captain. You should have heard what she called me when I got back. She didn’t even know what I’d done. She just doesn’t seem to like me.”

“Actually, I was hoping for a favour,” Phil told him.

“Sure!” Dave shrugged and began fumbling through his back pocket. “No problem. Let me just get my price list.”

Phil frowned, the expression of a man who wasn’t sure if he was joking or not. He began: “I’m having a lot of trouble with messages. I haven’t been able to send anything while I’ve been aboard and nothing is getting through to me, either. I sent a message from the planet but have no way to see if my family received it.”

“Have you been to the SCAR office?” Dave asked him.

Phil winced and nodded “They’re not even open today. They’ve been pretty useless.”

“The girl who works there, Carol, she’s a complete idiot. You know that noise when you blow up a balloon and then stretch the nozzle so it makes that painful screaming noise?”

Phil nodded that he did while his expression shifted to add a distinct element of bewilderment.

“That’s the noise she makes when she has an orgasm. I mean, who does that? Weird, right?”

Phil stared incredulously, finding no real answer to a comment like that.

“I said we could go back to my room and get a pizza delivered. She said that would be fun and who should we get it delivered to,” Dave explained and shook his head sadly. “I wasn’t going to date her again but it was a slow week and she had just above average breasts. Amazingly just above average.”

“Yeah...” Phil frowned, struggling to find something to say. “I guess she was pretty annoying.”

“We went out for a week. Honestly, I could have killed her. But, those breasts...Slightly above average,” he sighed thoughtfully.

“Well, you told me you worked in the engineering department. I was wondering if there was any way you might be able to help with my message situation.”

“I shouldn’t think so,” he admitted. “Hasn’t anyone told you about me? I’m widely discussed among the crew.”

He sighed, “I was just hoping.”

“Two beers, payable as a deposit, ten beers as a consultancy fee with an additional two beers for each message we manage to transmit or receive,” Dave told him, holding up the price list which seemed strangely extensive and covered this exact eventuality.

“Fine,” Phil agreed quite happily. “That’s fine. I thought beer was free for the crew.”

“Nothing in this world is free!” Dave told him with an abundance of exuberance. “Well, beer is free for the crew, but it’s not nice beer. The stuff they give you tastes like what English lager would taste like if Germans made an efficient version of it and then outsourced the production to South East Asia for additional efficiency. The best beer you can get without paying is Heineken, which gives you an idea how disgusting the worst is.”

“No problem.” Phil wondered again if he was joking and how someone like this managed to function around normal people. He finally decided that this was the perfect time for the conversation to end. “Thanks very much for trying. How will I find you?”

“I’ll find you,” Dave told him with a knowing grin.

Phil watched him walk away. Suddenly, he turned and came back. He called out: “How do I actually find you? What room are you in?”

Bernard shuddered as he sat down in the Captain's office, his thoughts still dwelling on the report embedded on a terminal that rested on his lap. He huffed and sighed and shook his head sadly.

The room had a silent air of grim expectation.

She told him sourly, "Tell me what's happened."

"It was Carol Mitchell. She worked in the SCAR office for eight months. We think she was murdered," Bernard told her.

"A murder?" She scowled at nothing in particular. "A murder happened on an Alliance passenger ship? My Alliance passenger ship? You're sure?"

Bernard thought about the scene. "We're pretty sure it wasn't an accident."

"I can see from the report that it wasn't an accident!" she barked at him angrily.

Bernard could do nothing but agree, sigh some more and sadly shake his head.

"Tell me about the victim," she told him, trying to remain calm. "Why would someone want to kill her?"

"I can't say at this point," he told her, flicking his eyes over the report. "She had many friends. She was well-liked, no regular boyfriend, no problems at work."

"And yet someone decided to hang her from the roof while they beat her and then shot her to death?"

"She was also poisoned and..." Bernard winced. "We haven't managed to determine the exact cause of death quite yet. There's quite a lot to choose from."

"I'm not really concerned about the exact cause of death at this point." She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. "It's clear she didn't trip on a carpet while shaving. What concerns me is that we

appear to have a murderer on board and it could literally be anybody.”

Bernard told her very seriously, “I’m not qualified to investigate a murder.”

“I know you’re a private security guard now, but you used to be an enforcement officer, didn’t you?” she said.

“That was a long time ago. We didn’t run a lot of investigations. We mostly just used to hang suspects from trees.”

The Captain looked at him with a mixture of incredulous horror and impotent rage. “A ship is going to join us. The Alliance Defence Authority has sent a vessel to rendezvous with us. They’re engaged in a warp-jump now. They should be here in around four hours. We’ve dropped from hyper-luminal velocity in readiness.”

“They’ll take over the investigation?” Bernard seemed relieved and offended at the same time.

“You’ll assist,” she told him, “that is, presuming that you think you can manage to avoid hanging any suspects from trees until they get here?”

“I’ve managed to get us a whole bunch of free beers!” Dave bragged to Rob.

“It’s lunchtime, Dave,” Rob told him redundantly. “Is now the right time to be consuming a bunch of free beers?”

“Is this a trick question?” Dave looked away thoughtfully.

“I’m concerned about your education. We seem to be falling behind.”

Rob shrugged and reminded him, “We get free beer anyway, I don’t see really understand your obsession with getting free beer.”

“You’re missing the point!” Dave scowled, looking really quite angry.

“Then what is the point?” Rob asked.

“I don’t even know any more,” he grumbled sadly.

“So how did you get us a bunch of free beer?”

“I agreed to do a nice thing for a nice person in exchange for a nice amount of nice free beer,” he said. “That virtually makes me a saint.”

“OK... In your world that’s probably true.”

“Oh, that nice thing I have to do for the nice man: you have to do it!” Dave told him with a grin.

“You’re a strange kind of saint, aren’t you, Dave?”

“This guy is having trouble sending communications home,” he explained.

“Has he tried the SCAR office?” Rob frowned. “I spoke to this guy earlier, I think.”

“The SCAR office is no good. Carol works there!” Dave shook his head. “Can you make your eyes look in two different directions at once?”

Rob shook his head and wondered what the hell he was talking about now.

“If you twist both of her nipples at the same time, her eyes do that,” Dave told him. “It’s not as fun as it sounds.”

“So what do you expect me to do about it?” Rob asked.

“I don’t think there’s any way you can fix it. It’s just how her eyes work, I guess,” Dave frowned. “I just stopped sleeping with her. She was really annoying.”

“I meant about the communications. What do you expect me to do?”

“You’re an engineer, aren’t you? You understand things I don’t care about, don’t you? You know all about how boring things work, don’t you? When you get right down to it, communications is just another boring thing I don’t care about, isn’t it?” Dave explained the

delicate process of his mind, inside which all this was perfectly logical.

“Well, what you need to do is ask someone in the communication centre if they can help you and offer to buy them a couple of beers.”

“I could do that!” Dave said thoughtfully. “We make a great team. You’re like a consultant who specialises in things nobody else wants to do.”

“And you’re like the retarded brother we’re all slightly ashamed of.”

“I’m touched.” Dave smiled back at him, apparently editing the comment in his head slightly. “But isn’t there a way to magically make messages appear?”

“We’re in a space-ship, not an enchanted castle,” Rob told him.

“Is there a huge difference?”

“There is one possibility,” Rob said thoughtfully, holding up a finger as enlightenment hit him. “There are different grades of communication on board a ship. Essential material takes first priority, passenger calls take the lowest. If a call comes in that’s not important when resources are stretched, then they can be cut off. There might be message fragments stored in the buffers.”

Dave stared at him blankly.

“So, if you find someone dealing with vital ship’s communications, they might be able to check the buffers for bits of messages that have been cut off because they weren’t important enough to process.”

Dave stared at him blankly.

“Somebody in the ship’s vital-communications office.”

Dave stared at him blankly.

“Deck 4, section 3.”

“I’m on my way!” Dave leapt up and headed for the door. He stopped in his tracks and stepped back to his seat.

“You remembered that it’s lunchtime, right?” Rob said knowingly. Dave nodded sadly.

Officer Carver sipped at a glass of chilled orange juice. “I see what you mean about savouring the moment,” he noted to his superior. “It has made me appreciate my job more thoroughly.”

“It does give life a certain flavour, doesn’t it?” Lynch told him.

“It’s definitely him. There can be no doubt about it.” Carver pointed to the terminal. The data bore him out.

“You’re certain?” Lynch flicked his eyes over to his subordinate and Carver nodded back. “It’s him. He’s travelling on his own passport and ID papers. He didn’t even fake an identity.”

Lynch stepped over to the other side of the room and began to stroll thoughtfully, “This is a bad situation, Carver. Four murders.”

“So far...” he added and Lynch glared at him.

The senior man rubbed his chin. “The question is how do we proceed? Do we kill him? Do we detain him?”

“Kill him,” Carver suggested.

“That does appear to be the easiest way in which to proceed, Mr Carver.”

“Yes, Sir!” he agreed.

“But is it the right way?”

“The Alliance ship will be here shortly. We don’t have long to decide,” Carver noted but Lynch already knew it perfectly well.

“No. But we have the rest of our lives to debate whether or not we decided correctly.”

"I've always wondered what a vital communications office might look like," Dave said as he looked around the bland room. It was a small cubical space with a bank of instruments along one wall that were as mysterious to him as the white machinery underneath a kitchen counter.

"You haven't, have you?" Rebecca Gibson said, as though she was speaking with a certain amount of authority on the matter.

"No," Dave admitted. "I didn't actually know this office existed. I got demoted recently because I misbehaved and was made to do a really lousy, soul-destroying job. I test little devices that make it sound like doors hiss when they open, for some reason. I haven't been able to quite make sense of it yet.

"What did you do wrong to end up down here?"

"I completed a five year advanced degree course in linguistic studies. I won't pay back my student advances for another eighty-four years at my current salary," she told him, her voice slow and monotonous, as if the routine had stomped all the zest for life from her soul many years ago.

"I need a favour from you, so I'm going to shut up now before I make this worse," Dave told her.

"It's probably already too late," she told him.

She was not an unattractive girl by any means. She was even cute, in a bookish way. Her dark hair was pulled back so sharply that it pulled back the corner of her eyes; and she dressed in a manner that gave away nothing as to what she might look like beneath the neck. He scanned her for clues quite thoroughly.

"I need to..." He pulled out a napkin with some instructions scribbled on it. "...grow the hell up."

"I agree," she told him.

“No!” he said and shook his head, which did sometimes help to focus his thoughts. “This is my room-mate’s way of telling me he doesn’t want any free beer and not to fill his shoes with chicken soup anymore.”

“I definitely agree. Your room-mate is clearly a very lucky man.”

He turned the napkin over. “I need to know if there are any bits of communications in the buffers for a passenger.”

“So why are you here?” She gave a shrug that only involved one shoulder. “Tell him to try the SCAR office.”

“No, he’s been trying that, but now the girl who works there has apparently been brutally murdered,” he told her as if it was nothing of any importance.

“That makes me want to help even more,” she said dryly.

“It’s a terrible shame.” He was picturing her amazingly slightly above average breasts as he spoke.

“There’s nothing I can, or even want, to do,” she told him.

“Is there really nothing?”

“I can ask you to leave.”

“What about if I bribe you?” he suggested slyly.

“Accepting a bribe is against the ship’s policy. I would lose my job if I were caught. Losing this job would be an unspeakable tragedy. My life would never be the same again. Whatever would I do without this job?”

“I can offer you two bottles of premium beer!” he said, lowering his voice respectfully.

She lowered her voice to match, “What kind of idiot would accept beer as a bribe? You can get free beer in the crew lounge.”

“Three bottles,” he said.

She sighed and something terrible happened to her lips as a smile was sent from one part of her brain and was destroyed in another, and her face was the chosen battlefield for the conflict to take place.

“It doesn’t work that way, Mr Satan. Once the messages are cancelled, they’re lost. There’s no way to retrieve them. Even if there were, they’d be locked behind a recursive algorithm.”

“My friend told me there would be a way. He’s ginger, you see,” he said, this all making perfect sense between his ears.

“I don’t think Mr Satan is your real name.”

“It is,” he nodded, lying quite unconvincingly.

“It’s not what it says on your name badge. It says your name is Dave. Are you ‘Retarded Dave’ who makes the sandwiches?”

“I’m the other retarded Dave.”

She looked him over and said, “Of course you are.”

“I guess I’m sorry for wasting your time,” Dave said sadly, thinking of all the very slightly different free beer he was going to have to drink instead.

She looked around the empty office, the clear desk, and the dusty instruments. “I hope you are. I wonder how I’ll ever manage to catch up with my work.”

Dave was beginning to like this miserable, sarcastic bitch. He had already begun to imagine her breasts might be quite magnificent. Maybe even more than slightly above average.

“I want to take you to dinner,” he told her with a smile, the words coming out of his mouth unchecked, as they often did.

“That’s a worse bribe than the three bottles of beer,” she told him. “It’s a considerably worse bribe.”

“It’s not a bribe. I find you attractive and interesting and I would like to find out more about you over a deliciously cheap meal, unless you feel like paying for a deliciously expensive one.

“I’m assuming that you don’t dislocate your lower jaw and devour whole children while on a first date? If so, I think you should choose the restaurant.”

“You really want to go to dinner with me?” She narrowed her eyes suspiciously and glared at him.

“I think it might be interesting and fun. Probably more interesting than fun. Probably interesting for me, and fun for you.”

“Maybe,” she told him, frowning.

“Go on,” he told her. “I’ll tell you what I’ll do to sweeten the deal, I’ll only make you pay for your half.”

“Are you sure? Most people think I’m too miserable and sarcastic, and a little bit of a bitch.”

“Most people think I must have suffered a very traumatic head injury.”

Another terrible thing happened to her lips but this time the part of the brain that sent the smile knew what the other part was thinking and seemed mostly to get the message through.

“OK!” she said with a tiny little reserved smile.

“Really?” he cried out and reeled back in surprise and sudden regret.

“Yeah,” she agreed, seeming a little surprised herself.

“You may be the smartest girl that’s ever agreed to go out with me!” he said thoughtfully. He leant forwards and lowered his voice.

“Is your IQ over 84?”

“Considerably!” she nodded.

To Dave, the number 84 was a mystical yardstick in his sexual liaisons. Women of, or below, that benchmark, tended to find him

witty and charming; while women above it—not so much. By coincidence, it was also the exact percentage by which he'd failed his supervisor's exam and the same number of beers he'd had to bribe the examiner with to keep his job afterwards.

“Four beers!” she told him.

He shrugged his reply.

“Give me four beers and I'll check your message fragments for you. It could take a while. What are you doing for the next 30 seconds?”

“Trying to figure out what I'm going to talk to a smart girl about over dinner,” he told her.

Rob took a break, a much-needed break from the afternoon flurry. It wasn't a time of heavy footfall, but it was possibly the worst in terms of the quality of the customers. It wasn't people looking for a quick and easy remedy to being hungry on a budget: these were time-wasters.

They drifted in lazily and were in no rush to leave. They ordered drinks while they studied the menu and tended to examine it at painfully detailed length, as if something delicious was hiding away between the endless variations of burgers and sausages.

They ordered snacks, usually picked over dubiously, before ordering another little something to tide themselves over. They ate slowly and they made jokes with the waiters. Not funny jokes, nothing original or witty, just clichés more recycled than the food, about flies in soup or hopping to get the frogs' legs.

The legs had never seen anything green in their existence, let alone a frog, and the food was known to be so abysmal by the staff that they considered a real fly to be a genuine bonus that they would probably have to charge more for.

They also complained about food not being hot enough, drinks not being wet enough and sausages smelling as if someone had farted on them, as if they'd never heard the words, 'reconstituted protein' and had no idea what they meant.

There was a legend of a very graphic description, made with hand-puppets, fashioned from slices of bread, that was shouted very loudly at just such a customer. It contained incredibly graphic and detailed depictions of bodily functions. This was precisely why Dave had only lasted for 84 minutes as a waiter and why he was banned from working in the upper cafe, even in the lowly capacity of making sandwiches.

A toilet break was a thing planned judiciously. The staff rotated turns to stretch the maximum amount of time out of their bodily functions as conceivably possible, without crossing the dangerous line into having pay docked. Now it was Rob's turn, and the others acknowledged this with a nod as he made his way to the kitchen exit. For some, near inexplicable, reason, Rob's mind dwelled on this.

Modern toilets were mostly unrecognisable from their earlier counterparts and had changed significantly after the 20th century, though one instantly recognisable aspect of the experience was a roll of flimsy paper hanging from the wall to one side. Its purpose, of course, was purely decorative in modern-futuristic times, and due to a contrived string of increasingly bizarre historical misunderstandings, it was considered the height of elegance to craft it from some of the lightest, thinnest and most fragile substances known to man.

Shower-toilets with built in warm-air dryers had becoming fashionable, and then the norm, except in parts of Asia where the

preferred method remained a high pressure water hose with a trigger on the end, or simply a bucket of dirty water.

Such innovations made toilet paper obsolete and people considered it a vulgar reminder of their barbaric past. Manufacturers of toilet paper colluded with manufacturers of shower attachments over several generations to transform the toilet paper into a comforting presence that symbolised the softer realms of the human form and the degree of tender loving care the machinery would provide in its elegant mission to gently, softly caress trace-lumps of crap from the hairs surrounding your anus.

Few people remained that remembered its symbolic meaning, as the progress of science reduced such barbaric practices as spraying a jet of warm water into your nether regions to a thing of the past.

The brilliant mind behind this was Dr. Nikifor Tanaka, of the Crimson Health Academy for “Science” (punctuation original and “correct,”) who formulated a simple but effective medicinal formula that could be added to a water supply to ensure that faeces was delivered to their next destination encased in a hygienic bubble of gel, lubricated by moisture that evaporated on contact with oxygen.

What this meant, in laymen’s terms, was that you could have a really good crap and be on your way out, even before you’d finished, without any additional stages, safe in the knowledge that your anus was every bit as clean and hygienic as it was when you went in, but certainly not more so.

Delicate paper, once more became a thing of the past, lost to antiquity and existing only in museums, Wikiweb memes and poorly-written sci-fi novels, created by writers with acute drinking problems and flimsy grasps on reality.

And sadly, this, too, was mostly lost to the annals of history. Production of the medicinal formula and all research leading to its

invention was forcibly ceased and destroyed respectively over the serious ethical breaches Dr. Tanaka had been found to have committed during the early testing stages. The product had been tested on sick and injured prisoners of the second Great War on Terror, who'd assumed they were receiving free medical treatment for depression, receiving anything free being considered a most heinous criminal act.

A number of the signatures on some of the required paperwork had not been written with sufficient pressure to be clearly legible on all five layers of the paper, which was clearly no longer made delicately enough.

All this was enough to invalidate his permissions. Nobody would have cared, until the prisoners very gradually realised that they accounted for 99.7% of Earth's population and revolted in a bloody final battle that lasted a total of three minutes.

This shocking revelation tore the scientific community in two. It was also later revealed that the distribution of the medicine itself, and subsequent recycling of waste products, had been the basis of a very elaborate money-laundering operation, though this was considered too difficult to prosecute in light of the fact that the entire world government had itself been a very elaborate money-laundering operation.

Modern communal toilet facilities amounted to little more than a large trough-like hole in the ground that connected to a network of sorters, and a long safety bar that people clung to as they hung over the edge to stop themselves from falling in. To date, there had never been a single incident of a safety bar breaking from the weight loaded on them, even in what used to be North America.

They were, however, known to accumulate sweat and grease very quickly, and people occasionally lost their grip and fell in, often with hilariously fatal consequences.

Private toilets, on the other hand, were robust and imposing metal contraptions with a wide opening on the top, some crude controls on one side, and an exhaust outlet on the other. They were noisy, had a tendency to leak hot oil onto unsuspecting users, and the gears could easily slip if you didn't double-declutch between squeezes. They were frequently modeled after a heavy German enduro-touring motorcycle, made famous centuries before, after appearing on a documentary about two almost completely incompetent bikers riding long distances without assistance, while actually being filmed by a huge support crew.

The machine in question was inaccurately known as an extremely reliable motorcycle, but was ruined by the same German engineering that created it.

Simplicity was no longer profitable enough and they crammed in more and more useless gadgets until the bike became utterly useless for its stated role. Modern toilets, similarly, were made of seamless metal and were beautiful to behold, with the huge 'boxer engine' jutting from either side, and with the engineering plumbed neatly all around it.

They flushed and cleaned themselves as you stood up by registering your movements with sophisticated sensors. Just like the motorcycle, the principal was good, but it didn't really work in practice. In the end, the gadgets frequently failed and you were left with a beautiful-looking lump of overweight engineering that was essentially just full of shit.

Kendra sat opposite Dave across her desk. Dave shrugged, wondering what exactly he'd done wrong and how she'd found out about it. He briefly considered making something up that he could admit to.

"You've heard about the murder?" she asked, assuming he had. "Carol from the SCAR office was found dead this morning."

"Everyone on board has heard," he told her. "If I had a couple of beers on company time then they were purely medicinal to calm my shattered nerves. Even if you know that I had them before I heard about it, or even before it happened."

"Didn't you go out with her?" she asked, an eyebrow raised at his apparent complete lack of emotion regarding the subject.

"A couple of times," he admitted, with a continuing apparent complete lack of emotion regarding the subject. "She was really annoying. How I did not strangle her myself, I don't know."

She frowned at him. "OK."

"You know the sound a cat makes when you accidentally cut off its tail with a lawnmower?"

Kendra just stared at him. Her head moved very slightly to the side in a gesture he took to mean that she didn't.

"Well, it screams a lot. She used to do that exact same thing every time she caught me trying on some of her clothes. That noise was so annoying I wanted to strangle her with her own entrails right there and then.

"I can sympathise with whoever killed her. Just look for a grumpy person with sore ears and wearing a bra, which would be ideally suited to a woman with amazingly slightly above average breasts. He'll be your killer."

Kendra stared, her mouth slightly agape. Slowly, she shook her head and clearly tried to ignore his massively inappropriate comments.

“Well, we have an issue. The Captain needs to be running at the peak of efficiency before the Alliance comes aboard to begin the investigation.”

Dave grumbled. “Is this like the time we had the annual inspection and I had to spend three days in an escape pod until they’d left?”

“No,” Kendra said, and handed him a portable terminal and a brand new probe. “I need you to go to the Captain’s office and run a diagnostic!”

“Me?” he groaned. “That office has bad memories for me. The Captain once threatened to feed me into the food reclamation system feet-first, eat my reclaimed protein and then feed me in again, and she did it in that very office.”

“I don’t have anyone else,” she told him, seeming just as unhappy with the decision as he was. “I’ve been watching your work. You’ve actually made a big improvement in your attitude and consistency.”

He recoiled in horror and gasped. “I have done no such thing!”

“Against my better judgement, I think you can handle this,” she told him. “I’m trusting you.”

He grumbled and looked down to the terminal.

“Wow!” he gasped and jumped up from the seat. “This? This? Do you know what this means?”

The Captain was staring grimly at her office terminal and she looked up from the reports as Dave walked into her office uninvited, a scowl fixed on his face.

“Mr Brown?” she grumbled, sounding rather surprised and clearly in no mood for this.

“Hello, Captain,” he said. He made every effort to glare at her with the same expression of annoyance that she usually reserved for him. He was no a stranger to her office but it was unusual that he wasn’t being dragged there by a superior.

“I didn’t call you here. What are you doing?” she said, sounding growingly irritated at the disruption. “I am extremely busy, as you can imagine. I’m familiarising myself with the specifics of a quite horrible incident aboard this ship, so I can quite well do without your foolish antics today.”

“I can imagine,” he told her sarcastically.

“I imagine you’ve heard what’s happened. Under the circumstances, your usual mischief is now the least of my problems. Now, get out, before I have security punish you in some horribly inventive fashion,” she told him.

He frowned at her, wondering how he could ever have been so very blind, “Yeah, a murder on board our own starship. Whatever next?”

“Exactly,” she told him. “Go away, Dave. Whatever it is, it can wait.”

“Well, there’s a little problem with that,” Dave told her, as he leant across her desk and stared at her.

He was really quite annoyed by all this. She had done a great deal to make his life moderately more difficult – granted, after he had done things that had very likely made hers a very great deal more difficult in the first place. In any case, he wasn’t happy about it!

“Mr. Brown?” she scowled.

“I know the truth about you,” he told her softly.

“The truth?”

“Yeah. The truth. I know it,” he told her angrily. “I know the truth. Why don’t I tell you what happened today?”

Dave explained the essence of how he ended up in the supervisor’s office and was given the terminal with the instructions on it. He left out the bit about scoring a date with an intelligent woman as he was still wondering how he was going to deal with that.

“So, you know?” she told him coldly. She dropped her report to the desk and glared at him, the suggestion of a smile on her lips. “So what? It was never a secret: at least, it was never meant to be.”

“Nobody told me!” he said angrily.

“Why would they?” she smirked at him. “You’re an errand boy. You deliver towels, you unblock toilets. Why would anyone take you to one side and discuss the intimate workings of a starship with someone like you?”

“That’s a good point,” he agreed, failing to find a fault in the logic.

“Do your job. Make it fast. Get out,” she told him.

“That’s no way to talk to someone that’s about to shove his probe right up your most intimate orifice,” he told her with a grin. He pressed a button on his terminal. “Computer, deactivate the Captain.”

She instantly vanished.

“Vanished?” Rob said in surprise.

“Vanished instantly! Right before my own two eyes.” Ian began gesturing enthusiastically with both hands outstretched. “Blink of an eye, the whole village was gone. Vaporised.”

“Unbelievable!”

“Yeah. Wasn’t even a bang; more of a gentle whoosh, followed by silence. Men, women, children... They didn’t have time to scream, and there was nothing left to bury, of course,” Ian sighed

wistfully. “And it turned out the guy they were after wasn’t even there. Somebody with a chip on their shoulder sold them a false lead, apparently.”

It was turning out to be a very quiet afternoon at the Upper Cafe. Having exhausted his toilet leave, Rob was killing time over a coffee with Ian, a recent addition to the crew who came aboard from Cirrus 3.

Ian had been regaling Rob with stories from his former career as an investigative journalist, with particular emphasis on the time he had spent in Switzerland as an embedded reporter. This was usually a death sentence, much like working in the upper café.

“For me, that was probably the low point of that adventure. For them, it was just another day. People below a certain class are just... disposable, you know.”

Rob noticed that Ian had not touched his coffee, or stopped talking.

“Oh, I hope you didn’t want milk or sugar in that—we don’t get those.”

“Plain is fine,” said Ian, with a slight glimmer of excitement in his eyes as he picked up the drink. “We had to pay for coffee at my last assignment. I had no idea it was free for staff here.”

“Well, I wouldn’t get too excited. ‘Coffee’ is more of an affectionate nickname than an accurate description of the product or service. It makes it that much easier to swallow.”

Ian chuckled at Rob’s witty banter before taking a sip of his drink. Very much in line with Rob’s expectation, he let out a slight grimace, but he soon shook it off dismissively and took another sip.

To Rob, it didn’t go unnoticed that his comments sounded very much like those made by his room-mate. More importantly, his mind

dwelled on the subject of coffee. He had never even liked coffee before he came on-board: he was more of a tea man.

“It’s... not that bad—I could get used to it.”

“Yeah, I think you stop tasting things after a while. Makes life a lot easier.”

Rob felt a little out of his league talking to somebody with so much real world experience, but he did know how things worked on board, which boosted his status just a little. He felt as if he should recommend the Macaroni, but stopped himself just short. He thoughtfully considered the nature of his own identity, wondering if he actually had one! He wondered if the tea would taste as bad as the coffee.

The two of them sat quietly for a moment. Rob went to sip his drink, bringing the cup slowly to his mouth, and then chugging a quantity in a move strategically designed to give the liquid minimum contact with his tongue, swallowing hard with the satisfaction of an ordeal well endured. Ian raised his cup again and took a slow sip, savouring the flavour, and, looked as though it was starting to grow on him, swallowing it with a smile and a slight nod.

“So how did you end up in Switzerland anyway?” Rob asked with genuine curiosity, but more to avoid having to think about how much he was turning into Dave. Also, it was useful to distract himself from the after-taste of the coffee, which always reminded him of slipping off the seat of his bicycle once as a child, which was where he first discovered pain. “How does anyone end up in a terrible place like that?”

“Well, I always had a nose for a good story. Something told me Switzerland was the place to look. And with just a little bit of investigation, I found it.”

“A story?”

“The story! Wasn’t even hard to find—the information was there for anyone who cared to look. I uncovered evidence suggesting a long history of both corruption and cooperation among the Swiss elite that, if proven true, had the potential to smash down the whole barbaric tribalism and re-unite the Swiss with the civilised world.

“More than that, I found tons of evidence that the Earth government had tried many times to destroy Switzerland—actually destroy it. It was like a dream story that would make my career, and I was sure I was on the money. I’d need to go there to prove it, of course, but I managed to get my editor to sign off on it, and I got shipped out there for three months, all expenses paid.

“Ideally, I’d have liked to have stayed longer—my elevated status as a guest in their provinces meant it took longer than I’d intended to gain their trust, but it was worth it to have done so. Swiss society is much more layered and nuanced than I ever could have believed. Nothing like the media would have you believe. They’re almost like real people.

“I pleaded with my editor for more time, but the three months was up and he needed a return on his investment. News is a business after all. So, grudgingly, I returned home and wrote up what I had.

“It wasn’t the game changer I’d hoped it would be, but it painted a picture of Swiss life that most people would never have been exposed to. It could have gotten things moving, raised awareness and understanding, you know?”

Rob nodded in partial agreement, despite having next to no overlapping experience to refer to, or any real clue what Ian was talking about. In fact, what was he talking about? Rob was suddenly massively preoccupied with why he hadn’t even tried the on-board tea.

“What I submitted was good. I was proud of it, even if it wasn’t what I’d set out for. That goes with the territory, so you kind of expect it—the goalposts move and you move with them. What got published though... That was just heart-breaking.

“My editor really did a number on it, turning it into little more than a fluff piece, a kind of ‘look how backwards those crazy Swiss are’ kind of treatment. It was published, and instantly forgotten. Just as well, really, because my name was still attached to it. I definitely should have expected that. Pretty much ended my career right there.

“My next assignment was the same—I turn it in one way: what comes out is unrecognisable. News, it turns out, is not about informing the public. It’s about selling them what they want to be told. People don’t want to be challenged—they want to have everything they already think they know confirmed to them each morning, so they can live out that day feeling a little bit better about themselves.”

“So you ended up here?” said Rob, suspecting Ian was far from finished. The tea must also be free, mustn’t it? He wondered if Dave drank tea. He began to imagine a string of poorly conceived ginger-tea jokes.

“Pretty much, yeah,” he said with a laugh. “I did a stint working in a kitchen on-world, as the machinery was quite fascinating, but my real passion is still sniffing out the stories, even if I’m not going to report on them. The adventure: it’s what makes life worth living.”

Rob nodded along. He’d never really liked herbal tea. Tea needed milk and sugar, so did coffee really, of course.

“I’ve still got a nose for a story. And you know what? I had a very good feeling about this ship the moment I laid eyes on it. What do you reckon?”

“You know what? You’re right!” Rob said defiantly. “I am going to try the tea!”

The Captain’s office was empty. Dave sat himself in the chair. He went through the drawers in her desk, the cupboards behind her, the display racks bolted to the wall. Empty. Everything had been a simulation, a sensory feedback device, an interface between the human crew and the ship.

The vessel was simply automated. Nobody ran it because nobody needed to. Command functions were issued by the company, the Captain relayed them as though she were a person, and everyone was used to treating her as though she were.

Back in history to when people were publishing books on the internet, people owned cars, small personal transports that ran on internal combustion engines. The technology was simplistic but few people ever worked on their own machine. Few understood the principle, let alone cared for what happened beneath the metal shell. Dave was just another example of that mentality. He never knew because he never thought it was necessary to find out.

The Captain, her anger, her headache pills and bad breath was all just a needlessly complicated simulation. He inserted the probe into an alcove at the rear of her desk.

“Diagnostic mode,” he said, and the Captain appeared before him, as the clutter around her office appeared on her desk.

“Diagnostic mode activated,” she told him. Her temper was gone. Her personality had left her, and she was just there, missing from her own presence.

“I have to read through this list,” he told her. “I have to ask you a series of questions and you answer them. Then I put in my report than you’re functional and we never speak of this again.”

“Yes,” she told him succinctly.

Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Of course, you never can speak of this again, because nothing that happens here will be recorded in your long-term memory.”

“That is correct,” she told him, a vacant expression painted on her face.

He twisted the probe until it began flashing green and he grinned at her. “I think it might be interesting if you and I had a little chat first.”

The airlock lights went from red to green as the pressure equalised and then they clattered with the sound of several devices made to simulate locking clamps. Finally, they slid open with a loud expression of the word ‘cheese sandwich.’

Bernard took an involuntary step backwards in awe. In the cloud of white vapour stood a daunting figure of a man. He was an imposing wall of arrogant rigidity, bent on a purpose and immovable in the execution of his task. He was sworn to deliver justice instead of pizzas, the only other thing ever to have been delivered through the service airlock up to that time.

“I’m the head of security for the Nebulous. My name is Bernard,” he said as he reached out his hand and the monster virtually crushed it with his mighty grip.

“Granger!” he told him. “Detective first class.”

“Welcome aboard,” he said weakly.

“You don’t want me aboard,” Granger growled. “If I’m here, then you’re in trouble, but the trouble doesn’t want me aboard even more than you...” he paused for a thoughtful moment. “...don’t.”

“I’m glad you’re aboard, Sir,” Bernard told him with a smile. “We’ve never seen anything like that before. We’re not set up to handle something like a murder.”

“That’s where I come in!” he told him, nodding and wallowing in his own sense of self-satisfaction.

“Would you like to rest up first or see the crime scene?” Bernard asked.

“Neither,” he growled.

“Sir?”

“Take my sensor robot down to the scene. It’ll start scanning the area for clues!”

He handed over the smashed head of Unit 4, which was now mounted to the end of a broom handle, stuck on with gaffer tape. Lights flickered randomly from the stump of its neck and a ribbon cable was attached to a terminal which was also taped on to the handle. The unit occasionally croaked or grumbled and made a noise which may, or may not, have been attempt to speak the words, ‘please kill me.’

Bernard took the head on a stick and passed it to a member of the passenger services who regarded it dubiously. “And you, sir?”

“I’m going to arrest a killer.”

Officer Lynch glared in a way only a man of his status could. “Please tell us in your own words what happened after the detective came aboard, Mr Brown.” He asked reasonably politely, but there was a subtle undertone that suggested that, if people didn’t co-operate fully, then he’d probably kill them, tear off their skin and dance around under the light of the full moon while howling like a rabid wolf and drinking the blood of innocent virgins.

At least, this was the way it appeared to Dave. It appeared much the same way to Rob, the only difference being that Officer Carver was standing behind him menacingly and had stated in terms that left no doubt in his mind that that was exactly what he would do, and had assured him that he would very much enjoy doing it.

“In my own words?” Dave gave Rob a slightly nervous glance.

The officer nodded gruffly and stared with a pair of fixed eyes that held more than a slight hint of threat. “If you’d be so kind.”

“First, there was a giant space-monkey chasing a bright yellow zebra through the engineering section. I think it was on fire and there may have been laser beams shooting out of its eyes. It was difficult to say. I was upside down on the ceiling. I’d been drinking Malibu which, as you know, is made from wooden spiders.”

“I’d like to be questioned separately,” Rob said firmly.

“Do you think you’re funny, Mr Brown?” Lynch asked him, clutching his hands behind his back and pinching his face together in an expression of reserved hostility. It was hostility that was only just barely reserved and could become unreserved at any second.

“Yes,” Dave said earnestly. “What is it with the people in this century? You’re the most boring audience ever. One of these days I’ll write my memoirs and shoot them back through a wormhole to a time back in the past when people could appreciate a good joke. Then we’ll see who’s funny!”

“Nobody is laughing, Mr Brown,” Lynch told him menacingly, his voice like the sound of a huge course file being dragged over fresh wood.

“Rob’s laughing a little bit.” He gestured over to where Rob was trying desperately to be left out of it.

“Mr Brown, Mr Smith, I will ask you only one more time. What happened after the detective came aboard?”

Chapter 8

What happened after the detective came aboard

“What happened after the detective came aboard?” Rob asked excitedly. “Did you see the murder scene?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there,” Dave shrugged at him.

“Anyway, you’re missing the important point that I was trying to make. I have a date with a girl who isn’t functionally-retarded. What the hell am I going to do? Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. Are they like normal women or do they have rules of conduct? I don’t know how this works...”

“You’re asking me for advice with women?” Rob found the situation intriguing.

“Oh my god, you’re right. I’ve finally, completely lost my mind!” Dave hammered his fists against his head, wincing at the sheer awesomeness of his own stupidity.

“If you’re this worried, then why did you ask her out?” Rob grinned, for the situation was going from intriguing to amusing.

“I’m a simple creature, Rob. She had breasts. I like breasts. It was as if I was outside of my own body. I could see myself saying the words and was screaming in silence, pounding on a sheet of soundproof glass, but my inner idiot wasn’t listening. He was just thinking about breasts, as usual.”

“I was...” his inner idiot said silently inside his own head.

“What’s the big deal?” Rob ventured with a shrug.

“I have a rule, Rob. The world runs on rules. Rules are important to me,” he told him firmly, panting almost breathlessly in mild panic.

Rob chuckled to himself. He said, quite calmly, “This ship runs on rules and you break them all the time. Last I heard, when you press the passenger emergency buttons on deck 3, instead of hearing a little click, you now hear a radiation alert klaxon and a warning that you can expect to be dead in three minutes.”

“On deck 4 you hear the sound of a toilet flushing,” Dave told him, slightly proud of himself. “I can do subtlety as well, you know. You make me sound like a one-dimensional caricature. I have layers!”

Rob laughed at him. “So you’re in no position to preach about adherence to rules!”

“I’m not talking about your silly rules. I don’t care about the ones governing life aboard a space-ship. I’m talking about important rules like never dating anyone with an IQ over 84.”

“Why would you never date anyone with an IQ over 84?” Rob frowned at him. “Anyone below that would have trouble tying their own shoelaces.”

Dave rubbed his temples in exasperation that Rob was trying so hard not to understand something so mind-crushingly simple.

“And anyone over that would have a problem with my trying to tie their shoelaces for them. Is it so wrong to like tying shoelaces, Rob?”

Rob watched in growing amusement as this horrendous unravelling unravelled before him.

“It’s wrong of you to judge me, Rob,” he told him, looking away contemplatively. “84 is a magic number. It was the age my uncle Ed was when he invented roasted beef and telephone ice-cream. It was also the amount of weeks that had passed since he was diagnosed with Alzheimer disease.

“He proved them all wrong, Rob. He showed them he could still achieve something truly wonderful.

“It was how old my family dog was when he finally died of old age and the bill for life support came to exactly 84000 credits. Also 84mm was the total amount of movement he had left in his tail before he died. Everything else had been paralysed for the last 84 months.

“84 was the number of times my dad had his sperm tested and each time they said it was so weak that he’d never have children, and yet here I am. Granted, I look nothing like him but my mum told me you have to expect that with his sperm being so pathetic.

“It’s all proof of the power of the number 84!”

“Wow, you’ve got me convinced,” Rob said sarcastically. “I wish I had a magic number which proved my family should never be allowed to reproduce, just like yours.”

“We’re friends. I’ll let you share mine if you promise to look after it. There’s enough for half each.”

“I don’t know what to say!” Rob told him. “I thought beer was the true meaning of life but obviously it’s this. Having half of Dave’s magic number. Friendship is the true meaning of life.”

Dave frowned at him. “Actually it’s cheese. It says so on the Wikiweb.”

“Only because you wrote it on the Wikiweb, and every single article it links to are about mental illness,” Rob told him. “Your page is entitled ‘You Idiots Will Believe Anything’ and you have a massive audience, half of whom agree with you and the other half who claim that’s offensive to them.”

“This is my point. When you say things like that, it proves I should never have agreed to go out on a date with a smart person. You’re all stupid.”

Rob patted his shoulder supportively. “You’ll be fine. I’m sure she’s a lovely girl...”

Dave shook his head and explained: “She’s a bit miserable, a little bit sarcastic and a bit of a bitch.”

“I’m sure she’s more than good enough for you,” Rob told him, slapping him on the arm and grinning as Dave did when it was his turn to make people feel bad, which was more often, and they generally felt worse than he did right then.

“This is all your fault, Rob!”

Rob started to open his mouth to ask how that was possible.

“You know I have impulse control problems. I can’t believe you let me do something this stupid. You’re meant to keep my stupidity in check. That was the deal.”

“How is my fault that you did something stupid when I wasn’t even there to stop you?” Rob asked. “What deal? I don’t remember us making any kind of deal?”

“Exactly!” Dave told him sternly, as if there was some forthcoming answer that had been revealed.

Rob shook his head at him.

“Well, she did get me some message fragments, so at least we can drink two different kinds of free beer tonight while I worry about going on this date,” Dave said darkly.

“I thought your date was tonight.”

“Right, right,” Dave grumbled and rubbed his temples as if doing so might alter time in some way. “I’d forgotten about that. Thanks for reminding me.”

Granger sat in the Captain’s office. Even she was somehow intimidated by him and had moved to stand near the rear wall as he used her access terminal.

“It could be anyone!” he growled. “Anyone aboard could be our murderer. Anyone aboard could be a deranged killing machine, driven wild by the scent of blood.”

The room went very quiet for a moment.

“Do you have a theory?” she asked, her voice piercing the uneasy silence. “You seem to know what you’re doing, I presume.”

He told her moodily, “I do know what I’m doing! I’m catching a killer.”

The Captain looked at Bernard who shrugged weakly back at her.

“I’m just a security guard. I’m not meant to know what he’s doing,” he mumbled defensively.

“There were three other murders on Earth. They were all around the space-port,” the detective growled and rubbed his liberally-stubbled chin. “Your killer spent time on Earth before he came aboard.”

“Well, that includes most of the crew, and all of the passengers!” the Captain frowned. “How will you know who the killer is?”

“I already know.” He grinned grimly up at her. “The net is closing in. When it closes,, Bang! The whole enchilada.”

Rob quickly looked over the message fragments on the terminal.

“Are you going to give this back to the passenger, Phil?”

“That’s how it works, Rob. That’s what we do in the message delivery industry,” Dave told him. “You’d never cut it in the SCAR office. How does it work with you being a waiter? Does someone order something and you go out the back and eat it for them?”

Rob frowned at him. “Have you read it?”

“It’s personal and private!” Dave exclaimed. “I was going to read it later. Is it interesting?” Dave craned his neck to read it.

“Dave, this is bad!” Rob told him.

“What kind of bad?” Dave grinned. “A good kind of bad?”

“Bad kind of bad. It’s from his sister. It was aimed at the ship about a week ago.”

“What does it say?”

Rob felt as if he shouldn’t be reading it, but if concerns of basic human decency slowed him down, they certainly didn’t manage to stop him, “It says, ‘This is the ‘Red Dove’ project. This is worth killing for.’”

“Cool!” Dave said. “That’s definitely worth the two extra beers!”

“There’s an attachment. It’s encrypted,” Rob said nervously. “What if it was the secret of this Red Dove project? Could it really be worth killing for, do you think?”

“You think I should ask for two more beers? Maybe four?”

Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“This is serious!” Rob snapped. “People might have been killed for the information I’m holding in my hands.”

“OK!” Dave said finally. “I get it. This is big. How many beers do you think we should ask for?”

Rob shook his head in exasperation. “I wonder what this Red Dove project is?”

“Maybe it’s a recipe,” Dave suggested.

“A recipe?”

“Maybe for pie?” Dave told him, shrugging.

“Dave. People don’t eat doves, even in pies. Nobody anywhere eats doves!”

“I don’t know about that, Rob,” Dave told him. “It’s a big universe. Anything can happen in a big universe.”

Out in the Frontier there was a small colony, a colony forgotten by the societal norms, where toothpaste was a rare luxury and showers were unheard of. Dating was rare.

It was a grim place where dust clouds reached up into the heavens and the light from a dying star scarcely warmed the surface just barely enough for life to cling onto it. Miners huddled in makeshift shelters at night, heated by the ore they dug from the rocks with the most basic of tools.

It was a place where life was cheap but the rewards, if you survived, were high. The few colonists brave enough to bear this life were tough, fearless people who guarded themselves fiercely. Since only the most dangerous of outsiders could pose any kind of threat, it was a place where only the most dangerous of outsiders might dare to venture.

“Dinner, Pyett,” he said in a thick Eastern European accent. He was a big man. He had a shaved head with a deeply scarred face and eyes that reflected a blackened soul.

“Thank you, Gregor,” the younger man replied. He was wiry, covered in the dirt of a hard day at the mine and was dressed in ragged clothes with crude safety pads strapped to the joints of his limbs. “What we have tonight, Gregor?”

“I make you dinner. You eat it,” Gregor told him sternly in simple words with an even simpler message.

“Not dove again?”

“You like dove!” he said.

Pyett moaned wearily. “I don’t like to eat dove every day. Can’t we have something that isn’t dove?”

“Dove is good. Is just like chicken!” Gregor told him and slammed a battered metal plate down on the table with some scrappy shreds of meat, mixed with something wet and green, floating in a thin gruel.

“Then why we can’t have chicken?”

“Dove is better than chicken!” Gregor roared.

“Nobody eats doves, Dave!” Rob said firmly, shaking his head at his friend’s total lack of grasp of the finer points of reality.

“It could be a pasta recipe.”

“No it couldn’t,” Rob told him, narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah!” he insisted. “It could be in tomato sauce. That’s why it’s called red. Dove in tomato sauce. It all makes perfect sense, Rob.”

“You are the biggest idiot in the entire galaxy, Dave!” Rob told him.

“I don’t know about that, Rob,” Dave told him thoughtfully.

“It’s a big universe. A bigger idiot could exist in a universe as big as this one.”

The dust cloud on the little colony world lashed the metal shelter; the walls flexed and creaked, the ageing metal screaming out in pain against the relentless punishment.

“I no like dove anymore!” Pyett shouted back.

“I cook you dove, you eat dove. You say you like dove, or I kick your arse like little girl.”

“We no brothers anymore, Pyett!” Pyett roared at him, pushing away the battered metal plate.

Gregor calmed himself and hung his head with a loud sigh. He said, "Pyett, we are not brothers. We have different parents. I am Gregor, Pyett is you. How many times I have to tell you this?"

"But I don't want to be Pyett," he told him and crossed his arm sulkily. "Pyett is the stupid one."

"Well, I find it difficult to believe than anyone could be this stupid," Rob told him. "I know you try very hard at it and practice a lot."

"It could be a recipe for pie or pasta. That's all I'm saying."

"Well..."

"Wait! I just realised something!" Dave shouted excitedly. He held up a finger for silence as he delivered the revelation to a slightly shocked ginger person. "I'm slightly hungry, Rob..."

Rob poked at his macaroni and cheese with a singular lack of interest.

"It needs more dove, right?" Dave asked. Rob looked at him and gave him a lacklustre smile, hoping that the whole conversation wouldn't start again.

"You do realise we're holding information that could get us both killed?" Rob shook his head and prodded a piece of cheesy pasta. "I wanted to see the galaxy, have adventures and meet interesting people. I didn't want to get involved in some kind of conspiracy and have anything to do with someone like you. Of course, no sane person could imagine that someone like you could even be a thing."

"Thanks Rob," Dave told him, slapping him on the back. "That means a lot."

"So what do we do?" Rob asked woefully.

"Beer!" Dave told him. "It's no big deal. We just act as if nothing happened. He's not going to kill us if he doesn't know we

got the message. Most problems go away if you just ignore them long enough. That's what happened with my Mum and Dad, she told me. He ignored her so long that eventually he just went away.

"I know it doesn't entirely illustrate my point but it does go some way towards demonstrating that the universe is a pretty stupid place with rules that don't always make a lot of sense. We just forget all about it: problem solved."

"Yeah, that could work," Rob said and furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "It's so simple it could actually work."

"Things are always so difficult in your world," Dave smiled at him. "In mine, there's a kind of elegant simplicity, a fine golden thread of reason which stretches out before me and all I have to do is avoid it to follow my destiny."

Rob smirked. "Like when you asked a woman with an IQ over 84 out for dinner."

"I'm trying to lighten the mood and then you bring up a real emergency!" Dave frowned. "Maybe you could come with me. We could all go together if I could find you a date."

Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "No. No, that would never work. Stupid of me."

"I'm charmed, as usual," Rob said, his amusement at the fact that his friend had a date and he didn't, slightly diminishing.

"Why can't you get a date, Rob?" Dave turned to him to offer his undivided attention.

He sighed. "Some of us just don't find it as easy as you do to talk to women."

"There's no trick to it, Rob. It's all about mutual respect. It's all a question of showing them that you view them as an equal, as a human that you have complete respect for."

"That's exactly what I do!" Rob told him pathetically.

“And that’s where you go wrong!” Dave grinned.

Rob shrugged and waited for him to explain himself, since this made the usual amount of sense that anything that came out of Dave generally did.

“If you treat a woman as an equal person, then she’s going to act as an equal person, a person who is your equal and nothing more. If you treat a woman as a beautiful woman that you admire and want to be with, then she’ll be flattered and ultimately that’s the way she’ll want to act around you.

“An equal person will talk to you about your interest in those grey tubes that go into the big grey boxes in engineering. A woman will go to bed with you.

“There is a huge difference between a person and a woman, just as there is between a person and a man. If you go around treating men as beautiful things that you admire and want, then there’s a pretty good chance you’ll get your spleen kicked out of you.

“People can be people: male, female, it doesn’t matter: they really are essentially equal. Only a woman you think is beautiful can be a beautiful woman to you, and how will a person know unless you show them?”

“What about if you’re looking for a long-term relationship?” Rob whined.

Dave raised an eyebrow knowingly and asked, “And are you?”

Rob shook his head and shrugged meekly. “Damn you, Dave. The things you say are actually beginning to make sense to me. I know you’re going to say I need more beer, but I think I just need less Dave.”

Detective Granger stalked down the corridor, his breath rasping from his mouth in a low growl and his hands clenched so tightly into fists that his knuckles turned white.

This was his favourite part of the job; the anticipation of the final moments of a case. It was exhilarating to know that the resolution was coming. He relished that electric moment of confrontation between the hunter and his prey. It was all about the danger, the thrill, the excitement, as the trap snapped shut.

Bernard held up his terminal and said, “According to the biometric reading, your suspect is just round the next corner.”

They trudged along, footstep after footstep, stalking closer to the final moment, to the capture, to the end of the chase.

“He’s not a suspect to me!” Granger sneered with his gravel voice reverberating around the metallic corridor plating. “He’s a killer!”

He unclipped the top button of his jacket and slid his hand inside. It came out brandishing a huge weapon with a gaping muzzle.

“I’m going to treat him like a killer. He’s getting what he deserves and nothing less.”

Bernard reeled slightly at the very sight of it, as he reflexively drew his stick and got ready to point it at something while adopting a very angry expression.

It was the worst thing he’d ever seen; the embodiment of violence, a whole war wrapped up in metal and carried in a single hand. A weapon so brutally ugly that it had to be a result of German engineering.

“We’ve got him!” Granger growled through gritted teeth.

Rob and Dave left the crew lounge together. Rob handed him the terminal that contained the Red Dove encrypted files.

“Just get rid of it and we can go back to being those two idiots who drink too much.”

“We’ll never stop being that, Rob!” Dave told him. “It’s our calling. We have a higher purpose. We’re Rob and Dave, saving the galaxy—one dirty fork, one fluffy towel, at a time – it says so on the cover. It’s at this moment that our legend begins.”

“You may be right! See you back at the cabin after the last shift,” Rob told him with a scowl, still wishing he’d never got into any of this, had never met Dave, had never signed up for the tour, had never even been born, and especially born ginger.

Dave slapped him on the back and told him not to worry.

Rob watched as Dave simply went happily on his way, seemingly without a care in the world. He turned with a sigh and very slowly headed up towards the lift to the upper cafe for another four hours of soul-destroying misery that wouldn’t just crush his soul, but also wipe its arse on it and leave it lying battered and filthy on the floor while it sent in a succession of ever-increasing Daves to tell it jokes about having orange hair.

Suddenly, as he looked up, he was confronted by the biggest, most menacing man he’d ever seen. This gigantic, throbbing blob of testosterone and muscle was coming directly at him, his jaw locked in place and a just ridiculously massive gun in his hand

Terrifyingly, he was bearing down on him with a steadfast severity he’d only seen once before—when Dave had been struggling to open a particularly awkward bag of beer—and his eyes appeared to be locked directly onto Rob

He pressed himself back against the wall in horror. His body surged with adrenaline as panic gripped him by the throat and he just managed to win the battle to retain bladder-control.

The detective never turned, never deviated, as he headed straight for him. Before he knew what was happening, he was there, right in front of him, his eyes locked onto Rob and then flicked away as he walked straight past, and then forwards, forwards towards Dave.

Dave turned as the detective came up to him. He raised his eyebrow, moderately impressed that someone aboard had learnt to make a more striking impression than he had, and had done so without the benefit of a flashing probe with which he could make showers sound as if they were saying, ‘Awww no, you shouldn’t have had that last slice of cake’ as the water splashed on the mat.

His mind filled suddenly with a variety of cluttered, jumbled thoughts, as the horrifying man approached him with confident, threatening strides. He finally decided that, from now on, he’d be programming the lifts to say the words: ‘Dave Brown is more awesome than that guy,’ that people would only be aware of at an unconscious level, just to try and make up the shortfall.

“You!” Granger growled at him.

Dave pointed to himself. “Me?”

“Get out of my way!”

As Dave did exactly that, Phil Bothan came around the corner and the detective levelled the gun directly at his head. Phil seemed mildly terrified and whimpered slightly at the very sight of it, as the muzzle threatened him with the quite apparent capacity to carve very large chunks off him at the minimum setting.

“You’re under arrest,” Granger growled. “Give me an excuse to pull this trigger.”

“You had better to do as he says!” shouted Dave. “He’s got a gun!”

“That’s a scary guy!” Rob said, muttering low enough that nobody else would hear it, especially someone who might come over to rip off his head.

A small group had gathered to watch, as the space detective arrested the passenger. His rights mostly appeared to be a secondary concern to the bodily harm that Granger kept telling him he’d like to visit upon his person. Appearances, in this instance, were not in the least deceptive.

“He looks a bit like my cousin, Vera: a bit less hairy, perhaps,” Dave said with a nod, as he vaguely meandered through a particularly shallow pool of consciousness. “I slept with her once after a funeral. That was the last time I ever drank beer at a funeral but not out of choice, just mostly because I was never invited to one again.

“I could also say I never drank paint at a funeral after that and it would also be true. It was also the last time I ever drunk beer around Cousin Vera, or paint for that matter.

“It was her father’s funeral. He was only 84. It wasn’t quite the tragedy it sounds, since we later discovered that he’d tried to make a cat into a musical instrument with gaffer tape and a pointed wooden stick. Fortunately, it wasn’t very successful and the cat went on to live a full and happy life helping other cats recover from similar experiences.

“My uncle’s death was therefore somewhat ironic, as he was attacked by his instrument while trying to maintain a ‘middle C’ and was critically injured, tumbling backwards and being crushed by an experimental bass drum contraption that was only missing the rhinoceros. He was trapped in his own garage and forced to drink paint to survive. The official cause of death was recorded as ‘winter lilac.’”

This was followed by a lengthy pause as Rob wondered what to say. He then wondered what it would be possible to say.

“So he’s our murderer?” he said finally. “I spoke to him. I can’t believe he would do those terrible things to Carol from the SCAR office.”

“She was very annoying. During the week I dated her, I considered killing her myself no less than 84 times,” Dave assured him. “Can you do that thing where you bend over backwards on your hands and feet?”

“I don’t want to know,” Rob told him sternly.

Dave shrugged. “I guess our adventure is over. Back to work as usual then!”

Dave was dressed in the very finest clothes he could find on Rob’s side of the room. The finest clothes he could find on his side of the room looked as if a dog had thrown them up. Fortunately, most of them were actually Rob’s, so there was no cause for concern and, consequently, no concern was caused.

“I’m not going to lie to you. I usually date attractive women, not intelligent ones and I’m a little nervous,” he told her, trying to sound charming and wondering if he’d quite hit the mark, but somehow knowing he probably hadn’t.

“You don’t get many second dates, do you?” she asked in her droning, sarcastic way.

“Do you?” he shrugged.

She looked at him fixedly with a largely neutral expression that gave away nothing of what might be going on underneath.

“Touché,” she said flatly.

The ‘Top Restaurant’ was nice. Not very nice, but nice enough. The staff were courteous and efficient and most of the food was made

out of something that hadn't been previously enjoyed; at least aboard the Nebulous. It was located somewhere around the middle of the top deck, so the view was not exceptional, but still better than the Upper Café, where the only window went to the kitchen, and that had been painted black for humane reasons. The décor was quite acceptable. To Dave, it had always appeared more than adequate to give him something to look at while women spoke to him and he pretended to be listening. He took no further interest in the place beyond that, and that was more interest than he took in almost everything else in his life combined.

"It's just that I'm not sure what to talk about with a smart woman," he admitted to her, a more open and honest statement than he'd made in the last three years of counselling put together.

"Your room-mate's smart. What do you talk about with him?"

"Women!" he told her with a shrug. "Did you want to hear my thoughts on women? I'm not sure you're going to like them. Most women don't. It's not derogatory per-se but there are lots of comparisons to household appliances, farmyard animals, seafood and doughnuts."

"Just talk about anything," she told him, rolling her eyes. "I have a wide variety of interests."

He nodded and took a deep breath. He gave it his best go. "I like your dress."

"That's a good start," she told him, sounding a little impressed.

"It's shows off more of your breasts. They're not too bad. Not as good as I hoped, but definitely not as bad as I feared. I can well imagine that they're significantly better than average."

"I'm assuming you've recently endured some kind of traumatic head injury?" she asked.

“Are you not finding my honesty refreshing and mildly arousing?” He bit his lip, realising that this was going every bit as badly as he thought it might. He wasn’t surprised.

“Perhaps this wasn’t a good idea,” she told him after a lengthy silent pause, her voice giving very little away about what might or might not be going on between her ears.

“Maybe not,” he admitted with a sigh, wallowing in the crushing defeat. “I have a new room-mate, you see. He’s pretty smart and we’ve become good friends, although he doesn’t have any other friends and his choices are limited, since he has hair the colour of a red mop that’s been used to clean the floor after someone accidentally drank a bottle of stain remover and vomited up most of their own organs.

“He’s a lot more fun than most of the idiots I normally hang around with and I’ve enjoyed mentally torturing him. Maybe I thought I should start looking for women that were pretty smart too, instead of ones that are just pretty with nice bodies, warm personalities and have interesting things to talk about. That’s why I asked you out.”

“I’m touched, Mr Satan. Can I just call you ‘Satan’?”

“Sure,” he agreed with a nod. “Actually, call me ‘Dave’ but I’m not the retarded kind and I don’t make sandwiches. I did make a sandwich once but I didn’t read the instructions properly and it didn’t turn out so well. Apparently, you need to unwrap the bread, spread the butter on the inside and the bit in the middle has to be edible.”

“Well, that just proves that you’re not retarded, doesn’t it?” she told him with a tinge of sympathy laced with a hint of miserably sarcastic bitchiness. “You can’t be if you made a sandwich from an entire loaf of still wrapped bread with a kettle as a filling, can you?”

He nodded enthusiastically, relieved that she understood. “Exactly – only, it wasn’t a kettle. It was a toaster oven. My understanding was that one of them went into the other and then there was a little beer, a tiny bit of a confusion, a small fire and a room-mate who was allowed to end his contract early after threatening to commit an inventive form of suicide if he ever had to look in my direction again,” Dave explained, without really explaining anything.

Rebecca looked away, slightly sadly.

The fact that the evening was unfolding rather poorly wasn’t lost on Dave. He suggested: “Well, we’re here in a restaurant that I wouldn’t normally be allowed into. We might as well have dinner, now that we’re here.

“Intelligent, miserable, sarcastic and slightly bitchy girls eat, right?”

“Probably not as much as an underachieving, ego-driven, amoral recidivists who are so terrified of failure that they hide away behind an impenetrable wall of self-delusion,” she told him with the faintest hint of a smile.

“We don’t eat that much!” he grinned back at her. “We mostly survive on beer and stupid jokes.”

“There’s a part of me that likes you, Dave,” she told him with a certain reservation. “There’s also a part of me that’s forcing a stream of partly digested food through my colon, so don’t get too excited.”

“Which part should I not get too excited about?” he asked suggestively. “I should warn you that it might already be too late.”

“You choose!” she told him.

“It is a tough choice.” he smiled at her. “You know, I’ve never told anyone this before but the real truth about me is...”

She looked over as Bernard escorted officers Lynch and Carver into the restaurant noisily. Heads turned at the interruption: conversations died and the room took on a stony severity.

“It’s those two visiting officials everyone was worrying about,” she told him, lowering her voice. “It looks like someone’s in a lot of trouble.”

Dave nodded to her and smiled sarcastically, waiting for it to happen.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” she sighed.

He nodded again. “You get used to this sort of thing after a while.”

They spotted him and began coming over.

“Is there any point in asking what you did?”

Dave shook his head. “I could tell you but then these guys would probably have to kill you for it.”

Rob picked at his macaroni and cheese. He looked longingly over to the left where a crewman was eating a cheese burger. It looked good. It was a big, juicy, hefty slab of brown meat-like-thing with cheese and onions all wrapped up in a soft, white bread roll. As he bit into it, a little brown grease ran down his chin and Rob needed no additional reminder of what the burger was actually made of. The macaroni suddenly seemed pretty good once more.

The crew lounge was the same but immeasurably different. The lack of stupid comments from Dave seemed like a welcome break at first but without them, life aboard the ship was dull, mundane even, and lacked a certain charm that actually translated to an utter lack of anything even mildly resembling charm, even in the loosest possible sense.

“Can I get a beer?” Rob asked, as the barman walked past. He grabbed up a bag and shook it. The chemicals inside the plastic top cap mixed together as he did. Instantly, the beer was carbonated and cooled at the same time, and the bag swelled to a cylindrical shape for convenient intoxication.

Rob’s mind suddenly filled with more annoying exposition, for some reason.

The concept had been invented a century before, in the search for a more efficient way of storing drinks. The measure had been declared a major success and the cost of manufacture had decreased by a massive 84 per cent. Thanks to the reduction in the costs of the packaging, these drinks became more widely available. As a result, obesity in certain countries increased by, coincidentally, the same percentage.

A method of reducing the outer packaging of the morbidly obese had been outlawed several decades before, on the grounds that it was highly offensive to those who preferred to have an outward appearance that didn’t conform to a traditional societal concept of what a person should look like if they didn’t want to die of heart disease.

Several large corporations banded together to campaign for the rights of those who became known as ‘will-unempowered’ or ‘positive-change-rejectionists.’

This should have been suspicious enough to any right thinking individual, but the activists claimed this as a huge moral victory. Nobody really cared, as they knew that the victory would be short-lived, for obvious reasons. It later came as no surprise when the same group of large corporations invented the world’s first ‘dessert hamburger,’ the bun made from double re-fried doughnut batter and

the filling from a retextured blend of chocolate, butter and beetle shells.

Rob wondered why this kept happening. It wasn't even relevant or particularly funny.

"No Dave tonight?" he asked, handing the bag to Rob, whose thoughts were meandering away in some other place about all sorts of beer and chocolate nonsense.

"He's on a date. He's going out with an intelligent girl," Rob told him with a smile.

"Well, she can't be that intelligent!" the barman told him grumpily.

"No?" Rob asked, moderately intrigued and certainly welcome of the distraction.

"Dave is an idiot," he told Rob darkly. "I can't stand that guy. Sorry, I know what he is to you, and all."

"He is my friend," Rob told him, almost surprised to hear himself say it in public. "Maybe you ought to give him a chance. He's a decent guy, really. Deep down. I will admit that you do have to dig very deep down."

"He's an idiot," the barman insisted and was clearly adamant on the matter.

Rob nodded, as there was actually little means by which to refute the argument.

"Granted, but he's a good guy. If there was anything he could ever do to help me out, then I know he'd do it. I can't say that about a lot of people. Even my own family."

"Hey. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything," the barman said with a frown. "You seem like an OK guy, so let's just agree to have a difference of opinion."

“It’s OK,” he said softly. It was true. His family had never really done anything to help him. Dave had interesting stories about his family, although he was fairly certain that he made most of them up. At least, he hoped that he did.

Rob’s family had no interesting stories to tell and, if he followed the same path then neither would he. That’s why he was travelling aboard the Nebulous, a chance to break the mould, to do something different and to be his own man.

“Dave’s a good man,” he told the barman, not even sure why he was saying it. “I know a lot of people don’t like him and he gets himself into trouble a lot, but I like that. He’s interesting.

“Sometimes I wish I was more like him. It’s fun to get into a little bit of trouble once in a while.”

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. “Robin Terence Bobson Keith Ronald Smith?” Rob looked around to the grim spectacle of Officer Carver. “Come with us.”

“Shit...”

Detective Granger handled his prisoner roughly. He was a powerful man, strong and heavy and he threw the much smaller Phil around with ease, and a certain amount of satisfaction.

He was cuffed and had been searched for weapons before being dragged unceremoniously down to the detention area by the mountainous hulk of grizzled justice given human form.

The detention area was hardly filled with cutting edge technology and there was little around that could even be described as technology, with any kind of edge, which could be described as anything beyond ‘blunt.’

Phil had never been arrested aboard a starship before and had expected glowing barriers of pure energy, rippling force-fields,

glowing panels and eerie white shimmering walls. Instead, he was taken to a row of containers that stored expensive liquor away from the crew. One had been emptied out so a couple of chairs could be placed inside. They looked as if they had been put there with a great deal more care than he had been, since they weren't smashed to pieces.

Bernard handed the broom-handle with the robot head on it to the big detective. He stood it in the corner and pushed the prisoner to the chair with what appeared to be quite little effort.

"That thing is going to record everything that happens in this room," he told him, glaring at the suspect disarmingly, every word spat through gritted teeth. "It's to make sure I don't do anything to you that you might die from; in agony, spitting out little bits of teeth and blood and parts of your organs.

"It doesn't work very well."

Phil swallowed hard, his head swimming nervously, sweat pouring from his brow.

"Sometimes, it doesn't work at all," Granger continued darkly. "Sometimes, it cuts out. It might be just your luck if it stops recording while you lean forward to tie your shoelaces with your teeth and end up having a little accident. You don't strike me as a lucky man."

"I understand," Phil said nervously, already pretty close to having a 'little accident' of his own right there.

The burly officer sat opposite and pulled the chair close. There was nothing between them and Phil pressed himself back into his own chair, reflexively moving away.

He was so close that he could have felt Granger's hot, rasping breath on his face.

“What exactly am I meant to have done?” he managed to ask, even though his throat was dry and felt as if it was in danger of closing up altogether.

The detective snarled at him, “Where did you get your ticket for this space-ship?”

“A place at the star-port!” Phil frowned, struggling to remember. “It was a small office. I got it recommended to me by a wall. It arranged everything.”

“Where did you stay?”

“At the star-port?”

The detective nodded.

“I spent a couple of days in a cheap place on the outskirts of town. I think it was called the ‘Travellers Rest.’”

“And when you got into town? Who did you meet?”

Phil closed his eyes, trying to remember. “I went out for a drink with a girl. Nothing came of it. What’s all this about?”

“Murder!” Granger shouted at him, loudly and suddenly enough to rattle Phil to the point of his being a total nervous wreck.

“Me? You can’t think I would?”

“The girl. The owner of the hotel. The man who arranged your transport. All murdered.”

“No!” Phil sobbed. “I could never. How could you think this?”

Officers Lynch and Carver stepped out of the room. Rob and Dave were hand-cuffed to a chair in the bedroom. The lights were out and they had left the door open, so that light spilled in from outside, just enough to see one another.

“I think that went well,” Rob said sarcastically, keeping his voice low.

“It’s funny. They seemed so nice on the tour, didn’t they?”

Dave shrugged. “It’s funny how you never really know somebody, isn’t it? I mean really know them.”

“What the hell is going on?” Rob shouted and whispered at the same time. “What the hell have you got me into?”

“Well, you’re handcuffed to a chair in the bedroom of a couple of angry, burly gentlemen. This might be the moment you lose the bottom end of your virginity, Rob, if you know what I mean. If so, you can thank me later.”

“This isn’t funny,” Rob insisted. “And I had a girlfriend. I showed you a picture.” This sort of suggested that Rob didn’t know what Dave had meant at all.

“You’re actually counting that?” Dave grimaced at the thought. “How did you meet her anyway? Were you carrying around a pocketful of sugar cubes?”

“Do you remember what I said about this not being funny?” he whispered angrily.

“You’re doing that thing again where you’re confusing remembering with caring,” he warned. “Like when you reminded me that I shouldn’t use your toothbrush.”

“Did you use my toothbrush?” Rob snapped angrily, quite missing the point of their current predicament.

“Not as a toothbrush, no.”

Officer Lynch rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “What do you think?”

“What do you think, Sir?” Officer Carver replied, mirroring the senior officer’s stance quite closely.

“I think I would have gone and asked that question in a mirror if I wanted to hear myself reply,” Lynch told him.

“I think they’re nobody,” Carver shrugged, delving into unknown territory as he thought for himself a little bit.

“Go on.”

“I don’t know what Bothan talked to them about but it couldn’t have been the Red Dove project.” He frowned as he thoughtfully put the pieces together. “The message his sister sent him never got through. We saw to that.”

Lynch nodded, “We jammed everything. I think she sent it out to her brother in desperation. I don’t think he ever knew about the contents so I don’t see how he could have told those two idiots.”

“I’ve searched their cabin quite thoroughly.” Officer Carver began to rub his chin thoughtfully just like his superior. “I found two terminals. Neither had any data relating to the Red Dove project.”

“What did they have?”

“Mostly porn,” Carver shrugged. “One of them had a list of suggestions for ice-cream flavours. 84 of the stupidest ideas I’ve ever heard: 12 included cartoon animals. The dark haired one was carrying one, but it just contained work schedules.”

“And nothing to be concerned about?”

“A message from passenger services saying a guest has blocked her toilet solid and he’s the only one she trusts to come and fix it in the morning.”

“I sometimes wonder if we’ve chosen the right career path!” Lynch said sarcastically.

“I’m happy to kill them both but the sadist in me thinks we should let him go back to work and clear that toilet.”

“Absolutely agreed,” Lynch told him. “Get them out of here.”

Dave and Rob stood nervously watching as Carver placed his considerable frame in the doorway. They rubbed their wrists, sore from the cuffs.

“You should put fur on those things. It really helps,” Dave told him with a slightly accusing scowl.

“You’ve had a murder on board your ship,” Lynch told them. “Myself and Officer Lynch offered our services in the investigation. We’re satisfied you don’t know anything.”

He looked more fixedly at Dave. “I’m satisfied that you really, really don’t know anything.”

“Thank you,” Rob said with an awkward glance back to his friend. “Are we free to go?”

“How does this work?” Dave shrugged. “Do we leave a tip?”

“You get out,” Carver told them sternly. “And you boys, stay out of trouble or you’ll be in a world of shit.”

“I usually am,” Dave told him with a weary sigh.

The evening found Rob and Dave in the loving embrace of a large quantity of alcohol and the first instalment of what promised to be an even larger amount before the night was through.

“The important thing to remember about beer is that it’s free.” Rob swung his beer around proudly and slurred the ends of his words. Dave reached out and clinked them together, a tradition that had lost a lot of appeal when the free beer was served in bags.

“So, another successful adventure!” Dave said, his voice ever so slightly slurred as well.

“My first,” Rob added. “I hope it won’t be my last. I get the impression that, if I hang out with you, there’s going to be moments where every adventure could be my last.”

“And where every last could be an adventure!” Dave drunk heavily from a bag and discarded the mostly empty thing on the floor behind the bar before ripping the top off of two fresh ones.

“You know that doesn’t make sense,” Rob said with a frown as he snatched up a fresh beer.

“If life was supposed to make sense...” He paused and glanced around the room. “Let’s just agree that life doesn’t make sense and leave it at that.”

“A partial win,” Rob grinned. “I never thought I’d come to like you, you know. It had something to do with you being a rude and unpleasant moron.”

“You could always find more boring friends. I’m not stopping you,” Dave suggested. “You won’t do that though, will you?”

Rob smiled. Somehow, it all made some kind of sickening sense. “Nah. So what now?”

“I still have a few loose ends to tie up,” Dave said, with a sudden, really rather dark expression. He frowned. “My date didn’t end very well. I was arrested in the middle of choosing a starter, after revealing myself as horrible boyfriend material over a glass of their very cheapest house red.”

“Do you think you’ll get a second date with her?”

“Oh yeah!” he enthused sarcastically. “I have often found that girls love it when the man they’re with is dragged out of a restaurant by a heavily armed security detachment while contemplating the melon balls.

“I’ll bet she’s at home right now on the phone to her parents, telling them she’s met the man of her dreams and to start knitting little white boots for our future offspring. Possibly, she’s doing this while she’s lying among silk sheets, covered in whipped cream, with

her possibly well-above average breasts heaving at her miserable, sarcastic and slightly bitchy underwear.”

“Plenty more fish in the sea,” Rob told him, taking a heavy slug from his bag of beer.

“That means nothing coming from you, Rob. Absolutely nothing,” he told him and Rob nodded in agreement, since there was no way anyone could not.

“You know, the barman doesn’t like you very much,” Rob said, as he caught him giving Dave a dirty look.

“I know.” He shook his head solemnly. “Most of my family don’t.”

“Family?” Rob was surprised that another member of his family had passed quarantine restrictions. He was shocked, even!

“He’s my second cousin, Geoff. He’s married to Vera.”

“Was he married to her when you...?”

“Yup,” Dave nodded.

“Oh.”

“But he’s just jealous, that’s what the problem is,” Dave told him. “I’m the big achiever of the family.”

“Nothing rounds the day off like a nice glass of fine cognac,” Lynch told his junior, while sipping on a nice glass of fine cognac. It was indeed a fine cognac, full-flavoured and smooth, with just a hint of elephant.

On the Frontier colonies, where most of the alcoholic beverages were produced, there had been a slight problem, since planning in places involving the production of alcohol is traditionally not excellent. The terraforming had been second rate, quick but not entirely effective, which, perhaps not ironically, describes 84 percent of Dave’s sexual encounters and both of Rob’s.

The colonies had been a partial victim of their own success. The engineers sent to sculpt the new world were so efficient at producing an environment capable of creating alcohol that when a minor problem showed up they were too drunk to fix it.

Such a problem inevitably did show up when it was found that the soil was largely unsuitable to grow the required variety of crops that were required to show a return on their investment. As the engineers began to sober up and apply themselves to the problem, mostly so they could get back to the business of being drunk, they came up with a solution of sorts.

Grass, and other hardy crops, were planted instead as feed for animals. The animals themselves were to be genetically modified variants capable of producing alcohol through sweat, urine or other means. It was an expensive solution but not as expensive as re-engineering the entire planet, and, because planning in places with a working democratic government is usually not excellent, it was just decided to follow along with whatever was easier.

The tourist trade certainly suffered from these measures. It was found that the time-honoured classic activity of crushing grapes with bare feet to produce wine was much harder, and considerably so, with live pumas. Many tourists died discovering this, as did a number of engineers, but it was eventually dealt with through government legislation against cruelty to wine.

The situation had matured and was now far more civilised, even to engineers. Fine cognac was produced with virtually no fuss whatsoever, by squeezing out the juice of adult, grass-fed bull elephants in a specialised wooden press. Vodka was still more ethically challenging but cheaper to produce. Genetically engineered Russian peasants with no higher brain-functions were squeezed out in the presses and this had the advantage that tomato was no longer

required to make a passable Bloody Mary, so long as you left the head attached when you began pressing. French wine was still a blend of various kinds of urine so, in that area, at least, little had really changed.

“Yes, Sir,” Carver agreed, even though he didn’t agree. He was a beer man, but was ashamed to admit it in front of his superior. He sipped at a Vodka Martini which had been shaken, not stirred. The cruelty to the kitten it was shaken from bothered him not in the slightest.

“So tomorrow, we leave,” the officer said with a hint of regret, while he tried to ignore the thoughts of alcohol production which had flashed through his mind. This posting had been an intriguing one and he had enjoyed it greatly.

“Where to next?” Carver asked.

“I don’t know, Carver. Wherever there’s injustice, wherever there’s immoral acts, wherever a government needs over-throwing or a politician needs betraying. That’s where we’ll be. Doing our jobs.”

“So you’re happy with the way this all worked out?” Carver sighed.

Lynch smirked to himself as he detected the distinct note of disappointment in his voice.

“Let me tell you what’s going to happen...”

10 hours later Granger shot them both to death. His report stated that he very much enjoyed doing it.

Rob looked into a cloudless blue sky as the sun warmed his face. The sound in the background was of gently lapping water, as it lazily washed against the shore. Birds twittered happily in the distance and the breeze wafted against the treetops, softly rustling the large green leaves.

On this Frontier world, giant flying lizards didn't tear birds apart with their fangs and talons. The lizards had all been eaten by the giant flying monkeys.

An unfeasibly gigantic spider crawled by them. Rob took two beers from the harness strapped to its back and handed one to Dave. He nodded in gratitude as they lay back on their loungers and enjoyed the peace and tranquility, the elegant simplicity of life in this place.

"The women here do have enormous breasts," Rob said thoughtfully. Such things, he felt, needed to be said once more. There may, in fact, not have been an upper limit to how many times that could be stated before it became annoying to hear.

"They do, Rob. I don't know if you realize this, but looking at covered-up breasts isn't the most interesting thing you can do with them," Dave told him.

"I'm building up to it one step at a time," Rob smiled.

"You're only on board for a year!"

Rob ignored him, as many people very often did, "It was certainly the most interesting two weeks I've ever spent. It's all a blur, not all a good blur, mostly quite a bad blur, in fact, but it was very interesting."

"You should hang out with me on Tuesdays," Dave grinned. "I'm always on top form on Tuesdays."

Rob smirked and sipped at his beer. It was nothing like the artificial rubbish they served on the ship. You could actually taste the rats in this stuff, and they tasted good.

“We’re galactic adventurers: we deserve the very best!” Dave told him. “Nobody is a rubbish waiter quite like you.”

“And nobody is a...” he frowned. “What exactly is it that you do, again?”

Dave’s reply was simply an apathetic shrug.

“Adventurer!” Rob mused to himself at what he thought was now an oddly fitting title. “Two weeks ago I was just a neurotic engineer.”

“Two weeks ago you were a neurotic ginger engineer who was pathologically terrified of women,” Dave reminded him. “Now you’re a waiter, working on a lifelong case of alcohol dependency while earning minimum wage.

“You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Well, I like how I’ve ended up,” Rob told him.

“At least we’ve essentially cured your women problems. Now, none of them would be interested in you, so the problem has gone away all by itself, just like I told you it would.”

“Whatever you say.” Rob was in the kind of mood that no amount of Dave was going to ruin, even on a Tuesday. “This is the perfect end to my first Rob and Dave adventure.”

“I have some news for you, which you are free to take as you will,” Dave told him with a happy smile. “What happened last week: that wasn’t the end.”

Chapter 9

The End

After drinking so much alcohol that Rob had passed out in the toilet three times, they had decided to call it a night. At least, Dave had.

Rob took passing out in the toilet fairly seriously.

Unlike most people who half-heartedly collapsed in a cubical, Rob was halfway through vomiting in the most unsanitary environment outside of India when his consciousness decided to abandon him in protest at the appalling treatment he was heaping upon it. He collapsed mid-vomit into a stinking crew-lounge toilet and, as his head fell in, the automatic flush activated, covering his head with improperly filtered water, bleach and enough germs to kill a bull-elephant, even one that was mostly full of fine cognac.

“Why does everything taste so bad?” Rob groaned as the morning alarm went off, the inside of his mouth feeling as if a homeless person had moved into it, and then moved out again in disgust. “I can’t believe it’s 6.30 already.”

“It’s 9.30,” Dave told him. He handed him a hangover pill, a little blue capsule that tasted oddly like the sensation of a razor blade dragged across an exposed eyeball. “Hurry up! We’ve got some important things to do before work.”

The hangover pill was a scientific breakthrough of monumental proportions. It worked on the same principle as the engines on the ship, but just a little more subtle, if not more clever.

Anti-matter was the inverse of solid matter in our universe. When the two were brought together, there was total annihilation of all the matter, releasing enough energy to power a huge vessel at

incomprehensible speeds, even while every deck had several kettles working at once.

The hangover pill was a shell wrapped around a stable magnetic field which kept a tiny pocket of anti-alcohol safe from the rules of normal space. Once it impacted the internal organs of a human, the shell released its load. Any trace of alcohol was annihilated and there was a subsequent release of positive energy.

Since this innovation had become common, the whole galaxy was a changed place. The seat of Alliance government had moved to Ireland, and Russian scientists no longer only existed in comic books.

“Like what?” Rob groaned, wondering why the very specific details of hangover pills had run through his mind. He lay back and waited for the pill to work. It usually took anything up to 84 seconds. “Important things? The most important job you ever had to do was clean the shower and you refused to do it. I had to do it after you ‘forgot’ for three days running. All you had to do was press the button marked ‘clean.’”

“There are often principles at stake,” Dave sighed, irritated that Rob was catching on so very slowly.

“Principles?” Rob hoisted himself up blearily as the pill just began to work. “If you were any less principled, you’d qualify for a role in galactic government. That’s not just me being sarcastic. You have a certificate from your counsellor stating that you have an almost complete lack of moral fortitude, the worst case he’d ever seen outside of a military murder-bot.”

“You saw that?” Dave said proudly.

Rob pointed above his room-mate’s bunk, “You framed it and hung it on the wall! You’re proud of it.”

Dave nodded, grinning disarmingly.

Rob gave up. "Alright, what are we doing?"

"I have to go to engineering and get a new probe. I must have lost mine yesterday in all the excitement. I can't imagine where I must have left it." There was a strangely focused look in his eye but it vanished quickly, as his thoughts turned to accountants and the horrible fates that should, no, must, befall them.

"And then?" Rob grunted.

"You'll see. It'll be fun, trust me. Well, I can't guarantee it will be safe, but it will be fun. Well, it might not be fun for you. Also, I'm not legally allowed to guarantee anything." He proudly pointed to another certificate on the wall above his bunk, right next to the one that he got when he was legally classified as a genuine hazard to mental health.

"I don't want to see," Rob told him very firmly, the kind of resolve you'd expect to be coming from a man, heading for a guillotine, who was pretty happy with the current location of his head.

"Come on. It'll be fun," Dave said.

"No," Rob insisted. He held onto the door-frame fast until his fingers turned white.

Dave held up his terminal and said, "Look. It's all official. I just want you to come along and have a look. It'll be funny. I promise you (but make no guarantee) that you'll enjoy this."

"Not everything is funny," Rob argued passionately. "Some things are dangerous. Some things you think are funny could kill me. Is that dangerous or funny?"

He grinned, "Is this a trick question?"

"No!" Rob said finally. "No. You're a bad person and you should feel bad."

“OK,” Dave said finally, sighing to himself but accepting the fact that Rob was going to be all boring about things. He didn’t feel bad about any of this, even though he should, apparently. Perhaps there was something wrong with him, he mused to himself. “This clearly isn’t going to work. Why don’t you wait here while I go and have all the fun?”

“Wait here? I should run and tell the Captain what you’re up to,” Rob told him, his voice lowered fearfully.

“Go ahead,” he said with obvious disenchantment. “She’s not real. She’s just a program, a trick of light and sound. Nothing more than a figment of someone’s imagination, a collective psychotic delusion, like money. Maybe none of us are real...”

“He’s real!” Rob pointed down the corridor to where the monstrous form of the detective had set up his base of operations. “His gun is real, Dave. It’s also huge and horribly destructive—just like the detective, come to think of it.”

He headed off towards the holding cell, ignoring Rob’s quite sensible reservations. “We’ll see...”

“You!” Granger roared suddenly, shattering the peace and plunging even Dave into near panic. He came out of Bernard’s office like a force of nature, roaring at the top of his not inconsiderable voice. Phil awoke in the cell and almost toppled backwards off his chair in startled terror.

“State your business and die!”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works,” Dave winced openly. “If it is, then Rob was right and I should have listened to him.

“Tell my parents I resent them and give Rob the only thing I care about. Actually, that pretty much is Rob. I’m not really sure how he’s going to work that out.”

“Who are you?” Granger roared.

“Satan!”

“Satan?” He leaned back from him a little, as Dave cringed away from him quite a lot. “What do you want, Satan?”

He held up his terminal and told him, “I have to make an inspection. I have to check your sensory feedback devices to make sure they’re running efficiently. It’s purely routine, I assure you, and I can also assure you that there are many other places I’d much rather be and other things I’d much rather be doing.”

“Do I look like a man who cares about any of that?” Granger asked the perfectly reasonable question. There could be no positive answer, since he was quite patently obviously the kind of man who very, very obviously wasn’t unduly concerned with the trivial details of normalcy.

“Should I leave?” Dave shrugged. Granger’s massive head began to nod very slowly.

“Great!” Dave said happily. “As soon as I do my inspection, I can get out of your hair.” He began scanning with the terminal.

The huge detective glowered at him menacingly. “How long does this take?” he growled in his ridiculous voice that was so deep and heavy that if there was a female rhinoceros in the immediate vicinity, it would have been very sexually aroused.

“Only a few minutes,” Dave assured him.

“Hurry up,” he sneered.

“Let me just get my assistant. That should make things go a little faster,” Dave said, as if he’d had a sudden brilliant idea. “Rob? Can you come here please and help me?”

Rob grimaced and slowly, gingerly, came round the corner and edged towards the holding area.

“My colleague just has to ask you a couple of questions,” Dave told the hulking detective. He put the terminal down. “I just

have to examine the computer in the security office; purely routine you understand.”

“Get on with it, pencil neck,” Granger growled to Rob. Rob cast the most acidic glare he could manage towards his friend who, was completely unfazed, as expected.

“Come on...”

“Erm,” Rob flustered. “We hope you’ve enjoyed your visit to our ship. Have you enjoyed your visit to our ship?”

“It’s been nice!” Granger growled, his bottom jaw never moving as he spoke. “The burgers in the Upper Cafe taste funny.”

Rob flustered again, “Is there anything about the ship you’d change?”

“Is there a shooting range?” Granger asked.

“Yes,” Rob nodded.

“Then, no. Everything is fine.”

“We’re done!” Dave called out. He came up beside the pair. “I hope my friend’s questions weren’t too intrusive.”

“If you’re done, get out,” Granger told them, incredibly bluntly.

“It’s our pleasure to serve,” Dave told him, bowing as he spoke.

“What do I do now?” Granger grunted. “Do I give you a tip?”

Phil hovered just between wakefulness and sleep, dreaming about a gigantic gorilla smashing him into a concrete floor over and over again because he’d looked sideways at his banana.

Detective Granger cracked his knuckles. The noise reverberated around the bay and was loud enough to wake up Phil properly, who had been dozing uneasily between rounds of threats.

He had spent the night handcuffed to a chair, which was a violation of his human rights. However, he was alive and relatively unharmed, so he considered it mostly as a success.

“Good morning,” Granger grunted to him. “I hope you slept well. We’re taking a shuttle ride back to Earth today. When we get there, I’m going to throw you to the authorities. You’ll be executed for what you’ve done. I’ll see to that.”

Executions had become more humane in recent years, and therefore more common, which in itself was far less humane. It had been discovered that life itself could simply be extracted and allowed to dissipate naturally.

The ethereal forces at play were not fully understood and some religions claimed it was a barbaric act of snuffing out of the soul. Still, the fact remained that it was the most painless way to die. Your life, and your existence, was simply dragged out of your body, which then collapsed lifelessly to the floor, an empty shell, totally devoid of feelings.

The discovery of the process was accidentally made centuries before by an employee of a mobile-phone store who was simply trying to relate the experience of working there to a friend.

Quite understandably, Phil was less than thrilled at hearing that. “I didn’t kill anybody. Where’s your evidence? You can’t have any evidence since I didn’t actually kill anybody,” he pleaded convincingly.

Granger’s bushy eyebrows moved down, as his heavily-creased skin folded into a very threatening frown.

“I don’t need evidence,” he scowled, although he admitted to himself that it was a good point.

“What time was the girl killed? I can tell you where I was.”

“Nice try, scumbag,” he grunted. “You know all the security devices went down when you were slaughtering the poor girl. I told you that.”

“There has to be a way to prove my innocence!” Phil pleaded impotently.

“Not if you’re guilty!” Granger almost laughed. It was a disturbing thing to hear, like the gurgling sound of drowning an elephant in porridge.

“But what if I’m not? You’ve let a killer go free.”

Granger rubbed his chin thoughtfully and told him, “You’ll say anything, killer.”

But something was troubling him. By now, most suspects had cracked, even a fair few of the innocent ones; most of them, in fact.

Most tended to feel that admitting guilt and being executed for the crime seemed considerably preferable to being questioned further by the detective, and probably less damaging to their health, also.

This suspect clung to his story fiercely and the details hadn’t changed. That was troublingly suspicious, but not suspicious in the way he liked.

“Wait there, scumbag. I’m having a coffee and then I’m going to beat you until all of your blood is on the wrong side of your skin.”

“I look forward to it,” Phil mumbled very, very quietly.

Granger accessed the computer system in the security office. He began looking for the pieces that didn’t fit, of which there were still more than plenty. Certainly, Bothan could be linked to all four of the murders, but there was still something that was troubling him.

All of the murders, including the one on the ship, had similarities. They had similarities enough for it to be implied that they were carried out by the same assailant. It had to be Bothan. It just had to be.

He began running a background check and then he saw it. He opened the file and, quite to his surprise, discovered what might just be the missing piece of the puzzle.

The security office door sandwiched open and the huge, hulking detective strode over to the holding cell in massive sweeping steps. He flung the cage door to one side and it rattled and clattered and made a noise something like a balloon when you hold the end and pull it to let it all the air out. It then sighed contentedly.

“I’ve got some good news and some bad news,” he told him, growling with his usual abundant menace.

Phil said nothing. He just waited for the inevitable threat which could, at any given moment, precede a blow to the face or a gunshot to the head. He briefly considered pleading guilty.

“Bad news first, son,” Granger told him, as he took a thin wooden stick from his pocket and began chewing it. “Your sister. She’s dead. Murdered. Preliminary reports say there’s no usable evidence at the scene. Same as my four killings.”

“No,” Phil whimpered. He closed his eyes. It couldn’t be true.

“I’m afraid so, son. The good news is; you couldn’t have killed her. If you didn’t kill her then maybe you didn’t kill the others.

“Maybe, I said. Just maybe.”

“I have been telling you that for hours,” Phil reminded him, not quite angrily since an angry rebuttal could quite easily result in a single blow to the face, which would mean his funeral wouldn’t involve an open casket. “Is my sister really dead?”

“Yeah. She’s really dead. I’ve seen the pictures. She’s really dead,” Granger told him. He took the stick from his mouth and pointed it to the suspect. “Whoever killed the girl is still here. It’s my

job to protect the innocent so I'm going to catch him. I'll catch him if I have to kill everyone on this ship to do it."

"Why do you need my help with this and why am I carrying this junk?" Rob held out a rain jacket and a pair of waterproof gloves. "Is this going to get weird in a way that I'm not going to enjoy, or worse, in a way the doctor won't enjoy when I have to explain this to him at my next psyche evaluation?"

"Yes!" Dave told him, not really clearing up or answering any of the questions. He knocked electronically on the passenger's door. "You're going to see something really special. Really special, Rob. This is one story you'll be telling your grandchildren one day. Or someone's grandchildren. Or a group of cats."

"You worry me, sometimes, Dave. Most of the time, if the truth was told," Rob said with a deep frown. This was already a bad morning, but bad could always get worse and Dave did work hard at making that happen.

"Sometimes it's best to ignore me."

"Is now one of those times?" Rob asked. Dave shrugged and let him make his own mind up.

"So what are we doing? What's this really all about?"

"That guy, Phil Bothan. He didn't kill Carol," Dave told him, breaking alarmingly from his startlingly convincing portrayal of a drunken idiot.

"How do you know?" Rob seemed worried. Even more worried than usual. He didn't like this. He didn't like this even more than usual.

"How do you know anything? You had to ask me how to tie your shoelaces yesterday. You asked 17 times until, in the end, I had to do it for you. It was really embarrassing. You know I'm not

allowed to talk to you at work and you're certainly not allowed to sit at a customer's table. She was pretty annoyed that you stole her chips, too. I was really surprised when she agreed to go on a date with you. Anyway, what makes you think that Phil was innocent?"

"Because someone told him that the Red Dove project was worth killing for," Dave said with a smile.

"And he killed four people because of it?"

"But he never got the message, Rob," Dave continued to smile fixedly. "We got the message, not him. Then, two burly officers tried to see if we knew anything. They weren't interested in the murder. They hardly mentioned it. They were interested in Phil."

"I don't like where this is going!" Rob rubbed his temples as he felt a stress headache coming on.

"So I hid the terminal with the Red Dove project on it where nobody would ever find it, literally the last place anyone would think of looking. I just have to make a little pit-stop first and then we'll find out the truth behind all this, the filthy, rotten truth."

"What if I don't want to know the truth, the filthy, rotten truth?" Rob grumbled.

"We still have to deal with the filthy and rotten part!" Dave told him nodding gravely. "It's more filthy and exponentially more rotten than you have ever imagined."

Suddenly, the door slid open with a sound very much like the word 'salad.' Rob was surprised to find the largest person he'd ever seen on the other side. She was wheezing from the effort of standing up, sweat was pouring down her sickening mounds of darkened skin and her breath was rattling alarmingly.

He had never seen an alien and briefly wondered if it was one. But then he realised it wasn't, which was actually far more horrible.

"Hello, Miss McDonald!" Dave grinned at her.

“Dave,” she gasped breathlessly and nodded back. She might have smiled.

“May we come in?”

She stood back and gestured for them to do so, waddling back on her tiny stump-like legs that seemed hardly up such a gargantuan task. Rob gingerly picked his way around her.

“This is Rob. He’s ginger. This is Miss McDonald. She weighs more than my first car.”

“Good morning, Miss,” Rob said awkwardly. She smelled suspiciously like bacon.

“Miss McDonald is the only person on board the ship with a genuine super-power. She’s decided to use her powers for good, instead of evil, so we can all be grateful for that,” Dave told him.

Rob tried to give her a polite smile and not stare too much. He asked, “A super-power?”

“I can shit so hard, it kills your space-toilets,” she told him proudly.

“Oh!” Rob turned to Dave, ashen-faced with sheer terror at this world Dave had dragged him down into. “Oh. Oh. That’s nasty, Dave.”

“It’s like your problem with women, Rob.” Dave took the gloves and waterproof jacket and started putting them on. “It’s going to get worse before it gets better. It’s going to get a lot worse.”

“You’re unblocking a toilet?” All the remaining colour drained from Rob’s face. He seemed to be very slowly recoiling in horror. “Manually? With your hands? Hands that might someday touch something I might later eat?”

Dave took a deep breath. Miss McDonald put her gigantic, misshapen hand on his shoulder and wished him good luck. It was far heavier than he had imagined.

“I’m going in, people.”

“Dear god, no!” Rob told him, his voice a pained cry. “They have machines than can do this. They simply must have. This is no place for a human being to be. At least, let me tie a rope to you first.”

As the door opened, the toilet was in full view. The smell was appalling and the blockage meant that waste was spewing over the edges and thick puddles were oozing around the bottom. Runs of sickly brown water had crusted onto the lip of the bowl overnight and the carpet around it was filthy and squelched as Dave stepped on it.

“Dave! No!” Rob warned him, stepping back from the appalling spectacle, as if it was some horrific nightmare that could only exist in the very darkest of fantasies.

“This has to be done, Rob,” he told him bravely, his voice cracking but his resolve remaining mostly steadfast. “You knew that life in passenger services wouldn’t be easy. It can’t all be serving bad food badly and delivering towels. Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty.

“Today is that day.”

“There has to be a better way, Dave,” Rob pleaded desperately. “Please, think about what you’re doing.”

“No, never!” Dave balled his fists in readiness. “This is the only way.”

Without another word, he turned and plunged his arm into the fetid, stench-ridden mass of filth.

“No!” Rob cried out and turned away, covering his eyes. “No. No.”

“I shit the whole toilet dead this time,” Miss McDonald told Rob proudly. “I shit it good and dead!”

Rob looked at her in terror, he was shaking openly. He couldn't bear to look, but the squelching, sloshing, slurping sound would haunt him for many years to come.

Never again would he drink a chocolate milkshake.

A decade from this moment, the sight of a child eating a bowl of chili would trigger a flashback that would reduce him to sobbing quietly, a huddled mess in the corner of some distant café. It would ruin the first date he'd had in many years.

Finally, there was silence. It was a strangely inappropriate silence. It was the silence of a battlefield after the noise of the gunshots had died away. There was an ugly peace amidst the horrors of what he'd seen, the terrible fate that had befallen his comrade.

This was hell and now, instead of peering into the darkest depths of it, he felt as if the darkest depth of hell were now staring into him.

"Got it!" Dave shouted, his words accompanied by the sounds of flushing.

"Thank the stars!" she said. "I have a burning need to refill that thing!"

"There's more?" Rob whimpered softly, his spirit broken. "How can there be more?"

Dave stepped out. It wouldn't be entirely accurate to say he'd never looked better. He held out the terminal in his ungloved hand. It had already seen more horror than any small piece of technology had any right to endure, and soon it would meet its ultimate fate.

"You hid the terminal with a secret file on it under a mountain of the worst smelling human waste I've ever seen?" Rob was still in shock.

"I did," Dave told him.

"I used my super-powers for good," she smiled proudly.

“It was the one place nobody in their right mind would ever think of looking!” he said and Rob agreed, but at what price? At what price?

“Come on. We’ve got to make sure this gets into the right hands.”

Rob frowned darkly. “Anyone’s hands but mine.”

Granger released the hand-cuffs and Phil began rubbing his very sore wrists.

“If you move from there, I’ll kill you,” Granger told him, pointing to a chair in the security office.

“OK,” Phil agreed and took a seat. He had no doubt that the detective wasn’t bluffing. His gun lay on the desk and looked as if it hadn’t been fired in weeks. It was the kind of gun that if someone was using it in a firefight, nobody would ever need to ask, ‘do you think you got him’?

“The question is: where do we start?” Granger growled at himself rhetorically. “The killer could be anybody on board. It could even be me, or you.”

“You said it wasn’t me,” Phil looked alarmed. “It wasn’t you, was it?”

“No,” the detective frowned. “I don’t think so. Not this time.”

Phil didn’t feel an awful lot better. He tried to imagine a situation that could be worse, but his imagination had limits.

“The guy from engineering left his terminal,” Phil pointed to the small unit lying at the side of the desk.

“So?” Granger roared, plunging the room into awkward silence and making Phil wish he could swap places with his sister. He grabbed the unit up angrily and it activated automatically. “You think

the key to this whole mystery is going to be on a terminal left behind by an idiot from engineering?”

“Let me tell you what’s going to happen,” it said.

Granger looked down. The screen came to life and was showing a recording of a previous conversation between Officers Lynch and Carver.

“That idiot detective is going to leave tomorrow on his shuttle with the prisoner. The prisoner has a small blaster and will kill the detective. He’ll get in a few shots himself and the prisoner will be killed right alongside him.

“The hull of the shuttle will be fractured and by the time the ship gets back to Earth the case will be closed. They’ll have killed each other. There will be no further investigation. The suspect simply must have been the killer.”

“So what do I do?” Carver seemed more than happy with the way things were going.

“You go to the shuttle and shoot Granger once he’s aboard. Kill the prisoner with Granger’s weapon,” Lynch told him. “Finally, that ties things up neatly. Everyone involved is dead and we can go back to the office, make our reports and then shred them for security reasons.”

“I can do that,” he said with a certain satisfaction. “I quite like Granger, but I can do that.”

“Keep it tidy this time!” Lynch warned him. He glared at him for a moment. “That girl from the SCAR office was a mess. I don’t know what you were thinking.”

“You told me to savour things, to enjoy my work more,” Carver said apologetically. “I was just following orders, Sir!”

Granger looked up at Phil who looked up at Granger. Both looked shocked.

“You wait here,” the detective snatched up his gun. “I have some people to kill and I’m going to very much enjoy it.”

The vital-communications relay office was a lonely, dire place. Misery hung on the air like a cloud, as did sarcasm—and bitchiness was in no short supply either.

Dave opened the door and stuck his head round: “Remember me?”

Rebecca Gibson pretended she was busy. Considering she had only one thing to do for the last nine chapters, it was a tough act to sell.

It was an odd peculiarity of galactic communications that those involved in the work measured time in almost unique degrees they referred to as ‘chapters.’

“No.”

“I didn’t actually intend to be abducted by security in the middle of dinner. That hasn’t happened to me before in the last seven chapters,” he assured her.

She sneered at him. “It was quite embarrassing. You’re quite embarrassing.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” he told her, trying to sound like the kind of person who frequently told the truth. “The person who was arrested for the murder spoke to me a number of times. They wanted to question me about him, which was honestly all there was to it.

“It had nothing to do with the fact I used to date the murdered girl who I found really annoying and frequently threatened to kill.

“Do you know that smell you get when you cook a rat in really old vegetable oil?”

She frowned at him. "I thought it might be something like that. You mentioned something about her before the other day. Have you got me into trouble?"

"Not yet," he said. "But I am working on it."

"I don't think you're going to be getting a second date, Mr Satan. I'm afraid you may have set the bar too high. I'd be too worried you wouldn't be able to match the standards of our first date and hate for there to be an anti-climax."

"That would be a shame," he told her. "I specialise in anti-climaxes in the area of dating. I've been told that I excel at that very thing a number of times."

"You've never worked on commission, have you?" she grumbled. She refused to look up and speak eye-to-eye. Instead, she pretended to be busy on her terminal which was actually displaying a dancing hamster.

"Guys like me don't come along very often, you know. How many handsome, charming men have walked into this office this week?" he asked.

"None, ever, that I'm aware of," she said simply.

"That hurts!" he grimaced.

"You've never been left in a restaurant while your date is dragged out by security, have you? Have you any idea what it's like to have everyone staring at you as if you're the most fascinatingly appalling thing they've ever seen?"

"I do have a certain amount of experience in that area," he told her. "I have already said I was sorry."

"No, actually you haven't."

"It was explicitly implied."

Her lips fluttered towards a smile but she controlled it, so the resulting conflict looked as if she'd masked an attempt to burp.

“I brought back the message you sent me,” he told her, handing her the terminal. “I think you should put it back with all the other file fragments and delete it from here. I don’t want you getting into trouble for helping me.”

“That’s very decent of you.” She picked up the terminal and instantly threw it back down. “That thing smells terrible.”

“Really?” he frowned. “I rinsed it under a tap for several seconds.”

“I’ll put the message back,” she told him. “I might even think about a second date.”

“If you do then I won’t bring any friends next time,” he promised.

“I can’t even watch when people eat anything but macaroni,” Rob sighed. “Even more so after seeing what came out of Miss McDonald.

“Oh, Dave. I’m going to be haunted forever by what came out of Miss McDonald. How is it even possible to block one of those toilets? They have an engine that runs on ethanol. I hear they test them by pouring in a bucket of wallpaper paste and bricks.”

“I need to confess something to you, Rob.” Dave bit his lip and took a mouthful of macaroni. “Pasta and cheese are both recycled. They always have been. Everything is recycled. It’s all just shit.”

“No!” Rob wailed and pushed the plate away. “There’s 84 things on the menu. They can’t all be recycled, can they? Why did you tell me it was clean food?”

“I like macaroni,” Dave told him with a shrug.

“So why did you make me eat it?”

“I didn’t make you! You’re a grown adult. You can make choices for yourself, can’t you?” Dave asked him, rather ironically.

Rob shrugged sadly. “Apparently not.”

“I’ve got some good news. I hear we’re going to Gannymead,” Dave told him.

“The planet where women have unfeasibly large breasts?”

Rob’s mood lightened a little. “The place you keep talking about?”

“The very same.”

“Well, that’s something.” Rob gingerly poked at the food. “So we never did find out what Red Dove was.”

“I’m sure it’s a recipe for pie!” Dave raised an eyebrow and a sly little smile fluttered over his lips. “It makes perfect sense, if you don’t think about it.”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Rob told him. “A part of me wishes I’d read it now to see what the secret was actually all about.”

“Pasta maybe?” Dave told him with an odd degree of certainty.

“No,” Rob grumbled. “Stop saying things.”

“If you want my opinion, and even if you don’t, there are two possibilities,” Dave told him with an expression, for once, wasn’t emanating from the awesome power of his inner-idiot. “The way I see it: it’s either a special secret program thought up by the most evil minds in the galaxy. It’s designed to rain down a specially-engineered virus onto Switzerland, the last bastion of freedom in Alliance space. It’s designed to make everyone living there into brainless, bloated, basement-dwelling, moronic creatures with no will-power and horrendous beards around their unshaven necks. They will then become a whole nation of Wikiweb programmers, filling the information channels with whatever the media wants to brainwash the masses with on any given week to disguise the fact

that everything we think we know about the universe is utterly wrong.

“It’s either that, or a recipe for pasta.”

“What?” Rob looked at him in horror. “Did you read it? Can you even read?”

“Nah,” Dave shrugged, and ate some of his lunch, but there was a flicker of a smile on his face and a little light glimmering in his eye. “I like my pasta in cheese sauce as nature intended. What do I care about Switzerland? What does anyone?”

“Right,” Rob shook his head at him in dismay. “If Phil Bothan didn’t kill these people, then who did? There are so many questions left unanswered.

“This is a terrible story, Dave.”

“Somebody knows,” Dave said, and gave him a difficult-to-read smile. “The clues are all there. I’m sure someone will figure all this out. It’s not really that hard if you’re a little more intelligent than your own lunch.

“I don’t have to spoon-feed you all the answers, do I? I mean, you’re smart enough to figure this out for yourself, aren’t you? I basically did just explain it all to you, after all.”

“But what about Bothan’s cousin, his sister?” Rob said thoughtfully. “They were probably killed for what they knew, murdered for the secrets they found out. Maybe we should take the message to the authorities? We should do something with it?”

“Many Bothans died to bring us this information.”

“What should I do about it? Print the information on a towel?” Dave asked sarcastically. “The way I see it, I had two choices. I could either have uploaded the file back into the computer and find some way to make the Captain transmit the message to everyone in authority that has ever been in touch with the vessel, to crush their

secret plans and bring safety and security to Switzerland, the most violent and dangerous place in the galaxy, by leaving it to carry on being the most violent and dangerous place in the galaxy...

“For that to work, I would have had to have known who the killers were all along and found a way to bring them to justice. I guess a very clever person, perhaps one who enjoys pretending to be very stupid but is actually really very smart indeed, could have worked it out. He might have been able to, somehow, by very clever and unlikely means, get the information to that big detective so that he might go and shoot them.

“I wonder if that might have been possible, perhaps using a probe and a personal terminal? Who of us can really know?”

“Or?” Rob asked.

“Or I could have taken the message and given it back to Rebecca, so she can hide it back in the buffers, in the hope of getting a second date, and a chance for me to play with those possibly above average breasts of hers.”

“Right!” Rob grunted knowingly. “And it’s not as if you had any influence with the Captain anyway, is it? I mean, you can’t just reprogram her like a portable terminal and make her do whatever you want, can you?”

Dave grinned to himself and said, “No. Exactly. By the way, from now on the alarm in our room is going to be going off at 9.30. There seems to be some kind of inexplicable malfunction that nobody will ever notice.”

“Cool!” Rob said with a smile. “I could use the extra sleep.”

“You could use a bottle of hair dye,” Dave told him. “I’d watch the news for the next few days, though, just to see if anything interesting occurs. I mean, all these things might just have actually

happened and we might have no idea about any of them, because we're just essentially useless alcoholics.

"For all we know, someone might put the messages back where they came from without knowing what they're doing, and the Captain might, or might not, accidentally transmit them across all channels when she has a little flutter after someone accidentally uses a diagnostic probe that's inexplicably set up for organ-harvesting. The horrible murders might be solved and the real perpetrators might be brought to justice. Perhaps Phil's family uncovered this conspiracy and it's now about to blow open, saving everyone in Switzerland from a terrible fate—not that I care one way or another!"

"Are you on drugs?" Rob asked, shaking his head in wonder.

"Probably!" Dave admitted with a shrug.

"So what next?" Rob said thoughtfully. "Do you think we'll have more fun and crazy adventures in the future? Do you think other ridiculous happenings could befall us while we travel in space earning minimum wage with the fringe benefit of free bags of beer and recycled macaroni?"

"Maybe." Dave rubbed his chin. "I guess you never can tell."