

# Losing. The will to live.

By

Jack Brewhouse

This is a work of literary fiction. Names, characters, places, events and incidents are all quite obviously the product of the author's imagination, and very clearly the result of crippling mental illness. I mean, seriously, it's set on a space-ship and the main characters have the IQ of a potato.

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[WWW.JackBrewhouse.com](http://WWW.JackBrewhouse.com)

This short story follows the average daily lives of Rob and Dave, the galaxy's greatest heroes as they do things so stupid that you wish you could meet them in real life just to try and beat some intelligence into them.

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On the site you will find 'Blips,' short, sharp science-fiction stories which are all free to read online. Rob and Dave's short adventures are listed for free, as are other longer short stories.

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There's also several novels about riding motorcycles over appallingly long distances, which is something I do to keep from going completely insane. After reading this, you might think it's already far too late, and you'd probably be correct.

Thanks for reading.

**Jack**

Rob slumped into his seat with an exhausted sigh. It had been another long day and he was glad that the most unpleasant part of it had finally ground down to a shuddering halt—a halt so shudderingly halting that the next stage of the day would shudder equally haltingly, as he transitioned from the spirit of a bored and unsatisfied waiter, to the spirit of an unemployed man drinking to forget that he was living trapped inside the body of an entirely employed waiter about which all this was essentially true. Thinking about this gave him a headache.

His work was mentally undemanding, and the drudgery of it was slowly draining him from the intelligent keen young man he liked to think he was, into a tired, apathetic shadow of his former self—a former self who was such a failure as a human, that he had become a waiter in the first place. Where this left his future self was anyone's guess, but in his darkest hours he knew it that none of this was likely to end very well, especially since it hadn't really begun that way.

"You sound like a man who's glad his day has finally ground to a halt."

Rob frowned suspiciously. Perhaps Dave was capable of reading people's minds in some way, since he appeared not to have much of one of his own? The thought troubled him since many of his own thoughts were about naked women and what he'd like to do with them. It troubled him further when he considered that what he actually liked to do with them was have a very cordial date over dinner, with perhaps a glass of wine. If Dave were to know such a thing, beyond the shadow of a doubt, then he would relentlessly attack him and accuse him of being gay in a horrifying blaze of irony that Rob just wasn't sure he could ever recover from.

"A shuddering halt," Rob added, quite cautiously, narrowing his eyes and peering at him darkly. All this was lost on Dave who really didn't care what anyone thought, especially himself, since he had discovered long ago how horribly unreliable he was, and totally out of step with what everyone else thought reality was.

"Drink?" shouted Dave from the bathroom. He stepped into the shared lounge and gestured with his thumb to the universal serv'o'matic.

"Drink?" Rob smiled weakly. He hoped he wasn't intending to bring something with him from where he'd been, such things were possible with Dave and not even unlikely. "Are you kidding? Beer. Bring me lots and lots of beer. I have many horrible life choices that need drowning in liquid apathy."

"Really quite very horrible life choices, Rob." Dave grinned back at him, and ordered two drinks from the machine, which duly appeared in a shimmering beam of light. The light in question was actually intended to assist with aiming, as the frothing liquid spewed out semi-unreliably, in an unpredictable jet of frothy blandness, a standard low enough that even the fact of it being free couldn't quite excuse.

"You look tired, as far as a man can be who has no real purpose in life! Another long day, huh?"

Rob shifted around in the seat, but couldn't quite manage to find a comfortable position. He sighed to himself wearily as he looked down at the beer like it was both the cause *of*, and the

answer *to* every problem in his life. He looked up towards Dave in much the same way, and sighed again as he nodded his apathy-enriched reply.

"Yeah!" agreed Dave. "These days are always the worst. Every time we dock with another ship and new passengers come aboard, my team has to actually do some work. Tomorrow will be fine again, I should think. I hope so, I promised the staff we'd spend the afternoon we'd play strip-poker in the gym. My hope is that it will go unnoticed there, or noticed less, at least. They deserve it, we worked twice as hard today."

He sat down heavily next to his room-mate and the pair chugged heartily at the first of what would probably be many beers that evening. The cool bitterness washed over their senses, not entirely unpleasantly, or entirely pleasantly either, and somehow nowhere in between.

"Twice as hard as what?" Rob frowned. "You lot don't do anything. Two zeros are still zero, you know?"

"Computer," said Dave, "is there anybody here who cares what Rob thinks?"

"Unable to respond to the question," the computer replied.

Dave shrugged and looked back over at Rob.

"Nobody cares what you think, Rob. Even the computer doesn't care, and I think that it's right not to. Perhaps it was programmed that way to avoid the needless complications of the opinions of barely competent waiters?"

"Did you check out the new passengers yet?" Rob gasped as he swallowed a mouthful of cold beer, cold being the only thing he was able to discern with any degree of certainty. "I was working on the forward guest lounge today. I think I saw most of them as they came through for lunch."

"I saw them." Dave grinned as if something was happening behind his eyes. It was unlikely that that was actually the case, but anything was possible. "I saw three in particular. A brunette, a blonde, and a bald girl caught my eye. I'm guessing the bald one is not from Earth. I'm more interested in the brunette though. She's pretty attractive—not as attractive as me, but I don't mind lowering my standards once in a while."

"Standards, Dave? Since when?" Rob frowned. "Anyway, how do you know the bald girl isn't from Earth? Lots of people on Earth shave their heads you know!"

"She had wisps of green hair," Dave shrugged. "Three of them. They were coming out of the top of her head, which was largely transparent. I'm not saying it was a bad thing. In fact, I think she was probably the second best looking passenger to come aboard. I can imagine myself stooping to that level with sufficient beer to compensate for any regrets I might feel afterwards. With sufficient beer I'm capable of a very advanced degree of stooping, you have said so yourself on many occasions."

"*Stupid, Dave. I've called you stupid.*"

"Is it not the same?" he shrugged, rather proving the point.

"I saw the brunette," Rob sat back and smiled to himself. "Tall, slim and businesslike. She was Asian, and dressed really neatly in a grey suit, and had dark eyes."

She was indeed strikingly attractive, and he had been struck. Rob had a habit of falling in love with passengers, and then doing absolutely nothing about it. He had developed a habit of doing absolutely nothing about a wide variety of things, and frankly, his career had begun to suffer.

"Yeah!" Dave nodded narrowing his eyes suspiciously. This was Rob, after all and the likelihood of him having any success with women was roughly equal to Dave's success with child-proof medication bottles. He often insisted, quite loudly, that there must be a significant design flaw since he wasn't a child and the bottles must know that on some level. This was actually a significant benefit to Rob whose medication bottles it was that he'd been trying to access. Ironically they contained drugs to help him cope with a recent and significant bout of stress brought on by a brief and significant victory of Dave's, where he had gained access to the aforementioned medication. Rob had spent an unfortunate, and quite painful, 36 hours with the largest erection he'd ever experienced. This had, also ironically, done nothing to boost his terrible confidence around the opposite sex. "That sounds like her. Did you talk to her then?" Dave asked, planning Rob's next bout of stress.

Rob took a deep breath and smiled smugly. "Yeah," he nodded slowly to himself, "I talked to her. I think we developed a real connection."

"No way!" said Dave, shaking his head, frowning in disgust, which might have been aimed at the beer, to be fair.

Dave had a confidence with women, an easy charm he turned on like a switch. He was relatively good looking and he knew it, and coupled with his easy-going personality, it was enough to afford him a great deal of luck with certain members of the opposite sex. As there was little else about him of note, at least in a positive sense, this simple fact was something he took a great deal of pride in.

He enjoyed exhibiting his success in front of his room-mate, whose luck with women while aboard the ship was limited to a single brief drunken encounter with an unidentified genetically-engineered female who was covered in a soft layer of fine purple hair, and had a slight aroma of used underwear. Dave had no particular talents and no particular skills. He was so utterly bereft of ability he considered it something of a speciality, and often bragged that he was able to turn his hand to practically nothing. He considered himself a 'Jack of no trades,' and one night after consuming copious amount of beer, he had postulated the theory that this might actually be a super-power, and that perhaps he had been bitten by a radioactive idiot.

What Rob lacked in confidence and success with the opposite sex, he made up for in intelligence—at least while not under the influence of alcohol, and not the kind of intelligence

that was actually of any use to him. He had been studying for a brighter tomorrow than his meagre today, and specialised in warp-jump theory whenever his busy schedule of consuming huge amounts of alcohol, and then regretting the consumption of huge amounts of alcohol, would allow. His talents were not matched with enthusiasm, and he'd taken a year out to go travelling aboard a commercial ship in order to see, and build a greater understanding of, the galaxy. A year had stretched into two—so far—and still he hadn't found a direction that really interested him. If the truth be told, he had seen and understood less of the galaxy than he would have by doing practically anything else in the known universe; with the possible exception of being Dave.

"Oh yeah!" said Rob, remembering the woman fondly with an exaggeratedly thoughtful expression. "We had a long conversation."

"You?" Dave frowned suspiciously once more, suspecting that tomorrow, Rob's shoes would be full of something that smelled quite appalling and had no place outside of a bathroom. "You had a long conversation with the best looking passenger to come aboard this ship? Are we sure you didn't dream it? Are we sure I'm not dreaming this now? How do we tell if we're awake again, sometimes I forget? It's got something to do with me punching you in the face, right?"

Rob simply nodded, ignoring Dave, whose mind seemed to have staggered hopeless off in one of its many explorations of its horrendous limitations, in terms of dealing with the very simple.

"Well... what did you talk about?"

"Well," Rob began thoughtfully, preparing to demonstrate that he had become quite adept at dealing with the very simple. "First she asked me about the lunchtime specials, and then she ordered the salad."

Dave laughed, not quite being mean but working up to it. "Yeah that sounds about right! For a moment I must have forgotten who I was talking to."

"Yeah," Rob shrugged, full of pent up self-loathing that Dave fostered and then frequently expressed far better than he could.

"So what do you know about her?" Dave asked. "Is she travelling alone? What's her name? Where is she going?"

"She asked for a clean fork. She said that the one on the table was a little bit dirty, and would I mind changing it? What she didn't do was tell me her entire life story. People don't do that to waiters for some reason. Maybe that's what wrong with society?"

"Well I guess I'll have to find out for myself, as you're so useless," said Dave with a sad expression. as he shook his head scoldingly at him. "Luckily, people do like to tell security officers everything. Females like to tell handsome young men like me all about themselves, and occasionally, I even listen to them. At least at first."

"You're not a security officer!" Rob felt it necessary to remind him of this very obvious fact. "You bring people towels, and report problems with food dispensers. On a good day, you supervise repairs to the passengers' toilets."

"Problems with shortages of towels could conceivably threaten the security of this ship!" Dave scowled at him angrily, or at least as angrily as a person who essentially didn't care about anything that happened anywhere in the universe could manage. "Anyway, I don't think that the entire Alliance would collapse if a table went without a waiter. I don't think the Proxili are waiting for the first sign of a slightly dirty fork before they invade our space again."

"OK!" said Rob. "I agree. In terms of the wider universe we're both a complete waste of time and resources. We're less useful than a marriage guidance councillor to a Warrior Krill with genital herpes."

"What if that Krill warrior needed a towel?" Dave asked. "Just think about that for a minute."

"No. I refuse to think about that for even a second." Rob shook his head, and returned his interest to his beer, where it belonged. "Computer," he said, "put on today's local news."

"Computer! Don't you dare!" Dave interrupted quickly.

"Unable to comply," the computer responded. "Please clarify the command."

"Now you've confused the computer!" said Rob with a sigh. "Throw a towel at it or something."

Dave glared at him. "I'll throw a towel at you in a minute."

Rob shrugged, "So?"

Dave looked away grumpily as the news came up on the main viewer.

"People have been known to survive encounters with towels. Even Krill towels."

"Do you think Krill use towels?" Dave mused, his mind doing what it all too often did, which wasn't very much of anything. "Do you think they have showers?" He frowned thoughtfully as if pondering something of great importance. "I don't think they have towels. Maybe that's what's wrong with society?"

"Maybe you're what's wrong with society?"

For a moment there was a thoughtful silence.

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The image of a man appeared on the screen. He was tall and austere, and as he spoke, he did so with a kind of confidence that inspired trust in his words. His name flashed up at the bottom of the screen informing the audience that he was a level 2 investigator.

*"It's widely understood that the Alliance is comprised of three major races; the Terans, who operate and control the military; the Proxili, who control the Trade Authority; and the Alcas, who form the backbone of the scientific community.*

*"What is less well understood is that one company, Hephaistos Engineering, works closely with all three departments, bringing Alcas technology to the Alliance Defence Authority military wing, under a trade agreement with the Trade Authority. Hephaistos Engineering is the largest independent small vehicle development company in the Alliance, and has contracts to supply a wide range of civil and military shuttles. They are also credited with developing the engineering patterns for many more designs of auxiliary vehicles.*

*And sadly, it all seems to be going a little bit wrong!*

*Today, a spokesperson from Hephaistos Engineering responded to recent allegations of widespread inconsistencies in their shuttle supply network."*

He looked directly out of the screen and smiled, showing off two rows of perfect white teeth, and a smug belief in his own arrogant sense of importance.

*"Alliance United News reported last week that as many as 40 Class Delta shuttles have gone missing over the past three months, and at least two military patrol scouts are still unaccounted for. The chairman of Hephaistos Engineering, Mr. Grego Pachman, made the following statement..."*

The image of the man faded away, as an older gentleman filled the screen. He seemed almost bored with the matter, as though it was far beneath his interests. His office was large and ornately styled. Most of the furniture was old, made of wood and metal, and was decorated with small models of famous vessels that had been built by his company.

*"I find the accusations of missing shuttle-craft absolutely ludicrous. In the first instance, we're primarily concerned with the development of shuttlecraft design, with construction merely a secondary concern. The shuttles we do supply are usually to small outposts without the ability to replicate and construct them with their own engineering staff. Outposts such as these rarely have the excellent record-keeping and level of professionalism that either the Alliance Defence Authority or ourselves maintain."*

He paused momentarily to look directly at the holographic imager the interview was recorded on.

*"I would like to address any additional concerns by reminding your viewers that when a shuttle leaves our assembly plant, it is barely more than a shell. The engines are separate. It will have no reactor installed, and the batteries will be completely discharged. There is no way the vessels could be operated without final assembly by qualified personnel.*

*Additionally they are all unarmed. Weapons are never fitted at our factories—if they are to be installed, then they're built and fitted elsewhere, and such equipment is quite outside our experience."*

He smiled smugly.

*"I would also like to address the issue that was mentioned in the previous news article, that our ships come with weapons mounting points and could be armed. Well in some cases, it's true that our shuttles have holes. They are designed to have several empty bays which can accept mission-specific equipment. I hardly think we're causing any significant danger by supplying empty spaces."*

A slightly muffled voice called out from behind the recorder.

*"And what are you doing to investigate these allegations?"*

*"Well as I said, I believe such accusations are ludicrous." The chairman shrugged. "However, it would be irresponsible of us not to take them seriously, so a review of our security procedures has been undertaken. Additionally, we've ordered a full investigation of our inventory, which I'm certain will show that we can trace each and every vessel that has left our plant."*

*"Thank you for your time," said the muffled voice.*

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"Off!" shouted Dave as if this was all a terribly slight on his conspicuously absent dignity. "That's enough news for now. We're drinking beer. This is no time for your brain to start working."

"You know, if you don't use your brain, it will become even more useless than it is now," Rob warned, although he felt it might already be too late. "You really need to address this issue, because today I served a piece of asparagus that I actually think could have beaten you in a game of chess."

"Yeah, that means a lot coming from a waiter with an advanced degree in warp-jump theory dynamics and a class 1 certificate in pouring out little glasses of water and folding paper napkins," he sounded quite sincere, which was unusual. "Another beer?"

"Do Krill eat their own young?" Rob replied rhetorically, frowning at himself for agreeing with his room-mate's sentiment which was unavoidably utterly correct.

His casually racist comment, of course, was a colloquial expression from his home town, an obvious statement of fact used to imply that such a question could only have an obvious positive answer. It was similar to the older practice on Earth of asking if the Pope was Catholic, or if bears crapped in the woods. These phrases, however, had lost a great deal of their cultural impact now that Catholicism was largely forgotten, and bears were mostly extinct, except for a few

pockets of Catholic bears believed to live somewhere in Switzerland. They had somehow survived, despite the male's odd predilection for trying to mate with junior members of its own gender, instead of mature females. Some examples of the species still existed in the American Museum of Ancient Horrors, which by an oddly ironic coincidence, also exhibited a wax effigy of the last Pope in the neighbouring section.

"You know what?" said Dave thoughtfully as if this took some considering. "I think they probably do. We could look it up, since we have the complete sum of all human knowledge at our fingertips. I wonder if we will? What will two people such as ourselves do, do you suppose?"

Rob took a sip of beer.

"So you think you've got a chance with this brunette? You think a beautiful, intelligent lady is going to be interested in the dubious sexual charms of a self-absorbed moron who shows up at her door with a friendly smile and a fluffy pink towel, asking if her toilet is in full working order?"

"I saw another girl come aboard." Dave sat back down, grinning. "She had a slightly transparent head, and languid black eyes. As she spoke, a kind of green liquid ran out of what I can only assume was her nose. She was hairless, and she smelled like burning rubber. I think I've got more chance with the brunette than you've got with that one, even if she was engineered on a colony that finds life-sized rubber dolls stuffed with green jelly that have been set on fire to be massively sexually alluring, and is thus filled with the sexual confidence of a massively attractive towel delivery expert called, Dave."

"Really?" Rob glared at him out of the side of his eye, his annoyance growing steadily to the point where he briefly considered putting his beer down. "Care to make a bet on it?"

"A bet?" Dave laughed. "You've got nothing I want. Everything you own came out of the ship's gift shop, or the food serv'o'matic. My serv'o'matic, because even that's on my side of the room. You actually have nothing of any value and no skills. You're not even a very good waiter. You can't even make paper swans out of the napkins."

His mood suddenly darkened and he took on a serious expression for a moment. Rob found the experience disquieting but stayed quiet anyway to avoid going to the effort of moving.

"I don't think you realise how disappointed I was when I found out I was sharing a room with a waiter that couldn't do the paper swans. I wonder just what the actual point of you is sometimes! It's like your sole function in life is to make me look good."

Rob said, almost sadly for Dave, "You don't look good!"

"You have one job and you can't even do that right!" he grumbled at him.

"None of this is going to be an issue, because I'm not going to lose the bet." Rob scowled at him with an odd degree of assuredness that he could only blame on the beer, the fact that this was happening at all meant that he'd lost something much more significant than this bet.

"You want to bet on the alien or maybe one of the girls from the loading bay?" Dave smiled sarcastically at him. "I'm not even sure I like those odds for you, but I don't mind being a little bit charitable, just this once."

"The brunette!" he shook his head and spoke with all the steadfast assuredness he could muster, which wasn't really very much. "I bet you I can get further with her than you can."

Dave looked at him for a moment, and a smile carved itself on his face. He had the expression of a man who thought such a thing was ridiculous, and that his friend was an idiot. Possibly a ridiculous idiot that he didn't really want as a friend.

"I'm intrigued," he admitted. "I'm intrigued that you think you have a shot with any woman on this ship that doesn't live in a computer simulation, or charge by the hour. I'm intrigued that you think you have a shot with any woman, anywhere in the universe, even in a universe where they can be manufactured and programmed to your specifications. I still feel that such a woman would likely reject you, possibly eating her own head to avoid this discomfort of you having a shot with her."

"OK," said Rob with a shrug. "I understand that you're afraid to lose. Don't worry about it. You can walk away with your version of pride more or less intact."

"No, no!" said Dave, grinning widely, he had no version of pride, that both knew that only too well. "I'm very much in. This is going to be fun—too much fun to pass up. Fun is in too short a supply on a ship that employs ginger waiters who can't do paper swans."

"Excellent!" Rob smiled. "If you win I'll do your laundry for a month. You can mine when I win."

"OK..." said Dave thoughtfully. "But you have to do it manually."

"Sure." he agreed. "Why not?"

"I'm going to eat Krill food for a month, so that when you wash my underwear, you really enjoy the experience on a multitude of emotional levels." Dave spoke with a serious expression, intended to convey to Rob that he really meant what he was saying. As he was so unused to actually being serious or really meaning what he was saying, the eventual effect wasn't everything he had hoped it would be, and left Rob merely confused. "And I'm going to bring her back here as often as possible. I might even use your bed, since someone has to christen it," he paused thoughtfully and then admitted, "well, christen it again because sometimes when you're out and my bed is still unmade when I bring a girl back, I borrow yours."

"No!" Rob cried out. "I knew it, I knew we didn't have a leak in the ceiling right above my bed!"

Dave nodded, kind of proud of that one. "And it's going to happen again, with that girl you like."

"No problem," said Rob. "It's never going to happen. I'm going to win. You may have confidence and charm, but in truth, you're little more than a noisy haircut. I'm willing to bet she's not the kind of woman that jumps into bed with someone out of gratitude for the delivery of a clean towel."

"Maybe you're right," Dave conceded with a shrug. "Maybe she's the kind of girl who desperately needs to understand the quantum-field dynamics of her cutlery while she tries to decide if she wants the soup of the day, or a delicious salad."

"So it's war!" Rob declared gravely. "Let it begin."

"Agreed. It has begun!" said Dave with a note of steadfast severity. "Go get me a beer," he added, pointing at the dispenser, his eyes narrowed aggressively.

"OK!" Rob nodded back angrily. He stared straight back at him, their eyes locked together defiantly. "What kind of beer would you like?"

"I would like selection 38," growled Dave. "It's a little less gassy, but still full-flavoured."

"That's a good choice," he spat the words fiercely through gritted teeth. "I think I'll join you."

"Thanks," Dave frowned deeply, glaring back. "You won't regret it. It's quite nice."

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The door slid closed behind him with a customary hiss. He ran his hand over his short ginger hair, and loosened the collar of his civilian uniform. It was designed to look similar to an Alliance military uniform, but with differences obvious enough to be noticed by anyone with an adult level of intelligence. Consequently, many of the staff bragged about their military service for some years after leaving the ship. Too many had left in disgrace after failing to earn the coveted 'medal of honour.' Unlike its military counterpart, this medal was awarded upon completion of a survey to see if they'd fully understood the basic rules of decent conduct, titled 'When is it OK to steal from the passengers?'

Dave had failed that one 42 times so far. He had also somehow managed to fail 84 times, the much easier questionnaire titled, 'How not to be a dick in front of the passengers.' It was multiple choice but Dave repeatedly answered the question, 'When is it OK to ask to use the passenger's toilet?' by adding his own answer, 'when I've already filled up their kitchen sink.' The 76<sup>th</sup> time had seen him legally classified as a non-human person with the same legal rights as a sentient carrot.

In his honour, there was now an additional question, 'when is it acceptable to use a passenger's sink as a toilet?' with the only available answer being, 'never.' He had cleverly added on the

previous 21 attempts, 'whenever you ask what colour towel they'd like and they carelessly answer, *surprise me.*'

"Computer. News," he called out as he stepped into the cabin. It was a small room, but with just enough space for the pair of them to be relatively comfortable. Like all the crew quarters, it lacked a window with a view of space, but it had a bathroom, a decent computer interface, separate beds, and a dispenser capable of delivering beer. It was, in fact, better equipped than officers' quarters on board some small military vessels and had been styled to be vaguely reminiscent of a parent's basement, either to make them feel more at home or to prepare them for the rich future they had to look forward to.

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A woman appeared on the screen. She was quite attractive, but had a maturity that made her more appealing to a wider audience and more trustworthy besides. She was dressed in clothes that were neat, but were not interesting enough to draw attention from the importance of what she was going to say. She frowned out of the view screen, as if the following message would have earth-shattering implications.

*"Breaking news. Another act of possible Skelk piracy was reported earlier today, which brings the total to three incidents this month in this region alone. Admiral Chor of the ADA has issued the following statement."*

The screen switched to a view of very fat officer standing outside the Alliance Headquarters on Earth.

*"The ADA is aware of the growing activity from the Skelk pirates in the 401-408 sector, and we have strong grounds to suspect that this is indicative of a new rise in activity from this particular race. A decade ago, we blocked them from travelling in deep space by economic sanction, but our measures have not been entirely successful. Our patrols have, for the most part, successfully inhibited their ability to engage in acts of piracy in Alliance space. These latest incidents are quite troubling, if indeed they do show a re-emergence of Skelk activity."*

*Let me be clear in reiterating that the ADA takes a very hard stance on piracy. Those responsible will be found, and dealt with to the full extent of interstellar law."*

He glared at the audience accusingly and flushed red with rage.

The screen flashed to a shot of space with two small ADA vessels cruising along, minding everyone else's business.

*"A pair of cruisers have been sent to patrol the region, and raise the level of defensiveness. The ADA is confident that the acts of piracy will cease, and threats to civilian vessels will remain negligible."*

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"News off." Dave waved his hand at the computer screen. "That's quite enough of that. Nobody cares what's going on in the Universe."

"I actually do care!" Rob grumbled weakly, knowing such complaints were likely to provoke questions regarding his sexuality or, more likely, absolutely no response whatsoever. "I wanted to hear that."

"Alliance Defence Force, huh?" Dave sighed wistfully, ignoring him as if it was something he practised in front of a mirror. "Sometimes I wish I were aboard one of their mighty ships. I wish I was on patrol, hunting down Skelk pirates, and keeping the space lanes safe for civilians."

"I think they have enough towels!" Rob told him.

"You know what bugs me about you?" Dave glared at him with a strangely serious expression that seemed highly out of character. "You could be in the Alliance Defence fleet. You know all about that warp stuff and space things that nobody with a girlfriend cares about. You could be running a ship's engineering team in a few years if you wanted to. Instead you serve little bread rolls to people who don't even like to make eye-contact with you. I find it hard to fault them on that since your hair is the colour of an emergency beacon."

"You forget that most evenings I get horribly drunk," Rob reminded him in his own defence, gesturing with one hand towards the beer he was holding in the other.

"I will concede that point," Dave admitted, "but don't you wish you were doing more than just wasting your life on a trade route being a waiter, when you're already qualified to do something more?"

"Not really," he shrugged. "I know you don't watch a lot of news, so I'm fairly sure you don't realise, but a lot of people shoot at military ships. Even if nobody's shooting at them, they blow up all the time. Shuttles crash far too often, there's an appalling fatality rate for junior officers in yellow shirts, and it seems like there's a life threatening or dramatic incident aboard most starships every week."

"Yeah," Dave said thoughtfully. "It does seem to happen every week, usually on a Tuesday. I wonder why that is?" They looked at each other in silence for a moment.

"Guess what?" Dave said finally with obvious excitement, all thoughts of things other than what had flashed immediately through his mind, now lost to the ages, and probably for the best all round.

"I don't know," Rob shrugged. "Have you been experimenting with a new kind of fabric conditioner? Are your towels now huggably soft? Do they have the delightful fragrance of summer meadows? Has someone discovered how to unblock a toilet with a towel, thus making your life complete?"

"It's nothing to do with towels, I assure you. It's much more exciting."

"More exciting than towels? Are you sure?"

"I know. The whole thing has left me both surprised and aroused. Maybe a little hungry."

Rob frowned curiously since it took something rather special to make Dave experience his entire gamut of emotions in one go. "I honestly dread to think. The last time you asked me to guess what happened, you had got a date with the officer in charge of cargo bay 2. Remember that? He turned out to be a man."

"We don't talk about that. We agreed!" Dave reminded him sternly, pointing an accusing finger. "I still can't go down to the lower bay. I just can't bring myself to do it."

"And why did he agree to date you again?" Rob smiled.

"He thought I was a girl," Dave frowned darkly, "or a very pretty man. Apparently the distinction is not such a big deal on the Altrax colony, where female growth hormones are added to the giant broccoli forests to keep them healthy."

"I particularly like the part of that story when you found out he was a man, when it turned out that you had both brought along precautions, and both took them out at the end of dinner to show how responsible you were prepared to be to someone of the fairer sex." Rob grinned. "Yes, I think that's my favourite part of that story. I think that might be my favourite part of any story, ever."

"Anyway..." Dave frowned at him. "Today I was called to room 42 on Passenger deck X2. Guess who's staying there?"

"Is it a man with long hair?" asked Rob with an innocent shrug. "Perhaps a very pretty man?"

"It's a brunette," he grinned back smugly. "It's a Miss Somari Rakdee. She needed help from the passenger services division. Before you ask, she didn't need a towel!"

"Blocked toilet?" Rob shrugged.

"It wasn't blocked as such..." he grumbled. "Anyway, she's travelling alone. I turned on the charm, and I found out she isn't married and she has no children." Dave smiled with a sense of overwhelming self-satisfaction. "I almost feel sorry for her—she has no chance."

"I actually do feel sorry for her." Rob told him. "Not as sorry as I feel for you..."

"Shall I leave my laundry on your bed?" Dave grinned.

"Leave it in Bangkok." Rob told him with a grin. Dave shrugged back, slightly mystified, as if someone had handed him his daily paperwork and wanted it completed in a reasonable time. "That's where she was born, although her father was French," he continued. Dave narrowed his

eyes suspiciously and glared at him. "She speaks three languages, English, French, Thai, and she's learning German."

"German?" Dave rolled his eyes. "Who speaks German? French people?"

"German people!" Rob told him, shocked at his abject stupidity. "German people speak German."

"So why do Australians speak English? Why don't they speak Australian? Why is Earth so confusing?" asked Dave, clearly struggling to make sense of things so basic that a child would have been frustrated at him, even a child who had acquired a taste for glue, paint or microwaved food.

"You come from Earth? I don't know how you can find any of this confusing".

"It takes a lot of effort," he frowned to himself.

Rob grinned at him. "What I do know is that she likes orange juice, and she doesn't like chicken soup."

"I'm impressed," Dave finally admitted. "You've spoken to a woman. I actually didn't think you had it in you. Of course talking to one is a lot different to throwing them out of your place after breakfast. Before breakfast is better, of course, and is my personal preference."

"Well I didn't have the awesome negotiating power of a blocked toilet at my disposal," said Rob with an expression of sarcastic regret. "But well done for finding out that she had a name. Good for you. That puts her one step ahead of your last three girlfriends."

"This isn't over!" Dave told him, shaking his head sadly as if in pity. "This is just beginning."

"Bring the beers!" Rob instructed with a wave to the dispenser. "Then I think we should go to the crew lounge, where I have heard there is a supply of the kind of beer that gives you a headache if you drink too much of it."

"That's my favourite kind of beer!" said Dave thoughtfully. "Shall we drink too much of it? Shall we drink until we think chatting up the girls from the docking crew is a good idea?"

Rob frowned and looked away in disgust.

"I don't think there's that much of any kind of beer on the whole ship."

"Let's hope you're right, shall we?"

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The end of a shift was always a special part of the day for Rob. It meant he had a few moments of peaceful time to himself before Dave's shift also finished. They had little in common, but you couldn't share a small cabin with another crew member without becoming friends, unless you were willing to kill them. Rob preferred becoming friends, although he had done some research into the disposal of corpses into the recycling matrix on several occasions. The results were encouraging.

Dave had in fact turned out to be a pretty good friend, and they had shared many interesting nights getting so drunk that he could barely remember any of them.

"News!" he said, and the viewer flicked up the latest report.

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The report began, the voice sounding extremely serious as the viewer lit up with an image of a suspected pirate vessel.

*"Reports coming in from within Proxili space claim that Skelk pirate vessels have begun appearing and threatening small ships, with the most likely intention of stealing technology. According to sources on Proxil, at the heart of the Alliance Trade Authority, an incident was recorded in which a ship of unrecognised configuration fired upon a small science vessel. The energy discharge matched the configuration of a military type particle beam."*

The screen went blank, and then flashed to a very angry looking officer, craning forward over his desk, glaring into the holographic imager as he began to speak. Below him the report flashed that he was Rear-Admiral Paul M Cass, responsible for security in this region of Alliance space.

*"This incident brings us two problems. Firstly, there's the fact of the Proxili claiming that a military ADA type weapon was discharged in their space. From a peacekeeping perspective this is already a serious concern, but if the report turns out to be accurate, then we'll have the additional task of trying to determine who is in possession of one of our weapons and how they came by it."*

*By design, each particle cannon is coded to the power generation signature of the vessel it's mounted to—you can't simply bolt one onto the side of a pirate ship and go shooting holes in unarmed Proxili trade vessels, or else everyone would be out there doing it."*

He paused for a moment and sat back.

*"Secondly, if pirates are hunting down Alcas technology, installed in Trade Authority ships, then we have to assume they may come into possession of any sort of technological nightmare. If that happens, then we could all be in trouble. We are investigating these claims as we speak, and will hopefully resolve them to everybody's satisfaction before the situation escalates."*

*We are currently enjoying the best diplomatic terms with the Proxili that we've had in a decades, and we intend to maintain this enviable situation without another war, even though we nearly destroyed them in the last one."*

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"Computer," said Dave as he walked through the doors which slid open automatically. "Turn off the news and play some music."

Rob glared at him and began to open his mouth to protest.

"Please specify?" the computer prompted.

"Something good. Delete anything Rob has ever selected, because his taste in everything, up to and including friends, is appalling."

The computer started playing something reasonably melodic.

Dave made an expression of disapproval, but let it play in any case, "How was your day, Rob? Oops, sorry, I just remembered I don't care."

"It was fine," he shrugged, still frowning at his room-mate, "I was actually interested in the news."

"Well I'm interested in the brunette and I still don't care!" he grinned, "so I win."

"Somari Rakdee?" Rob reminded him sternly. "She has a name, you know!"

"They all have names." Dave smiled to himself. "I can't remember all of them. Anyway, I was in her room again today."

"That's great," Rob sighed. "What did you find out this time? Did you discover what kind of toothpaste she uses while your arm was firmly entrenched in her U-bend?"

"We're not quite that far along yet, Rob. If my arm had been firmly entrenched in her U-bend, like you suggest, then you'd be busy doing my laundry right now."

Rob shuddered outwardly, as the image he had had an unwitting hand in the creation of took permanent form in his mind.

"Actually though..." began Dave, seeming suddenly thoughtful, "she was talking on a secure communications line. I had to deliver the access codes because there was a connection problem. I heard a bit of the communication—it was pretty intense. There's more to this girl than what she's hiding in her U-bend."

Rob shuddered outwardly again, before regaining some composure. "I wonder what constitutes intense to a man whose primary role in life is ensuring the passengers have something to dry their hands on?"

"She was talking to someone about missing shuttles," Dave continued.

Rob went quiet, his face taking on a look of interest in something Dave was saying. He felt his mind screaming at him at this unresolved paradox.

"She mentioned the supply lanes, and she said she knew where they were going."

"Interesting!" Rob rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So you think she might be involved in the missing shuttles?"

"Yeah. Now you said that, I do!" Dave nodded in agreement. "That's suddenly exactly what I think for some, or possibly no reason!"

"There is just one problem with your theory, as I see it," Rob began thoughtfully.

Dave gestured for him to continue.

"You're an idiot, Dave."

"Agreed! But you didn't hear the best part."

"I dread to think," Rob frowned, and braced himself for the best part.

"She mentioned the news article about the missing shuttles," Dave began. "She said she had watched it, and then she got angry. She said she'd sort it out next time, and they had better get it right, or else there was going to be big trouble."

"She actually said that?" Rob frowned. "That they had better get it right, or else there was going to be big trouble? That's exactly what she actually said?"

Dave put his hand on his heart.

"I swear to the gods of beer and shuttle-racing," he began solemnly. "That is basically exactly more-or-less what she said."

"Well it doesn't mean anything," Rob shook his head and tried to look like he was ignoring him.

"I'll tell you what it doesn't mean!" Dave grinned. "It doesn't mean I'm going to give up on our bet. Today I ate an authentic Indian curry from the canteen, which was appalling by the way. I had them make up an especially ferocious batch brimming with authentic herbs, spices and germs. I feel like I've been eating infected razorblades, Rob, and I'm actually concerned about my anus turning inside out from the amount of time I've spent sitting on the toilet already. I

farted and turned the entire toilet bowl yellow, Rob. I'm going to wear my underwear for an extra day to make washing it even more special for you."

Rob looked at him in something that surpassed disgust.

"Tomorrow, Rob, I'm going to have them make me an authentic Thai green curry. Extra spicy. Last time I ate that, I lost half a stone in a weekend, and 98% of the functionality of my left kidney. I'm doing this just for you, Rob. It's the only way you'll learn. I only hope you appreciate all the effort I'm going to for you."

"Yeah, I heard your Indian curry made its way onto the lunchtime menu. I actually recommended the curry to her before I found out what you'd done. The sick-bay is full of people who think they're decomposing from the inside out, and they're printing emergency toilet-rolls around the clock." Rob frowned and shook his head at him sadly. "At least she remembered me from yesterday though."

"So?" Dave shrugged. "You have bright ginger hair. Your head looks like a rat trying to escape from a basketful of carrots. You're easier to remember than a scary clown at a children's party. People are going to be describing you to their counsellors in twenty years' time." He paused for a moment and narrowed his eyes, "In fact if you wore a big red nose..."

"So anyway," Rob interrupted, as Dave began smirking to himself, "I got chatting about things as I took her order. She asked me my name. Did she ask you your name?"

"No," Dave frowned. "She calls me 'the toilet-man.'"

"We actually got talking about my degree in warp-field theory." Rob smiled smugly.

"Really!" said Dave with a sarcastic expression as his lips pulled into a beaming smile. "I bet her clothes just fell off, didn't they? What woman could possibly resist a man talking about complicated maths while serving her a crunchy salad? You've definitely cracked it there, Rob, and I'm not just saying that because I find you hilariously pathetic."

"She seemed very interested," Rob told him. He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Actually she seemed *very* interested. She asked why warp-jump theory is so different for shuttles than it is for larger vessels."

"Wow. You're virtually engaged," Dave grinned. "I couldn't possibly compete with your raw sexual powers. I wish I knew all about something mind-numbingly boring instead of being interesting, devastatingly handsome and attractive to women."

"Yeah," Rob shrugged. "Actually you're right for once. Women aren't usually interested in that kind of thing, and she asked a lot of questions."

"So she's boring?" Dave shrugged. "I can handle that. It's not like I'm ever planning to see her again once I pry my arm free. That's not how I roll."

"Maybe," Rob started at him fixedly. "Or maybe you're right? Maybe she is up to something?"

"Well whatever she's up to, it won't be with you!" said Dave earnestly, and perhaps a little sadly for him, but not really very sadly. "There is only one sensible and mature manner in which to proceed."

"I think you're right," Rob nodded gravely, "it's time for beer."

"And lots of it!" Dave proclaimed, as if the matter demanded the very strictest of attention.

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*"There are three new news reports for this region." The computer stated succinctly. "The titles of the reports are, 'Skelk pirate vessel in unconfirmed sighting in sector 402,' 'Shuttle manufacturer confirms parts are missing from inventory.' 'Fish deliveries from Omega-prime cause chronic flatulence in Alcas shock.'"*

"No!" Dave winced as if this was hurting him on some deep emotional level. "I don't want to hear about any of that. Search news feed for the words 'underwear', 'horrible sexual morality' and 'bikini.'"

"Searching," the computer replied in an artificial monotone, which still sounded somehow disapproving.

The doors slid open suddenly with a hiss that sounded remarkably like someone was saying the word 'hiss' rather than an actual hiss.

"How was your lunchtime shift?" asked Dave, as Rob lurched into the cabin with a stain on his uniform, and an expression which conveyed the message that it had certainly not been everything he could have possibly hoped for.

"It certainly wasn't everything I could have possibly hoped for. Actually it was just peachy," said Rob, pointing to the stain. "This is peachy too. A kid threw it at me because, apparently, his desert wasn't quite peachy enough."

"Just stick it in the laundry. It'll be fine," smirked Dave, in something between amusement and apathy.

"This is going straight to the recycler," Rob grumbled, "this is beyond laundry."

"I saw the brunette again this morning," Dave called out. "There is definitely something strange going on with her."

"Yeah?" Rob called back from the bathroom. He stepped out with the jacket of the uniform removed, and was dabbing at the shirt underneath with a towel. "I was thinking the same thing. I spoke to her at lunch, and I think you might actually be right about something for once."

"I guess it had to happen sometime! The law of averages and all that, I don't pretend to know how these things work," Dave shrugged. "You'll never guess what I saw in her room."

"If you're going to describe her underwear in painfully graphic detail, or make another subtle but pointed reference to her plumbing, then I should warn you that I've had a bad day, and I'm looking for someone to direct the full force of my ginger rage at." Rob told him evenly.

"Interesting." Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I didn't know you could feel anger. I thought ginger people didn't have souls."

"We don't," Rob shook his head. "That's why I can kill you without feeling any remorse whatsoever. Do you want me to show you?"

"Maybe later." Dave shrugged, but shot him a slightly suspicious look. "Ginger. I still don't see how that kind of thing can grow out of a man's head, a normal and healthy man, at least." He looked as though inspiration had suddenly hit him, "I think I just answered my own question."

Rob sighed, "It's genetic."

"Ah, so you got it from your mother? OK, that makes a kind of sense, I guess. We all like a novelty once in a while, a drunken fumble and a morning of regrets."

"That is actually my mother you're talking about," Rob tried to look angry. Tried and failed. "But it's on my father's side actually."

"See, that makes no sense whatsoever." Dave scratched his head as if his brain had run down and needed more friction to charge it up.

"Might I remind you about the whole thing about me killing you with no regrets or emotional repercussions?!"

"Sure. If you could do it just before my next double-shift, that would be ideal for me. You'd actually be doing me a favour."

Rob smiled back knowingly, "I know what you mean. So what did you see in her room? And please keep it clean."

Dave frowned, and his expression hardened into something more serious.

"She'd left a computer interface pad on her table and I read it," he began. "It had details of where the stolen shuttles were being transferred to. It had a map open."

"Really?" Rob tried to look sarcastic but couldn't quite manage it. "I chatted with her about the ship that she transferred here on—the small transport vessel we docked with."

"And?" urged Dave expectantly.

"It came from a deep space relay station, number 33." Rob's brow furrowed thoughtfully. "According to the news, that's where the supply depot that the shuttles went missing from is located."

"14 people came aboard from that transport," said Dave, his voice low and serious, which was a struggle for him. "Every one of them looks suspicious."

"How do you know?" Rob asked. "How comes you managed to meet them all?"

Dave looked away and bit his lip. Seconds ticked away. "They all needed towels..." he said finally.

Rob tried not to smirk. He tried, and he failed.

"But still, they all looked strange to me. They weren't the normal people we get aboard. The brunette was travelling alone too. Even that seemed odd."

"I don't know," Rob shook his head. "I guess it does look bad."

---

*"Hephaistos Engineering has confirmed today that it will be requesting assistance from the Alliance Defence Authority in its investigation into the loss of several shuttle components from their manufacturing facility on Starbase 33."*

The screen opened to a hologram of a nervous bald man whose eyes flicked around sharply. He seemed ill at ease with the imager pointing at him, and stood awkwardly, his arms tightly wrapped around him as he shifted his weight from foot to foot.

*"Can you tell us what your own investigation has thrown up?"* a voice called out from behind the imager.

*"Well..."* he began with a measured nod. *"Shuttle parts are missing."*

*"Can you tell us what exactly is missing?"* the voice called out once more.

*"Parts!"* The nervous man wore a badge on his overalls stating he was the factory foreman. *"Parts of shuttles. Shuttle-parts."*

*"Which parts exactly?"* the voice asked once more, a little wearily.

*"If we knew that, they wouldn't be missing."*

*"I see..."* the voice said behind the viewer. *"And how did they go missing?"*

*"We lost them, obviously," the foreman admitted. "We're still looking into it. They could be anywhere. They're probably still here somewhere—some of them are very small and easy to lose. You could be looking at one right now and never know it, because that's how small it is."*

"OK," said the voice, clearly giving up, *"you've been very helpful, thank you."*

The foreman shrugged.

*"Glad to be of assistance. Are you sure you're permitted to be in here?"*

---

"We need to talk," said Dave as he squeezed into the cabin, pulling off his uniform jacket, and discarding it casually onto the back of a chair—so casually, in fact, that the chair suffered for it. "This is getting serious!"

"Go on!" said Rob, finding himself slightly disturbed that his room-mate had found something beyond running out of beer to be truly worthy of concern. "What's happened? Did someone block the captain's toilet today?"

"The brunette. But she didn't block the Captain's toilet. At least not that I know of," he said simply.

Rob sat back in silence and let him continue.

"She's going to a space-station. It is still 2 days away, and she said that's where the shuttles are being transferred."

"That would be station AEOS401," Rob mused thoughtfully. "It's a cargo transfer station, or something. To be fair, that is probably where a lot of shuttles get transferred. What makes you think there's anything to worry about there?"

"She said something else," Dave smiled grimly. "She said a smuggler from the supply network was arrested there. She said she was going to go and sort it out. She said she needed to get there before the people from Earth-Central News got hold of the story."

"Really?"

Dave nodded and perched himself precariously on the back of his chair.

"She's got something to do with these missing shuttles. She's going to sort out the problem. The problem must be that this smuggler got caught. It must be why they're on the news."

"So what do we do?" Rob shrugged.

"We should have a beer!" Dave told him, nodding to himself in approval at such an elegant solution.

"I meant what should we do about the brunette girl who's involved with an interstellar smuggling ring, who we suspect of stealing armed shuttles from the Alliance?" Rob reiterated with a sigh.

"Yeah," said Dave thoughtfully. "When you put it that way, I do find her slightly less attractive. Does that make me shallow? I don't like to think of myself as shallow, but sometimes I do—I think of myself that way quite a lot of the time, actually. It doesn't help that you keep saying I have the depth and warmth of a puddle beneath a leaky fridge. That's a sentiment I've heard expressed by several of the young ladies I've entertained recently." He sighed and hung his head. "Maybe I should have a meaningful relationship with someone who isn't shallow? Maybe I could find a soul-mate—someone as cool, interesting and good-looking as I am? Then I wouldn't be shallow anymore."

"We have to tell someone!" Rob told him flatly, slightly stunned at how well he was illustrating his own stupidity.

"Or we could investigate ourselves!" Dave grinned. "Why couldn't we be the heroes of this grim situation and solve the crime that's on all the news programs? We could become heroes and attract tons of girls and I could grow old trying to explain to you what you're meant to do with them. Probably, in your case you fantasise about a nice dinner date with a glass of wine."

"We're not doing any of that because I'm a waiter and you're an idiot who delivers towels," Rob pointed out the blisteringly obvious. "I'm not Shakespeare Holmes and you're not Doctor Livingstone."

"That is a good point," he agreed. "We should tell the Captain, I suppose, which is a bit boring, isn't it?"

"Tell her what?" Rob shook his head. "We haven't got any evidence."

"Could we just tell her we don't have any evidence?" Dave suggested. "That would give us more drinking time."

Rob shook his head at him, the expression on his face was that of a man who was toilet training his pet and it had accidentally made a horrendous mess on the floor. This pet of course, was a fully-grown man who delivered towels, and luckily such an incident hadn't happened in weeks.

"How can we get evidence?" asked Dave. "What is evidence anyway?"

"We need to prove she's involved with the shuttle thefts. We need something that shows there's definitely something going on."

"Her interface pad?" Dave shrugged. "It has all the information we need on it. I could steal her pad!"

"That's a brilliant idea!" said Rob.

"I know," said Dave, grinning wildly. "What could possibly go wrong?"

---

Miss Forman was a formidable brute of a woman. Being responsible for discipline aboard a ship where discipline was in incredibly short supply, this quality was of natural benefit to her. She sat down on a chair arranged directly opposite the two crewmen as they looked nervously to one another, and then away; anywhere, in fact, but back towards Miss Forman's angry gaze. She was accompanied by two officers, a security officer who guarded the door to their cabin, and the head of passenger-services who stood behind her looking ferocious and glowering down at the pair. She looked them over, one after the other as they sat in silence.

"So..." she began finally, "I hope you both realise that this is a very serious accusation that's been made against you."

"Yes," Dave agreed with a nod. He hung his head to the ground like a guilty child. "Is it that serious though? I'm not terribly good at judging these kind of things." He glanced to Rob and shrugged.

Rob nodded at him.

Dave grimaced and looked away. He tried, unsuccessfully to look sad, and even a little guilty as he said, "Yes, Miss, we realise now that we're very sorry. We've learned from our mistakes, and it won't happen again, whatever bad thing it is that we did this time." Dave shook his head and tutted as if rebuking himself for his stupidity. He turned to Rob. "We done a bad thing again, Rob."

"Would either of you like to explain to me why you stole a pad from Miss Somari Rakdee's cabin?" she asked angrily. "Perhaps you, Rob, as you seem to be the one operating the one brain you have between you?"

"He did it," Rob pointed at Dave. "I don't know anything about it. It was all his idea."

"Thanks, Rob. I appreciate your support."

"Enough!" she shouted, standing up from the chair fast enough to send it skittering along the metallic floor of their cabin. "I do not expect to start my day with a complaint from a guest that a member of my staff has pilfered items from her room. This is incomprehensible. Pads are freely available—you can get one from the supply office you work in. Why in the galaxy would you steal one?"

"It's a long story," Dave said weakly.

"I'm listening," she told him sternly, her eyes boring into him with an intensity that went a little beyond making him feel uncomfortable.

"Rob can tell it better," Dave pointed at him and flashed him a tiny smile.

"Fine," Rob scowled back at his friend, "we needed evidence."

"Evidence?" She turned her anger on Rob who far preferred it when it was pointed mostly at Dave, where it really belonged.

"Dave and I have had a great deal of contact with Miss Somari Rakdee over the last few days, and we came to believe that there was something untoward about her," Rob explained.

"A great deal of contact?" she smiled knowingly, but it held not a shred of warmth. She cast a glance to the security officer at the door who shook his head at the pair as if disgusted by them both. "I have also had additional complaints from both of your shift supervisors. You've both been far too familiar with Miss Rakdee for the last couple of days. I hear you've made yourselves a total nuisance to this poor young lady."

"We were just trying to get a date!" Dave explained. "There was nothing untoward about it, we were doing it for a bet."

"A bet?!" she scowled at him, her anger growing more intense. "I see. Go on."

"If I sleep with her, Rob has to clean my underwear for a month," Dave explained. "I've been eating curry, you see, just to make it more unpleasant for him."

"Curry!" she groaned and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Half the people on board have heard about your special batch of curry."

"That was how it started!" Rob jumped in quickly to capitalise on the fact the Captain had seemed to focus on the least offensive thing Dave had mentioned in quite some time. "But we started noticing things. We started realising that there was something wrong!"

"I should say there's something wrong!" the discipline officer shouted back at him. "You two are always going wrong!"

"No..." Rob winced, "I mean with Miss Rakdee. There's something not right about her."

She narrowed her angry little eyes and stared at him, then turned away from the pair. She clasped her hands behind her back and gripped hold tightly. The pair looked at one another in abject terror.

"You had better explain yourselves, and be extremely careful about what you say," she said coldly with note of measured calm.

"Yes, sir," Rob agreed, "it's about the missing shuttles that are on the news."

"What?" she turned back to them, her brow furrowed deeply. "What about the shuttles on the news? What are you talking about now?"

"We think she's been stealing them!" Dave explained.

"What?" she roared at him. "What the hell do you mean? How could she steal shuttles from the comfort of her cabin aboard this ship?"

"Sir!" said Rob, trying again to calm things down. "We heard things she was saying—it seems like she knows all about the shuttle thefts. The story is all over the news. It's the biggest story going on in this part of space."

"So you stole her pad because she knows about something that is all over the news?" the security officer frowned at him accusingly.

"Well, it does sound silly when you say it like that," Rob admitted with a shrug.

"We were about to bring the evidence to the Captain," Dave continued, "I took the pad, because I saw it open with details of where the stolen shuttles were going."

"Right." She flashed an expression to the security guard standing by the door, who rolled his eyes and shook his head solemnly. She shook her head as well before looking back to the pair of idiots, "So... you're telling me that in the course of sexually harassing a passenger, you came to believe that she was so well informed about an incident on the news that she simply had to be involved in criminal activity?"

"Exactly!" Dave agreed. Rob slapped his arm and frowned at him.

"The pair of you are confined to your quarters until I decide how to deal with you. I promise you that it won't be pleasant this time," she began. "I'm very disappointed in you both. Why do I always have to be called to your cabin every couple of days to deal with your nonsense? What is it with you two?"

"Yes, Sir," said Rob dejectedly. "We're sorry. Again..."

"It might be partially my fault," Dave said enthusiastically. "I have something wrong with my brain, and I have a certificate to prove it. I used to have two but apparently it doesn't count if you make one yourself. Ironically it was making one myself that earned me the second one. Isn't it funny how life works?"

There was an odd silence as the brains of the people in the room refused to process this information.

"Now you listen to me, you boorish weasel-nosed little runt. Firstly, Miss Somari Rakdee has every right to expect a reasonable level of privacy aboard this vessel. If she's involved in any wrongdoing, then it's up to the authorities to deal with that matter, not a pair of drunken waiters."

"I'm not a drunken waiter, Sir. I drunkenly deliver towels and with quite an astonishing lack of efficiency!" Dave corrected.

She gave him a look that withered him instantly.

"If you have suspicions, then it's your duty to bring those suspicions to the proper authorities, not steal from the passenger's cabin."

"Yes, Sir," Rob agreed. "I realise that, Sir."

"And for your information, yes, Miss Rakdee does know a lot about the news. She's a journalist; she *writes* the news. She's travelling with us while she continues her investigations."

Rob hung his head in exasperation at his horrible little life.

"Oh!" exclaimed Dave. "That makes far more sense than what *we* came up with."

"Yes!" continued Miss Forman. "And as for the sexual harassment, let me assure you both that you're really not her type." She glowered at them for a moment before turning to leave.

She stepped out through the door still churning on her rage.

The passenger services officer at the door left with her, hefting a large plunger. He stopped to glare at them with an extra little measure of hostility that he had to work hard to find.

Dave watched them both leave, and turned to Rob frowning.

"He's got my toilet plunger. How dare he? That's cruel and unusual punishment to take another man's plunger. I made some special modifications to that thing. It had my best elastic band wrapped around the handle."

"Shut up, Dave."

Dave started to protest but gave up, "So who won our bet? Do you still have to clean my underwear, because honestly, it's gone too far for me to even risk touching it again, especially without my special plunger?"

The security officer stood for a moment glaring at them, shaking his head like a teacher watching two children with special needs eating a box of crayons.

"You really think either of you had a shot with Miss Rakdee?" he asked, gazing with mild bewilderment at the pair.

"I thought I did!" Dave admitted. "I knew Rob had no chance, I mean look at the state of him."

"Neither of you had a chance," he said as he walked towards the door, still shaking his head. "She's been seeing Miss Forman. You're really, really not her type."

"Miss Forman? She's a woman!" Dave frowned. "Isn't she?"

"I think so, yes," Rob agreed weakly with a shrug

"You two are total idiots," said the officer as he left. "You need to be more careful. This is how rumours get started."

They watched as the doors closed.

"We are idiots," said Dave. "It's nice to have it confirmed once in a while though, isn't it? I mean, you're never really sure, are you?"

"You know something, I'm actually not," said Rob softly. "I think I'm going to quit being a waiter and get a proper job. I think it's time I lived up to my potential."

"Maybe I should live up to my potential too," Dave shrugged. The silence dragged on awkwardly for several seconds.

"You know somewhere across the vastness of the galaxy, there's a Krill scout, stuffed full of angry warriors, watching us with powerful sensors that glow green for some reason that I don't care about," said Dave solemnly.

Rob turned to look at him. It was a bit like watching a car-wreck happening in slow motion.

"A warrior, filled with blood-lust will look up from his console and say the time is now for them to attack the Alliance. A dirty fork has been detected in our sector. It begins with a fork, and then a plate. Before you know it, the table-cloths are at slightly wrong angles, and the little paper towels don't look anything like swans, which can be blamed on a certain ginger waiter whose name nobody wants to mention, especially female nobodys for reasons that are pretty obvious."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Rob shook his head in dismay.

Dave raised a finger, gesturing for silence.

"A second Krill ship agrees—civilisation is breaking down, the entire Alliance is in danger of collapse. The leaders of the Krill hordes ready their fleet of funny-looking green space-ships."

"Dave?" Rob sneered. "What the hell have you been drinking this time?"

"And then you know what happens, Rob?" Dave smiled thinly. "They try to press the buttons that make the ships work, and they're just too slimy. They slide off, and so the invasion has to be aborted. It's a towel, Rob. The lack of a towel saved us all."

Rob just shook his head.

"That's what we do, Rob. We're saving the galaxy one dirty fork, one fluffy towel at a time. Without us, there wouldn't be an Alliance of worlds. There'd be wet hands, and slightly dirty cutlery. Anarchy, Rob. Madness."

"There are no words!" Rob told him, aghast.

"If only the Krill had beer, Rob!" Dave shook his head sadly. "Something fully flavoured and less gassy."

"Shut up, Dave."