

EDGE

by

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Nobody

“If you look out the viewers on the port side, you’ll see that we’re on the final approach to Station AEOS-401,” a suspiciously human voice called out over the announcement system and stirred almost, but not quite, nobody to any kind of action, even the fairly modest action of turning one’s head to look out of any of the viewers along the port side of the vessel.

“AEOS-401 is a deep-space relay station, a minor freight and cargo processing plant on the edge of the expanse. As scheduled, we’ll be making a short 47-hour layover while we take on fuel and wait for authorisation and navigational information to allow us to head on towards planet Vega 7. Conditions on the station are not considered optimal, and passengers are invited to remain on-board during the process.

“Those choosing to disembark do so at their own risk.”

The pilot’s voice spoke with a passion that didn’t seem to be shared by the passengers, who continued to largely ignore it.

“We’ll be docking in just a few minutes. There’s no need to bother with seat-belts, which is why none are fitted. If a mistake were to be made, seat belts would be of no use to you in any case since at the relativistic speeds the craft is travelling at, any less than perfect docking procedure would vaporise the ship instantly.

“Customers are invited to bring their own seat belts on board if it makes them feel more comfortable. This ship, however, has a perfect safety record since both it and the crew continue to exist.”

Several of the passengers shook their head at the pilot’s stale, unwelcome, and slightly unsettling attempts at humour.

Martha Slicko was of those passengers aboard the small commercial transport vessel who, unlike the others, did appear to

have an interest in where she was going. She was the sort of person who met every situation in the galaxy with boundless enthusiasm, whether the situation warranted it or not. She was the sort of person who went forwards even when there didn't appear to be anywhere to go in that direction. She had abundant motivation for things that would demotivate the most driven of people and was impressed by things that would crush the spirit of the most ardent optimist. She was the sort of person that most people found annoying. In this regard, most people were probably correct.

She didn't shake her head at all, and she alone did go to the port side of the craft to peer out, stretching herself to get a glimpse of the station. It was still some distance away, but it could be seen if you looked hard enough. She looked harder than anyone.

She stretched further, over a young man who inched back away from her awkwardly as she craned to see, ignoring his realm of personal space as if such a concept was totally alien to her.

She turned to face him with a happy smile and said, whether he wanted her to or not: "It looks like a really big dustbin."

His eyes rolled up suddenly to meet with hers, blinking in surprise. Her eyes were like two languid black pools of water, deep and empty, and seemed to draw him in, blanking his mind. He sat there in an awkward, wordless moment that seemed to swallow him up.

"A dustbin?" he said finally, clearing his thoughts as he wrenched his eyes away from hers. He noticed that she did no such thing herself. Those eyes were bearing down on him and hadn't deviated in the slightest. Her mouth was curled into a happy smile, and the eyes just stared and stared, digging into his soul, or, at the very least, his patience.

“The station looks like a dustbin!” she told him again, perhaps a little more insistently. “Or at least how I’d imagine a dustbin would look. We don’t use dustbins where I come from: we use recycling cubes. My colony doesn’t believe in waste, and cubes are more efficient to store than cylinders. Have you ever thought about that?”

He hadn’t, for reasons that were so obvious that it scarcely needed stating out loud. He began to think about an answer but his mind was still shaken by the outright boldness of her.

The seating was laid out in little rows of chairs set across from one another, divided by a table. Opposite to them, another passenger, an older man, was asleep. He was lying up next to the viewer and snoring softly.

Perhaps he wasn’t asleep at all. Perhaps he had the good sense to simply pretend he was so that people like her wouldn’t bother him. He was comfortably anonymous, he had no name, just a man sleeping on a shuttle. The young man was suddenly quite jealous of him.

“We recycle, too, on Earth,” he managed to say, his throat oddly dry, his mind churning anxiously.

“Everything recycles,” she added with a shrug. “It’s the way the universe works; nothing is wasted. Everything you can imagine is used somewhere by something. That’s why you have to be careful what you imagine, don’t you suppose?”

He frowned as the conversation took a turn from intrusive to confusing. He didn’t see any reason to press for an explanation: it was a conversation he had no interest in, in any case. He turned to look out of the viewer himself, hoping she might just go away.

She sat down opposite, just next to the foot of the sleeping man. He just managed to stifle a groan.

“It’s a Class 2 gravity-well station. That means that it’s not really a station at all. The middle bit has a gravity generator so, even though it’s small, it creates a wave of gravity that keeps the outer modules in orbit around it. The cargo platforms, the habitation area, the shuttle bays, they aren’t attached with metal tubes. They’re held in place with the force of gravity, which is by far the more reliable choice.

“They rotate around in a fixed orbit,” she told him without blinking, her strange eyes melting further into his. “And the energy from their movement powers small shuttles so that people can move around between them without expending any power.”

“Really?” he replied, but his own voice seemed distant, as though it actually wasn’t his own at all.

Her smile took on a strange quality.

“That’s when you know a species is really ready to leave their home world. The way we created things before was through destruction: we burned fuel, smelted ore from the ground. We damaged, we ruined and we destroyed, so that we could create the temporary from the ashes of the permanent. Now that we’ve learned to respect the way the universe works, we can copy the grand sweeping nature of creation. The station is a model of a solar-system and uses almost no power. Humans have matured: we’ve started to learn who we are. We’re starting to know what we really are.

“We’ve started to change now,” she told him, her voice boring into his mind. “We’re moving towards the future, which is frightening for the past. Change is the way of the universe and it leaves weakness behind.”

He stared at her incredulously, unblinking now himself as her words seemed to form in his mind so that what she was saying was

coming from somewhere inside his own head, where it didn't at all belong.

"I'm Marrta Slicko," she said, her voice having an almost sing-song quality. "I'm from the Brof colony, and I'm essentially human, for the most part. So are you, it looks.

"I wouldn't judge you for that. I don't mind humans at all, even though I am one; essentially."

"I'm Corey," he said with only the ghost of a smile, and his face hanging almost expressionless, his voice sounding hollow. "I am entirely human as far as I know."

And as far as he knew it was true, but still he scolded himself for saying it. He wasn't even entirely sure why he'd told her his name, he certainly hadn't intended to.

He blinked and shook his head, clearing his increasingly murky thoughts. "Excuse me," he said, standing up to leave.

He turned and walked away briskly, pausing only briefly to see her not moving to follow him as he made his way from the chair.

The anonymous sleeping man stirred very slightly and then his eyes fluttered open. He peered around wide-eyed for a second and checked the data on his pad before glancing out to see the station.

Corey went up to the airlock, which was located about halfway down the cabin in a small but significant alcove, where even the most novice space traveller would have no trouble identifying it. It was padded with soft beige cushions, beyond which were grey metal jaws, intermeshed layers of strength to protect the flimsy internal environment from the unspeakable hostility of absolutely nothing beyond.

He pretended to be fascinated with the computer monitor above the door that showed details of the docking procedure as the square little ship got closer to the port. He hoped she'd be more

interested in the man who'd been sitting opposite. For some reason, she was all he could think about. Her eyes were still floating in his mind, etched coldly into his imagination.

"You've never been this far from home before," Marrta said, her shrill voice jarring him more than it had any right to.

He turned, startled, to find her right beside him. She seemed to burrow into his thoughts as her black eyes floated before him, drawing him in, her words hooking into his thoughts deeper and deeper each time, like the talons of some great predatory bird, ripping away at his defences.

He smiled politely and shook his head, determined not to give any more away than he had to.

"We're a long way from Earth here: a very long way," she told him, and again her eyes dug deeply into his mind. "The Alliance is way back where we came from. This is the Edge, the frontier of space, the place where colonies plant a footstep in the virgin soil of the grand unknown.

"Out here, there is nothing of the central rule of law; out here is where the galaxy is wild, where a person can start over; where a person can leave his past behind, if he needed to."

He stared back unblinking, his face contorting into a confused and disapproving frown.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not really very good company," he managed to say, but the words were hard to find and he dredged them from his mind only with some difficulty. "I'm sure the other man might be more sociable than me."

"He's nobody, but you seem interesting!" she told him, her smile deepening. "I want to talk to you because you're interesting. I know you're interesting."

"I'm sorry," he said as firmly as he was able. "I'm nobody."

“No! You’re a somebody. You’re interesting and I want to hear your story,” she pushed on.

He was sweating now, nervous, his heart was pounding, his palms were wet and his throat was dry. “Tell me your story. You are going to tell me your story.”

The Tourist

Station AEOS-401 was an ageing trade platform, right on the very edge of Alliance space. It was neither a popular place to visit, nor an inviting place to work, but its strategic placement made it a convenient stop-off point on the way to a dense pocket of colonised worlds that were rich in natural ores. Were that not the case, the bulk of the inhabitants would have packed up decades ago, the station itself left as little more than a hollow abandoned hulk rusting away in space, occupied by a skeleton staff and serving as a grim reminder that things don't always turn out the way they were planned.

It was a low-priority installation with minimal comforts, outdated technology, and a questionable safety record. It was the sort of place that people could endure a brief stint at, if being there moved their careers along, or if they had suffered an unfortunate setback of some kind. Although it was relatively quiet, by Alliance standards, it still had a fairly sizeable turnover of short term visitors, who arrived and left, on scheduled transport vessels and cargo haulers as they made their way across space. And with little else to do while temporarily stuck there, it was typically the lounge where most of them spent the larger part of their stopover.

Were it a more regular station, the lounge would merely serve food and drinks to hungry travellers, or those wishing to socialise with other visitors after spending too long alone on their own vessels. The station staff would normally have had their own separate facilities, and the arrival and departure security checkpoints would be a safe segregated distance from both.

On AEOS-401 though, they were all thrown in together into a single multi-purpose area, the go-to place for just about everything, since there was nowhere else to go-to, or even away-from. It wasn't a

problem of a lack of space, so much as a lack of staff, facilities, and a point in making any much larger effort. Combining all the facilities into one principal area just made everyone's lives that little bit easier and the unbearable just a little bit less unbearable.

Anyone entering, or exiting, the station would be escorted straight to the lounge, where they'd be required to wait briefly as security checks were performed. These took time, since the computer was not what it once was, and the trans-spacial communications were exactly what they'd always been when they had been installed half a century earlier. Consequently, patience was a useful commodity on AEOS-401. But, for all that, the lounge was not the worst place on the Edge to be. In fact, it was about the only thing of interest on the entire station.

Martha Slicko was smiling. This was not an unusual sight, as it was something she spent most of her time doing. She did it so much, in fact, that one could easily reach the conclusion that her brain had been somehow mis-wired, making it incapable of processing any negative stimulus, regardless of how difficult it may be to find any positive stimulus to process in its place.

In the overly-spacious station lounge, in which she found herself, positive stimulus was most definitely in short supply. Around her were some forty people milling about, reading data from personal pads, using communicators, and drinking foul-smelling liquids from tiny utensils—whatever small distractions could help spare them the inconvenience of making eye contact with another living being.

She smiled her brightest smile, but as she looked from face to face, it became apparent to her that hers was the only one to be seen. She sighed to herself a slightly frustrated huff. Still, it didn't matter very much; miserable people still had stories to tell.

Ordinary, non-engineered humans were OK, for the most part, and she didn't much mind their company.

On Earth, most people were still non-engineered, but in space, things were quite different. Genetic engineering was simply a part of life, and an essential one for most of the wider population. The trend had begun even before mankind had set foot off the planet, but the very fact of setting foot off the planet made the need even more pressing.

People needed to be stronger and more durable; they needed to breathe different gases; they needed to survive longer, and to be smarter, if they were to survive at all. Intelligence was rarely augmented since smarter people were a threat to those stupid enough to want to be in charge. More often, people who weren't that intelligent wanted to be more powerful in some other way. What had begun as an exercise in necessity shifted quite rapidly into a desperate struggle to find some advantage over others.

Martha was somewhere in-between—heavily engineered, but done so for a purpose. She was a tool with a really quite specific function. She was like a spanner or a screw-driver in a world mostly populated with nails. But there was a reason why a screw-driver, or a spanner, couldn't enjoy what they did, even with modern artificial intelligence chips which could quite effectively simulate high degrees of work satisfaction.

She scanned the crowd, looking for a certain something. Humans were social animals, and she could generally pass as a quite ordinary one in their company. In fact, it was only her pitch black eyes and the hardness of her fingernails that gave her away. Occasionally, she would experiment by wearing dark glasses or coloured lenses, just to see if people would treat her any differently. They rarely did, though; either she was able to pass as normal to a

much greater extent than she had expected, or the diverse nature of the more cosmopolitan segments of Alliance space had rendered any such distinction moot.

She rummaged in her hand luggage and pulled out two scarves — one pink, and the other a sombre shade of dark brown. She held them up to the light and stared thoughtfully at them for a moment. “What do you think?” she called out to a civilian security officer who was standing nearby.

“I’m sorry?” he began politely. He checked over his shoulder, as if he was wondering if it was him she was actually speaking to. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“What do you think?” she repeated with a broad smile. “Pink or brown? Am I in a pink mood, or a brown mood today?”

The officer frowned to himself, a look of bewildered confusion. “Pink?” he suggested with a cautious shrug.

“No!” she corrected him sternly, her smile suddenly vanishing to be replaced by a deep frown. “I am in a brown mood today.”

His reply was but a curious expression, and although his mouth opened, no words came out of it.

Marrta smiled again, and thrust the pink scarf back into her bag, wrapping the brown one around her shoulders. Satisfied, she looked around the lounge for someone, anyone, to chat with.

“I’m Marrta,” she said by way of introduction, perching herself down next to an unwary man who seemed suddenly much more interested in reading the latest news about a theft of starship parts, some way off in the vast emptiness of the galaxy.

He flashed her a polite smile, that no sane person would interpret as an invitation to continue talking.

“I just got here,” she continued obliviously.

The man shuffled uncomfortably, as his eyes started flicking around the bar area.

“I’ve been to lots of places before. Some of them were better than this, but I like space stations. You meet the nicest people on them,” she told them. “You meet horrible people on them too. I was wondering if you were horrible?”

He stared at her for a moment, incredulously, before huffing deeply and clearing his throat.

“Is it nice here? Is there a lot to do? Are the people friendly? What’s the food like? Is there a dominant culture? Where... are you..?”

Her voice trailed off as the man muttered something about getting some water, and shuffled off with not inconsiderable haste.

“No... No... No... Bad... No!” came a voice from behind her.

Marrta turned to see an upper middle-aged man standing there, smiling back at her, but in a far more reserved manner, with considerably less enthusiasm, and with significantly more tedium, apathy, and misery thrown in. It was hardly a smile at all, in the conventional sense.

She shrugged her reply. “Sorry?”

“Don’t be!” he grunted with a sigh. He began again, “It isn’t nice here, you see. There’s nothing at all to do; the people are awful; don’t get me started on the food. There are no dominant or lasting cultures, in the biological sense—they never get a chance to get a foothold, as our janitor keeps the toilets spotless.”

“I think you’re just biased,” she suggested with an even wider, more empty smile. “I think you’re just looking for things to complain about.”

“Maybe...” he said, shaking his head solemnly. “I’ve got no complaints about the toilets: they’re the pride of the station, probably this region of the galaxy.

“Speaking of which, I think those pickled prunes have kicked in. The excitement never stops here!”

As the man strode off towards the bathrooms with an enigmatically chirpy weariness, Marrta’s eyes began searching for her next target. Within seconds, they fixed on a slightly younger man, who seemed just a little happier to exist. She wandered over to his table and planted herself down in front of him.

“You’re quite attractive and relatively intelligent-looking,” she told him happily. “We should have a drink, and if you’re humorous, and have a good level of personal hygiene, I might consider performing an act of procreation with you later. Maybe sooner?”

The man stared back, and blinked at her for a moment. “Would I have any say in this?” he finally managed.

She shrugged at him and said thoughtfully, giving the matter a really quite thorough thinking-about, “That largely depends on what you wanted to say.”

“Um... How about hello?” He reached out to shake her hand. “I’m Gary.”

She stared at his outstretched palm and made no attempt to reciprocate, but smiled ceaselessly in any case.

He withdrew his hand and raised an eyebrow quizzically. “What are you, exactly? You don’t look totally normal.

“I’m guessing you’re a second generation colonist with some basic re-engineering?”

“I’m from Brof,” she said with a curious frown. It was rare anyone noticed such details. “But most people there are not like me. I’m Marrta, and I’m a bit special.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” he said with a laugh. “Would you like some advice, Marrta? I’m getting the next transporter out of here, and I suggest you do too! This is not a good place.”

“Yes, I heard about the food. I don’t mind.”

“The food is the least of your problems here.”

“The drink is bad?” she ventured innocently.

Gary smiled back at her grinning face and he stifled a chuckle. “The drinks are just fine. Look, I’m stuck here for at least a couple of hours, so why don’t you join me for a couple and find out for yourself?”

“Will you tell jokes?” she asked. “Will we need a private room, or do you procreate in public?”

“I meant join me for a drink!” he said, gesturing towards the bar.

“Oh,” she muttered with mild disappointment. “Okay then. I’ll have what you’re having.”

Gary stepped up to the bar where he ordered two identical drinks. A young, endlessly uninspired waiter handed him two glasses and walked away, barely a raised eyebrow passing between them. He returned shortly after with two drinks, and handed her one.

She took the glass gingerly and sipped at its contents. Her face screwed up instantly in horror.

“No good?” he asked.

“It’s okay... What is it?”

“It’s just cola.” he said with a frown. “I thought everyone liked cola.”

She shook her head and took another sip. This time, she made a loud noise of disdain and shook her head furiously from side to side.

“Are you sure I can’t get you something else?” he asked again, his expression developing into a concerned frown.

“It’s fine, really. So tell me about this station!” she almost demanded. Lowering her voice seductively, she continued, “Tell me about you...”

“Well I meant what I said, you know,” he began. “You really don’t want to stay here. Bad things happen around these parts.”

“Go on!” She looked him up and down and grinned.

“I’m a shuttle pilot, so I get to hear all kinds of crazy stories,” he began. “Most of them are exaggerated, and half probably never even happened, so I normally don’t pay them much attention. But this past week, something very strange has been going on, and this was very much for real!”

The crew bunk rooms on board the station were prohibitively spartan, and the beds weren’t really up to the task, even the fairly undemanding task of simply being a bed. Consequently, the act of sleeping was often routinely augmented with chemical assistance in the form of a rather substantial quantity of alcohol.

Gary lay snoring in his, as the monitor at the far end of the room lit up and began chiming a loud, and frankly quite rude, klaxon. Above it, a yellow light began to flash.

He woke up dimly. Still half-asleep, he rubbed his eyes lazily and rolled over on the unyieldingly firm mattress. A hand began shaking him, and he knew that resistance to all this was quite futile.

“Yellow alert! Move yourself!” a voice cried out.

“Yellow alert?” repeated Gary blearily. “How can there be a yellow alert out here? Has the Commander lost his keys? Did someone forget to water a pot plant? We’re on a giant space-dustbin that nobody cares about!”

“Get your lazy arse out of bed, soldier!” commanded Enoch Abulga, firmly, but in mostly good humour.

Gary hoisted himself upright, glancing around the barely lit room, blinking the sleep away.

“I’m not a soldier,” he corrected forcefully. “I’m a civilian pilot, and at this time of the morning, bed is exactly where my lazy arse belongs! It also belongs there all day Sundays and most afternoons before drinking-time.”

Enoch looked at him expectantly. Clearly no was not going to be an acceptable answer.

Finally Gary yielded. “Fine, have it your way. I guess I have no choice but to do my job!”

Enoch nodded and pressed his finger to the communicator panel on the wall. “Abulga to bridge! We’re on our way, Sir.”

The AEOS-401 bridge was much like a large office—a big single room that had been divided into sections by makeshift partitions. Stations like these were generally manned by plain-clothed personnel, who dealt with their duties in a much more laid-back fashion than a man like Enoch would have liked.

Gary had heard all about his preferences on more than a few occasions, and while he’d mostly succeeded in keeping his own uniquely nonchalant work style under the radar, he was all too aware that Enoch had a very good point to make.

Things could be better, one could argue, and during such arguments the question of how it could be worse had never been adequately addressed.

The two of them entered the bridge together, Enoch in full station uniform, and Gary in whatever was nearest to the door as he’d left the room.

“Gentlemen, come on in!” said Commander Bailey, who was sitting back blithely in a comfortable-looking chair. He sniffed and took a big gulp of fresh coffee, his one luxury aboard the tired old station, and something that the recycling system played no part in; even the water had come from a bottle, and it had required no setting fire to in order to make it drinkable.

“Commander!” nodded Enoch gruffly in greeting.

Gary sat perched on the edge of a desk and waved, “Morning, John. This had better be good!”

Enoch cast him an acidic glare.

“How can we have a yellow alert out here, John?” Gary continued, his tone easy and familiar. “There’s nothing here to go yellow. I might manage pale brown, but that would be a stretch.”

“Ten minutes ago, I was asking the same question,” he replied, much less concerned at the informal nature of the banter than Enoch seemed to be. “Regardless, we have ourselves a situation.”

Enoch stepped forward, his body stiff and his eyes locked forward as he addressed the Commander. “A situation, Sir?”

John raised an eyebrow before returning his attention to Gary.

Gary sighed, “Not another threatening letter from my ex-wife?”

“We haven’t had one of those all week,” he assured him.

“No... we’ve picked up what seems to be a distress call.”

“What, all the way out here?” Gary frowned.

“The signal’s all over the place, but yeah; or that’s what it seems to be. One of the Alliance Defence guys is going to investigate, so we’ll be needing a pilot. And it looks like you’ve just volunteered, Gary!”

Gary groaned. Bunking with Enoch, an aspiring soldier, was bad enough, but the thought of being stuck in a long-range shuttle

with an Alliance officer made his living arrangements seem like a delightful picnic, with fresh blätterteig and obatzda cheese.

He thought to himself that it would almost certainly be a security officer, which would mean enduring endless quoting of protocol and safe-conduct recommendations, as they travelled in a straight line for hour upon hour, upon mind-numbing hour. All this would likely happen without a Bavarian beer in sight.

“Scheisse!” he muttered. “The best shuttles we have can only just manage faster-than-light level-2, at best.”

“We have one with upgraded engines that the technical guys have been itching to try. She can hold steady at 6.5 now, they tell us, and it comes with coffee!” he added, holding up a bag of freshly ground beans. “Though I’m sure you’d be happier with some German beer.”

“How did... ?!” said Gary, with a look of abject confusion. “Never mind.”

As the awkward pause continued, Enoch stepped eagerly forwards. “Sir! With permission, I would like to volunteer for this mission!” He bit his lip hopefully for a moment, before regaining his former pose of eyes locked forward, unblinking. He was the very vision of stiff formality.

“I’d also like to volunteer him!” added Gary, gesturing towards him with his thumb.

The Commander looked him up and down. “Gary is next in line for an assignment but, frankly, I don’t care which one of you does it. Just be ready to leave in 20 minutes. Report to shuttlebay 3.”

Enoch had a travel bag already packed for exactly such an occasion, containing clothes, tools, emergency supplies, and a weapons pack attached to the outside—just in case. He quickly snatched up the bag,

and paused to take a deep breath, before heading out to the shuttlebay.

“Are you going to be OK?” said Gary, patting him warmly on the shoulder as they walked. He felt a certain responsibility for the young man, not enough to overwhelm his desire to completely shirk his responsibility to this mission, but enough to very slightly feel sorry about it.

“Absolutely!” he said. “This is just the opportunity I’ve been waiting for. Without this experience, my applications to the Alliance will just keep being rejected. I need a promotion!”

“I see.” Gary smirked to himself. “Well then... I guess you owe me one.”

“I most certainly do.” Enoch stopped suddenly, and turned to face his colleague. “I know we don’t always see eye to eye, but I do appreciate your standing aside and allowing me this chance.”

“I...” Gary stopped himself and smiled supportively back at him. He’d forgotten what it was to be an ambitious young fool, and wasn’t all that sure there was much to remember about it in the first place. “I... just know you’re going to be fine out there. I have every faith in you.”

Enoch reached out to open the access portal to the shuttlebay. “I won’t let you down. I promise, on my honour, that I will make the station proud.”

“I’m sure you will!” Gary grinned. “I’m sure you’ll be our new poster boy. Songs will be sung of your deeds!”

The shuttlebay, that opened out before them, was as vast as it was cluttered. It was the primary loading-bay for cargo, and the shuttle was sitting right in the middle of all the chaos.

The shuttle itself was nothing to get excited over—a poorly maintained Type-B craft, dirty from frequent use, but capable and

quite probably safe. The engines had been quickly upgraded so as to make the longer than usual journey a little bit easier, but the changes didn't seem apparent. The ship looked more or less standard; little more than a light-grey box with a few probes sticking out of it.

Enoch looked it over proudly.

"You'll be okay!" said Gary, slapping him on the back.

He grinned widely and nodded his young, inexperienced head.

Just then, Borran Draï stepped onto the deck, rubbing his temples wearily. He looked up at the pair of pilots with an expression of mild incomprehension before approaching them.

"Good morning," he said, nodding wearily. He began to smirk to himself. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Draï. I'll be running the investigation into the distress call."

"Enoch Abulga, at your command Sir," he enthused. "With your approval, I'll be your pilot for the duration of the mission."

"At ease, cadet. Shall we get moving then?"

Enoch nodded, and the two of them walked off towards the shuttle.

Suddenly, the shuttlebay was filled with the deafening wail of what sounded like a combination of disgust and despair. As Gary turned to seek out the source of the noise, he was momentarily taken aback to find Marrita, the strange woman from the station standing right next to him, sipping at a frothing black liquid.

But then, of course she was.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"It's fine. Don't worry."

"Okay..." he agreed hesitantly.

"That is, I'm not saying your story was boring..." she began thoughtfully. "It just wasn't very interesting. Nothing about it made me want to leave."

“I hadn’t actually finished,” he said, somewhat self-evidently.
“I’m only just past the preamble!”

“Oh.” She said. She reached out to stroke his collar with a flirtatious wink. “Impress me then!”

Gary had been working aboard a tiny Type-15 shuttle all day. Conditions were cramped enough as it was, and the life support system was long overdue for an overhaul. The air was thick and humid which left him feeling tired and uncomfortable. With no other pilots on duty, he’d pulled the unenviable task of sitting in orbit around the station, ready to escort larger vessels to the docking clamps. Only one had arrived all day, but regulations required that he remain available in case of emergencies. All in all, it had been a day he would rather forget.

For the last 4 hours, he had promised himself a long spell of getting hopelessly drunk in the 401 lounge bar, a complete deck on the top of the main habitation section, where most of the crew gathered throughout the day to swap stories, and bawdy jokes, while questioning many of the choices they’d made in their lives. It was the hub of activity for the whole station, and really the only hub, and the only place where any real activity took place at all.

It had been a relief to finally be back at the station, where the air was comparatively clean and fresh, and in no way reminiscent of his own mouldy socks. He was still wiping the sweat off of his face and arms with a hand-towel when he arrived at his bunk room.

“Computer!” he began. “Put on some music. Put on... I don’t know, surprise me!”

Before he knew what had hit him, his senses were overwhelmed by an onslaught of the most gratingly hostile and schizophrenic noises he had ever been subjected to, which instantly

sickened him to his stomach, and to a much greater degree than even the most extreme of hangovers. In terms of hangovers, and their relative extremeness, he was something of an expert.

A seemingly random trombone line competed against a clattering drum part of heavy industrial components and dinner plates being tipped onto a concrete floor from a very great height, which competed against ear-splitting guitar-like wails epitomising the eternal screams of the damned, which competed, in turn, against a dark and raspy convulsing bass part reminiscent of infinite chaos and unfathomable despair. This clashed, quite violently, against a vocal line in the most tangible articulation of what can only be assumed was the voice of Satan himself, accidentally stepping on a rake, and amongst all this, the most hideous resonating laughter of happy young children.

There was no synergy of purpose, no compositional structure, nor any discernible phrasing, as each individual part worked in spite of the others in a constant struggle for a short lived dominance.

“Computer, stop music!” he cried out.

The music duly did exactly that.

“I know I said to surprise me, but... What the hell was that?!”

“Proxili funk fusion: a weaponised sub-genre of classical Proxili funk, engineered by the Alliance in an attempt to subvert and divide the Proxilia and the Krill,” said the computer.

“I almost feel sorry for them.” Gary took a deep breath, and closed his eyes for a moment, shaking his head. “Are there any messages for me?” he continued.

“You have three unchecked messages,” said the computer.

Gary checked the terminal screen, and noted that the first was from his ex-wife. He deleted it unopened, as there were only so many

ways she could call him an idiot before the whole thing lost its charm.

He'd hear all about it from the Commander anyway, next time she deemed to write to him. The second was his duty-rota for the next day, and the last was from Enoch. No attractive women had seen fit to mail him, again, but this was hardly a surprise on Station 401, where attractive women were in shorter supply than good pilots who took their jobs seriously.

He decided the duty-rota could wait, which he always did in any case, and went straight for the message from Enoch.

It was a video-call, and Enoch's rigid face quickly appeared large in the viewer. In the background, the small shuttle stretched back to where the Alliance security officer could be seen sleeping on a bunk. He seemed happy enough.

"Hello Gary," he began. "This is really just a personal message, so please excuse the relaxation of communications protocol. We've been tracking the source of the message now for 13 hours, and still have nothing to report. We're no closer to tracing the origin, and long-range sensors aren't detecting a vessel of any kind out here. Lieutenant Commander Draai says that's perfectly normal, given the sensor equipment fitted. We're not likely to detect anything until we're a lot closer."

He paused momentarily to quickly glance to the rear of the ship where the officer was sleeping fitfully.

"The Lieutenant Commander and I seem to be getting on quite well. He's very efficient and seems completely in control of things," he said haltingly. Gary could tell there was something prickling at the younger man's mind. "He's genetically engineered and has low-level telepathic abilities. It's a little disconcerting knowing that he knows what's going on inside my head."

“It’s a strange feeling, and something I’ve never come across before. I guess it’s normal these days, though. Perhaps when I’m a fully qualified Alliance officer with my own command, I’ll get used to all this kind of thing.”

Gary shook his head and chuckled at the young man’s over-exuberance.

“The shuttle is handling well. There seems to be a slight lag in the power delivery, but I ran a diagnostic, and everything is operating within normal parameters. I think the problem may be in the injector manifold.

“I set it for a full-power burst of the experimental engine to clear any blockages and didn’t get any reported issues. I did get some very odd readings so I’m going to make an official report, and recommend a full maintenance overhaul when I get back.”

He paused, looking even more pleased with himself.

“I don’t know when that will be, by the way. If we knew what the message said, it might give us some clues about what we’re looking at, but according to the Lieutenant Commander, the station hasn’t had any luck decoding the message either. We could be out here some time, at this rate.

“I also gather Alliance Command have been appraised of our mission. That rather puts the pressure on things, truth be told. If it goes well, it could really put my name on their radar. If the mission fails though...” He looked suddenly quite concerned, but it passed quickly.

“Well that’s about it for today. I’ll send another message tomorrow.” He leant in closer to the viewer. “And I just wanted to say thanks again, Gary. This means a lot to me! Shuttle S2AEOS-401, out.”

Gary woke up the next morning with a terrible hangover. It was as if someone was pushing into his temples, and their fingers were somehow meeting in the middle. Luckily, he'd had the foresight to prepare for this eventuality, and reached out for a small bottle on a shelf next to his bunk. He unscrewed the cap and downed the salty black liquid before lying back for a moment in agony, exhaustion sapping the strength from his aching muscles, and his head throbbing from his own abuse. Within a few seconds though, the pain began to fade, the clouds parted, and after roughly a minute and a half he was out of bed, feeling suitably recovered.

"Good morning, computer!" he began. "Do I have any new messages?"

"You have seven unchecked messages," it said in a monotone voice.

He checked the terminal screen. The first was the duty rota from the previous night, and the second, which was displayed open, was asking if he'd read the previous message; evidently he was supposed to have reported to Bay 2, approximately half an hour earlier. He checked his watch and grimaced.

The next four were from his ex-wife. The title lines were demanding his immediate attention, so he attended to them immediately, by using the delete function.

The last was from Enoch, another personal message. He shook his head at the young man's enthusiasm, wondering if he had ever been that young, that naïve, and that keen to please. It was hard to remember any kind of enthusiasm since his marriage had so very thoroughly sapped his will to live.

"Open the last message," he said to the computer, as he begun rummaging through his clothes for a uniform he could wear, or at the

very least, something that would cover up the fact that he had no intention of taking a shower that morning.

Enoch appeared on the monitor, shifting around nervously. “Good... morning, I guess, where you are? I just thought I’d send you a quick update.”

He lowered his voice and glanced behind him.

“It’s probably nothing, but I’m actually getting a little worried about Lieutenant Commander Draï. As I said, I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about, and it’s probably just that I’m stuck in a small shuttle with him for such a long time, and getting nervous...”

“He’s... acting a little strangely. He keeps forgetting my name, and he stares at me for ages at a time. I counted and once it was for a total of 22 minutes. He just stares at the back of my head.

“A few hours ago, I asked if he wanted anything from the service hatch, and he told me that ‘soon the house of blood will open, and it will consume our bodies and our very souls, and then we must make our home in the house, where the darkness will burn brightly enough to scorch the eyes from our skulls, and cleanse us of our hate, and we will be made unto them.’ Or words to that effect.”

“Pause...” said Gary. “Repeat that last part.”

The computer duly complied. “..soon the house of blood will open, and it will consume our bodies and our very souls, and then we must make the house our home, where the darkness will burn brightly enough to scorch the eyes from our skulls, and cleanse us of hate, and we will be made unto them. Or words to that effect.”

Evidently, he had heard exactly what he thought he’d heard.

“Resume!”

“I’m sure it’s fine though. Also he keeps pacing up and down the shuttle. He keeps saying they’re here, and that he has to find them before they destroy the future of the galaxy, here inside the past. I

assume he means the distress call, but it seems a bit of an odd turn of phrase.”

Enoch looked like everything was far from fine.

“I don’t want to report this through official channels yet. It might just be how telepaths behave, and I don’t want to look like an idiot on my next Alliance application. I’m still traumatised by the incident at that formal dinner I was invited to attend that time; you know, the one where they served Vichyssoise. I’ll hang in here for now, and see how things go.”

Looking deeply troubled, he glanced back around. “Also, the shuttle is getting worse. It just... won’t do what I tell it to, not straight away anyway. The response time lag is growing in leaps and bounds. That will be going in my report, in considerable detail,” he said with a scowl. “Whatever this experimental engine was, it clearly doesn’t work properly. Shuttle S2AEOS-401 out.”

Gary bit his lip thoughtfully.

The door to the bridge swung open with a groaning hiss as Gary stepped out of the elevator.

The Commander looked up at a large black chronometer on the wall and sighed at him loudly. “Aren’t you supposed to be somewhere?” he said sarcastically.

“John!” he began, his expression much more serious than he ever took his job. “We need to talk. Can we use your office?”

“What’s this about, Gary?” he frowned back at him. The Commander’s face took on a much more concerned expression and he began to look really quite worried. “What’s happened? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look this serious, even on Poker-night.”

“I’ll tell you in your office!” he said.

“Is this about the distress call?” he sighed, dragged himself up and led the way. “I have my best people working on that. I know you’re worried, but Enoch is going to be fine! He’s not a bad pilot, really.”

“Commander!” Gary insisted loudly enough for the whole bridge crew to hear. More quietly, he continued, “We need to talk in private. This is important.”

“Yeah, but my office is full of stacks of beer crates.”

“Commander!” Gary gestured to the office. “Please!”

Gary perched himself on a haphazard pile of beer, while the Commander shifted a couple of boxes out of his way so as to be able to sit down behind his desk.

“It’s the Lieutenant Commander!” began Gary. “Enoch sent me a couple of messages. He’s acting very strangely; I’m not happy with this.”

“Enoch?” The Commander shrugged. “He always acts strangely. He takes all this stuff way too seriously.”

“The Alliance officer!” snapped Gary. “He’s been saying all kinds of crazy stuff. I really don’t like this, John!”

“Gary, words like duty, discipline and punctual sound like crazy stuff to you!” said the Commander, leaning back in his chair with a growing sense of smugness.

“I’ll show you.” Gary stood up and clambered across a series of stacks of beer crates as he made his way towards a large display set into the far wall. “Computer, access my messages. Martin, Gary, approval GD302. Show me checked messages as well as new.”

As he rearranged some crates, so the screen could actually be seen from across the room, the list of messages appeared. Among them were three new ones. Two were from his ex-wife, no doubt

threatening to do horrific things to him if he didn't reply. He had no intention of doing so.

"Oh..." he said. "There's a new one from Enoch."

"Good," sighed the Commander. "Play it then; let's get this over with before I have to change your duty rota again; get you out in a space-suit cleaning the blocked waste pipes on the lower levels."

Gary looked over to the Commander, a knot of concern tightening in his stomach. "Play message," he said softly, and stepped back to his assigned pile.

At first the screen was dark, but there was sudden shock of movement and yelling. A foot that had been blocking the view moved away, to reveal Enoch on the floor, hoisted into a sitting position, and edging away backwards from the much larger Alliance officer who was yelling incoherently at him.

"I don't know... I don't know..." insisted Enoch, tears rolling down his face as he cowered away from the marauding officer, flinching with every sound.

"The hole is deep, the hole is swallowing all life! Blood fills the sky, bile rains down from the towers," he cried out angrily, his voice almost a roar.

The officer suddenly lurched forwards, pinning the pilot to the ground. "All hope is lost, but in darkness!" he shouted out in a frenzied rage. "There is an evil in the darkness; it cannot be killed, and it drinks the blood that blackens the sky."

By now, the screen showed only the back of the shuttle, as he continued to yell to the constant sound of sobbing.

"The evil must drink the blood!" he howled, louder than before. "The resurrection must come to pass; evil must fan the flames of blood! What's old must be new again."

The message ended and the screen went dark.

“Well, that was unsettling,” agreed the Commander. “It’s a good job we’re surrounded by beer!”

“So what happened?”

Martha continued to look at him with an ill-placed smile, that would have been out of place more or less anywhere. A haphazard, curious and slightly bemused grin began to form, twitching at the corners of her mouth.

“I don’t know,” said Gary with a shrug. “That was the last I heard from him. After that... well, you know how these things go; the rumours took on a life of their own, so honestly, I don’t know what to believe.

“It doesn’t matter anyway; The Alliance got involved and classified the whole business, locked it down tight, and told me to keep my nose out of it, which suited me fine. When they tried to sign me to a gag order though, I rather told them where to stick it and resigned my post on the spot. Hence, my leaving.”

“Did anyone try to hail the shuttle?” she asked with interest.

He shook his head. “We weren’t allowed. Shuttle S2AEOS-401 never contacted us again, so I doubt it would have made any difference if we had. Besides, it’s The Alliance’s problem now. They made that clear.”

“It’s still a good story though. If you were staying, I would almost definitely procreate with you.” She leant forward and smelled him. He didn’t quite smell like fresh laundry, but he wasn’t as stale and appalling as what she’d had for breakfast. “Almost definitely...”

“Well it’s nice to know I still have it,” he said, not sounding like he was terribly convinced. “I still have some time—do you fancy getting a proper drink?”

“You mean one that mildly poisons you, and temporarily removes inhibitions?” she asked matter-of-factly, weighing the consequences and finding that, on balance, she had nothing much to lose. “I guess I do!”

She looked across at the bar, where she could order one herself from a real, actual person, instead of a machine, as she was more accustomed to. “What was that called again? Cola?”

He nodded, as she got up and headed for the nearby bar. “Talk to the barman, he knows everything there is to know about drinks!” he told her.

The man serving smiled at the happy young girl as she approached him, putting down a glass and stepping forward to politely serve her. “What can I get for you?” he asked politely. “We have a wide selection of drinks, and we serve the best food on the station!”

She looked around the sombre architecture, the rusting service hatches, the bored, bemused faces, and the lacklustre swill being shovelled into some of them.

“Best food on the station?” she asked sarcastically.

“There isn’t much competition,” he shrugged. “We also, technically, serve the worst food on the station, if you think about it.”

“Well I need two drinks,” she began. “Can you make me something strong, with cola in it?”

“Certainly!” he agreed with a nod.

“Well, please don’t. Make me something that tastes absolutely nothing like cola.”

He seemed remarkably unfazed by her peculiarity. “I can do that too.”

“And food...” She grabbed what she hoped was a menu.

“What’s good today?”

“Leaving on the next transport,” he said earnestly.

“But I just got here!” she protested with an angry frown. “And I haven’t had lunch yet.”

“Like I said, we have the best food on the station! It’s all good!” The barman laughed at his own dry sarcasm. “Except the fish. There’s no fish today.”

“No fish?” she said, angrily slamming the menu back down on the counter. “What kind of bar doesn’t have fish?!”

“The kind that does the best food on the station!” he explained. “By the way, are you a telepath?”

“No!” she replied uneasily. “A little bit, sometimes. Yes. No.”

“It’s just that, I noticed that you begin to react to what you hear a little before people have actually said it. I have a telepathic friend who used to come here every day for lunch...”

“Lieutenant Commander Drai!” the barman called out brusquely, as the security chief entered the bar. “Why is it that around this time of day, your investigations always lead you here, and make it absolutely vital to closely examine a bowl of macaroni?”

“We get a lot of reports of stolen macaroni!” Borran Dria told him sternly. “And I have my suspicions about you, old man!”

“I’ve got a few suspicions about you, too, telepath!” said the barman, just as sternly back at him.

“You know something?” continued Borran, leaning forwards to add effect. “I’ve been told never to trust a barman. They always know too much about you.”

“And I’ve been told never to play cards with a telepath,” he said back. “Except you—you’re terrible. Maybe security officers just aren’t clever enough to play cards?”

They both laughed. Borran sat down at his favourite chair, and ran his index finger around the collar of his uniform. "I could arrest you for your casual racism, you old bigot," he said, snatching up a menu.

"You're just ageist and bitter about not being as handsome as I am," said the barman with a wink, as he picked up a glass and wiped the rim with a clean, fluffy white towel. "You're probably jealous for other reasons too. Honestly, with you, I wouldn't know where to start."

"Such as?" Borran raised an eyebrow.

The old barman frowned as if it were obvious. "Well I get all the girls. I don't leave any for you!"

"Of course!" The security officer opened the menu and began scanning through it. "You can read me so well it's like you're the one who's telepathic."

"Well I can tell you one thing I do know!" the barman told him with a grin. "I know you're going to scan through the menu for 30 seconds, and then order the macaroni."

"Not today," he said assuredly. "In fact, today, I decided to surprise you. I'm going to order the fish with potatoes and peas."

"Really..?" said the barman with a skeptical expression. "Not macaroni then?"

"Fish!" he said firmly.

"Well, you'll never guess what?" The barman held up the glass and nodded in satisfaction that it was finally acceptably clean.

"No fish?" Borran laughed. "How can you have no fish? It's on the menu!"

"Well, what can I say?" he shrugged, picking up the next glass. "I've had my nets out all morning, but we just haven't caught

anything. In fact, on this station it's a miracle we've even got a menu, if you really think about it."

"I'll just have the macaroni then. If you can manage that..."

"It's your lucky day..." he said with a grin. "There's a bucket of it brewing out the back, I'll just scoop you up a bowl and pick the flies out."

Borran Draï leant back in the wire-framed black chair and gazed around the bar. It was rare that people travelled to the station so his workload was light, too light to be interesting. His empathic ability did most of the work for him. He opened his mind and felt them, the thoughts and emotions flowing around the room. He felt the pain, the boredom, the frustrations, the resolve.

As usual, there were no criminals, no terrorists, and no political dissidents passing through. Just minor traffic, and a couple of low-level law breakers, but nothing that threatened security if left well alone. It was a place where people were only ever just on their way through. Nobody stayed.

The post was far from demanding, but it had initially been a welcome change of pace after his previous assignment serving aboard the ADA Titan. A skirmish along the border of the Skelk home-world had left him temporarily incapacitated, since he was no longer the proud owner of his own limbs.

Upon discharge from hospital with new, even better, limbs, he had been offered a temporary assignment on AEOS-401 as a lateral promotion, to allow him time to recuperate from his injuries, and to learn to cope with the heavy psychological burdens his experiences had subjected him to. Four years later, he was already thinking of the station as home, and was starting to worry that he might one day have to leave.

The two opposing perspectives troubled him. They wouldn't reconcile themselves: on the one hand, he was bored with the same tired routine, on the other, he was concerned that it might change. He wondered, sometimes, just how deep the psychological scars ran.

"You look tired," said the barman, with a hint of concern to his expression.

"I guess I am," he said, swivelling the chair back round to face the bar. "Did I mention we caught someone the other day?"

"Illegal parking?" quipped the barman. "Was it someone stealing all the fish, perhaps?"

"Smuggling!" said Borran proudly. It had been the most interesting thing to have happened in months. "I had a 48 hour pass to interrogate him, so I've been pulling some late shifts."

"Well it's nice to see you do some work for a change!" The barman handed over a tray; a steaming bowl of pasta with garlic bread and extra cheese. It smelt good, as always, a galaxy away from the rubbish the recycling systems of the station could produce, if forced against their will to do anything at all.

"To tell the truth though, I've not been sleeping!" He rubbed his temples and took a mouthful of pasta. He cursed himself as the hot food burnt his tongue.

"You know, most people here are pretty well rested; there's nothing to do except sleep," said the barman, handing over some paper towels and a glass of iced water.

"That's usually true," agreed Borran with a sigh.

"So why aren't you sleeping?" asked the barman, returning to the clean glasses, that for some reason needed the attention of a warm towel.

"What are you, station's counsellor now?"

“Well they wanted to put me in charge of security, but I prefer to keep myself busy,” he replied with a grin. “Besides, I failed the intelligence test.”

“Really?” he knew a sarcastic quip was coming.

“Yeah, I turned up for it. They said that took intelligence, so I didn’t qualify.”

“I’m glad I have the support of friends like you!” He smiled back at him.

“Borran!” the barman said and then looked really quite serious as he put the glass down and stared back at him fixedly. “Whatever made you think we were friends?”

Borran laughed, and turned his attention back to his macaroni. It had cooled a little now.

“So, you never did say why you weren’t sleeping!” The barman gestured with a nod towards the coffee pot.

Borran nodded and sighed to himself wearily. “It’s a bit embarrassing, but... I’ve been having bad dreams.”

“A big, strong man like you?”

“Exactly,” he said coldly. “Every time I close my eyes, I have nasty, vivid dreams, and always the same.”

“Go on...” The barman poured a small cup of very strong, rich coffee, the smell filling the bar as it dribbled into the small, white, ceramic cup.

“They started a week or so ago,” he began, his voice lowering as he spoke, his mood growing darker. “I’m in a tiny room, and it’s dark; it’s not so dark I can’t see at all, and the room might be my office but I’m so confused and scared that I just can’t really tell.”

“If there’s no fish in there, it could be my office!” quipped the barman solemnly, perhaps just to break the tension.

“Someone is there. I can’t see him, but I can feel his presence. He’s bigger than me, more powerful, and I can’t fight him.” He frowned as he remembered it. The images were so vivid that they almost felt real. “He’s angry, no... furious, and I don’t know why. I’m terrified, more scared than I’ve ever been, and... I don’t know what to do.”

“Okay,” said the barman, as Borran paused.

“Then he’s on me; he’s screaming at me, but I can’t understand what he’s saying.” Borran took a deep breath. “He’s pinning me down, his hands clamped to my shoulders, and he’s screaming into my face. I can feel his breath, warm and sickly on my skin. His rage is tangible, so real that I feel like I could reach out and touch it.”

This time the barman just waited.

“And then his hands are around my neck. I’m kicking and struggling, but his grip is closing. He’s strong, and I can feel the world becoming dark; I know I’m slipping into unconsciousness. I can feel my legs and arms thrashing, but it’s like they’re somebody else’s limbs now; I feel weak, distant, like I’m slipping away from it all.”

He stopped for a moment, holding his own hands in front of his face and staring at them raptly.

“Then the light finally hits him, and I see his face.” He stopped and looked straight at the barman, as if the next thing was almost too horrible to say.

The barman remained respectfully silent, just waiting for him to finish.

“The face...” he began. “It was my own.”

“So he... enjoyed the macaroni then?” said Marrta, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

“He had it every day!” he said with a knowing wink.

“Everyone else likes it too. I’m sure there are people who eat nothing else every day!”

She glanced around the miserable faces in the waiting room.

“I’ll give it a miss then. Just the drinks, please, for now.”

“Coming right up!”

A few moments later, two drinks were placed at the counter in front of her. She picked them up and took them to the small brown table where Gary was waiting for her. He looked up, a little frustrated frown on his face.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You were gone ages!”

“I’m great!” she enthused. “I have to say, though, there are not many happy stories here.”

She passed him a drink—a cocktail, heavy and pink, with a small paper umbrella and a mass of frozen fruit bobbing around inside it.

Gary seemed slightly surprised, even more so when he noticed she was sat cradling a beer served directly from a bottle. “I think maybe...” he slid the cocktail over to her, and took the bottle of beer instead.

“Are you sure?” she smiled. “This one is far more pretty, I thought you might like it.”

“Quite sure,” he told her.

She sipped at her drink. It was far more to her taste than the foulness of Cola, and it made her smile, as did everything else, of course.

“So tell me about yourself,” said Gary, taking a swig of beer.

“Why are you here?”

“Travelling!” she said with a shrug, not entirely honestly but not quite lying either. “No planet is safe from me. I want to visit everywhere.”

“Oh right... Well, we don’t get many tourists out this way,” he gasped through a sip of cold, frothy beer.

“I’m not surprised. Everyone is miserable and all your stories are horrible,” she said with a shrug.

“Maybe that tells you something?” he suggested. “Like, maybe this is not a good place to be?”

“Maybe...”

“Well, I need to use the bathroom,” he said, tapping the top of his bottle of beer. “I’ll be back in a minute. Will you be here?”

She nodded happily, and then sat watching him go. Then she stood up and stepped in front of the first person she saw walking past.

“Hi!” she said to the complete stranger. “My name is Marrta, with two rs. I’m from Brof. The sky is yellow on Brof but it’s not a nice yellow at all. It’s the yellow of the eyes of a person who has died because their kidneys have stopped working.”

“Hello,” said the stranger, stepping back in surprise and tensing up. She was carrying a computer pad, and held it suddenly close to her chest. She was young, in her early 20s, and was strikingly unattractive, with matted, unwashed hair, and no makeup. She had clearly paid scarce attention to herself for quite some time. “Vikky,” she said hesitantly, eyeing the stranger suspiciously. She looked scared.

“I’m travelling,” Marrta continued as if the conversation was welcome. “I’m stopping over at AEOS-401 for 3 days. Are you leaving or arriving?”

“Leaving!” she said very firmly. “Leaving on the next transport out!”

“Well I’m arriving!” she added redundantly, with a wider than usual grin. “Why are you leaving?”

“Do I know you?” asked Vikky. “I mean, who are you? What do you want?”

“Tell me a story,” she told her in reply. She narrowed her eyes expectantly, clawing into the woman’s thoughts with her mind. “Tell me why you’re leaving, and then I’ll answer your questions. Deal?”

“It’s none of your business!” she said defensively, her eyes widening.

“You don’t know who I am,” she smiled. She relaxed and a wave of confidence settled over her. “You don’t know if it’s any of my business or not. You don’t know what my business is!”

“Wait a minute, are you Alliance? Is this what I think it is?” Vikky lowered her voice, and seemed to calm down a little. She looked her up and down, and retreated a step back. “No… No, I guess not.”

“Tell me why you’re leaving, and I’ll tell you who I am, and what I want.” Marrta stopped smiling for just a moment, and gave her most serious look.

“Fine,” Vikky agreed. “Why not…”

Vikky Sandmore sat in her cramped little room, with only her computer for company; a constant companion that would never let her down, never abuse her, never argue with her about their future, and certainly never run off with a pretty little thing who was five years her junior, with the brains of a jam sandwich, and so heavily biologically re-engineered that she felt a genuine affinity with her own kitchen appliances.

She liked computers so much more than she liked people: at least, that was what she told herself.

Station 401 was a special place for her. It had everything she needed since all she currently required from the universe was that it left her alone. 401 had sufficient access to Alliance databases, and she could follow her work in relative peace and quiet, assured that the people here had even less interest in her than she did in herself.

At least, that was, until the door-chime sounded, automatically pausing playback of the Proxili funk fusion she had been relaxing to.

Vikky glanced around urgently, wondering who it could be. Facing the dark spectre of potential visitors, her room looked startlingly appalling. She became suddenly grimly aware of the piles of rubbish that had built up over months of neglect, the clothes lying on the floor and stuck to the walls by who knew what, and the musky stale smell of too much second hand air. It also occurred to her that she hadn't seen her felinoid in several weeks. It was a biologically re-engineered little thing with the softest, gingerest, warmest fur you could imagine. It was genderless, had no judgement of her loneliness and loved her unconditionally. In return, she loved it back, at least on the condition that it didn't leave her for someone younger.

"Who is it?" she called out nervously.

"Security, ma'am," came the reply through the intercom, the answer sending fresh bouts of panic through her.

"What's this about?" she asked, dashing about the room, busily hiding the dishevelled appearance as best she could, but knowing just under the shallowest of surfaces that it was a futile effort. Just then, a perfect balance of neurochemicals were released into her brain, making everything seem perfectly all right. The room would be fine as it was.

“May I speak with you, just for a moment, ma’am?” replied the slightly irritated drone.

“Just a second!” She took a deep breath as she placed her dainty dustpan and brush down on top of a small mountain of ferocious-smelling washing, that had broken the banks of its assigned basket around the same time she had last seen Tiddles.

Well, it could be anywhere by now.

“Open!” she said, with pretty robust reservations about all this.

The door slid open with a hiss, and she found herself face to face with a man aged around 50 years, with greying hair, a lacklustre beard, and who was dressed in very casual clothes. He wore a station ID clipped to his shirt, which appeared to be hiding a large stain of some sort.

“Security,” he said, holding up a computer pad. “Miss Stanton?”

“Stanford,” she corrected. She stood in the doorway with her arm blocking the way in, although he appeared to be making no effort to enter. “What’s this about?”

“I’m here to escort you to the bridge,” he said with a lazy shrug. “Commander’s orders. I don’t know what it’s all about, so there’s not much point asking me.”

“Do I have a choice?” she asked, grabbing her portable terminal and holding it tight to her chest.

“Do any of us?” he sighed. “I’m Ted, by the way, not that you asked. I’m the Logistics officer; I’m supposed to be taking care of cargo haulage maintenance today... but, it was lunchtime and nobody else wanted to go, so I got drafted into security, just to come and get you.”

“Okay...” she said sceptically, narrowing her eyes into a measured little frown.

“Not making any suggestions of course, but if you wanted to put up a fight and make a run for it, you’d probably get away. Good whack on the cranium with that terminal and I’d be out like a light. Lot of blood to clean up though; Mr Wellington would never let me hear the end of that, so... well, it’s your call. I’m not trying to influence you... free will, and all that.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go with you.”

“Well, as I said, it’s your call. I’ll probably miss lunch now either way,” he added, sounding sad, melancholy and bored, all at once. “There’ll be no fish left by the time I get to the bar. I’m probably going to end up with macaroni again, if I’m lucky.”

“The fish wasn’t very good today...” she said, gathering up her things as she spoke.

“You had the fish?” he asked accusingly.

The elevator ride was even worse than the doorway experience.

“Don’t get me started on maintenance,” he began. “We’ve never got enough staff.”

“Really?” she huffed in abject disinterest. Why would he not stop talking? Her mind was screaming at her now: why was this man so totally incapable of just not talking?

“We have to use automated equipment, because we don’t have enough staff. But then, when the automated equipment breaks down, where are we meant to find the staff to fix it?”

She shrugged.

“Exactly!” he told her. “Hey, let’s get Ted to do it, they all think. Well, not think... That’s what they actually say!”

He shook his head sadly, and so began a moment of merciful quiet.

“Do this, Ted. Do that, Ted,” he began again. “Go strip the antimatter flow regulator, Ted—the safety valves aren’t calibrated to strict SO2005 compliance criterion.

“It doesn’t matter that the antimatter flow regulator safety valve is actually a part I stripped off a coffee machine and installed with a hammer. What compliance criterion would that come under, do you know?”

Vikky shook her head wearily.

“Go fetch some butter, Ted—I’m prepping the anodyne capacitor for phase two repurposing, and unrelatedly, seem to have gotten my head stuck between some railings, Ted.

“Every day it’s the same!”

By the time the doors opened onto the bridge, she was ready and happy to face whatever fate the Commander could possibly have in store for her, as Ted had successfully worn down all her resistance barriers, and made her question all the professed benefits of her continued survival.

“That’s him,” said Ted, pointing to a dishevelled-looking man perched on the side of a desk, running his hands thoughtfully through his receding grey hair. “John! It’s this one!”

The Commander jumped up, and started to make his way over. He stepped cautiously over the banks of cables that had been covered with black rubber mats, and mismatched plating that had clearly been replaced unevenly a number of times.

“Thank you, Ted,” he said.

“That’s okay, John,” said Ted. “You know how much I hate eating anyway.” He made an obscene hand gesture, and shook his head before disappearing back into the elevator, grumbling to himself with every step.

“Sorry about Ted, he’s a bit of a strange guy, I’m afraid.” The Commander reached out a hand in greeting. “Welcome to the bridge, Miss Standwell.”

She shook his hand gingerly. “Stanford,” she corrected.

“Are you sure?” He checked the pad that was lying next to them on a desk.

“Quite sure, yes,” she said with a suspicious look. “I don’t think I’ve been getting it wrong all these years.”

“Hmmm, but our records are normally so accurate...” he said, scratching his head. Suddenly, realisation appeared to come to him, coincidentally, in perfect synchronisation with a nearby machine that had let out a cheerful ping sound. “Wait! That’s the opposite of correct. Welcome to the bridge then, Miss Stanforth.”

“Stanford.”

“Yes. That’s what I said.”

An awkward pause continued for several seconds.

“Well, I’m glad we’ve got that sorted out,” she said finally, with rapidly decreasing interest.

She muttered something.

“Great. To business then,” he began. “I gather you’re a student of computer science?”

She nodded dubiously.

“I’m not going to lie to you,” he began seriously. “That sounds horribly dull...”

She squinted at him suspiciously, but the statement was difficult to refute. “Why am I here?” she asked, her patience beginning to feel a bit stretched.

“We have a computer-related problem I need a little bit of help with,” he said, massaging the back of his neck with his hand. “I already put my best person on it, but... it didn’t really work out.”

“Was your best person Ted?”

His expression remained fixed, and perhaps a little apologetic.

“I see...” she said.

“Computers aren’t really his thing. His real calling is logistics, whatever that is...” The Commander glanced around sheepishly.

“Truth be told, I thought we were going to have to get the Alliance in, but after we received some unrelated complaints about pungent odours and the sounds of horrific violence exuding from the ventilators, I put Ted on it, and he suggested I check the bunk assignments. That’s when I discovered we have you on board, our very own computer specialist.”

She tilted her head suspiciously, wondering what exactly he was talking about, and prompted him to continue.

“We’re not the military, so you’re under no obligation to help. But, without wishing to sound melodramatic... lives really could depend on it.”

She relaxed a little, relieved that he was finally getting near to making his point, and that far from being a fate worse than Ted, it sounded like a potentially interesting challenge.

“I’ll help if I can,” she agreed. “What’s the problem?”

The Commander perched himself on the edge of a desk, oblivious to the sound of his computer terminal creaking as his full weight crushed down on it.

“We picked up a signal from... out there.” He gestured vaguely towards the main viewer which was depicting a view of open space. “We’re sure it’s a distress call, but the signal is broken.”

“Degraded,” she corrected.

“Degraded, yes!” he agreed, nodding enthusiastically. “You’re good!” He began beaming a wide smile. “So, we’ve sent a shuttle to

investigate. It's just that, well... it's a shuttle; limited speed capability, poor sensors. It was all we had."

"Go on," she told him and nodded.

"The pilot... he's just a kid, a cadet," he continued. "There's a security officer with him who'll deal with the actual investigation. He's one of several Alliance officers stationed here, and to be frank, none of them are much use to us.

"This one's recovering from battle-fatigue; he's only stationed here to give him time to get his head back together after they stitched a whole new set of limbs onto him. He was the best choice, which gives you an idea of what we're up against."

He stopped himself.

"I'm... getting off track. The point is, they're flying blind, and I don't think we can rely on their combined experience and expertise to rustle up any kind of on-the-fly solution. If it is a distress call, then we need to help the shuttle find it, and fast.

"The best way we can do that is to analyse the signal properly, and see if it contains coordinates, or any other information that could help the team."

"Signal analysis? I can do that," she said with a shrug. It was one of her specialities, in fact.

"Really?" he said with a wide smile, seeming somewhat taken aback.

"Sure! I mean, I'll have to put my thesis on hold for the day, but people could be hurt out there. I'd be happy to help out any way I can."

"Wow!" he exclaimed happily. "You're really nothing like Ted."

The only place they could find for her to work was a quiet cubicle at the edge of the bridge. There she was supplied with a terminal, and open access to the computer systems. She initially protested when the Commander transferred his security clearance to her name, but she actually found it flattering that she was now so important. She let it slide, and enjoyed her new temporary rank.

She began scrolling through the various files available, at first horrified at how disjointed and uneven they were, but that quickly subsided into casual amusement at the innocent brand of inept mismanagement.

After a short while, she found herself instinctively recoiling as someone invaded her personal space. She turned, only to be confronted by a man. He was young, maybe around 30 years old, tall, and fairly good looking. As far as her personal space went, it wasn't such a bad invasion. In fact, it was enough to make her a little nervous, and flush slightly with embarrassment.

"Vikky, isn't it?" he asked, standing to the edge of her workstation, politely smiling at her.

She nodded, and hurriedly returned to her work, with the full pretence that it was both fascinating and demanding of her full attention.

"I'm Tariq," he smiled. "Can I get you a coffee? Tea? Muffin? Socks?"

"Socks?" she said with a frown.

He smiled and shook his head at his silliness. "Sorry, if you work with Ted, you'd understand."

"I'm fine," she said with a fidgety shake of her head. As he started to turn and walk away, she called out, "Tea! I'd actually really like some tea!"

"No problem!" he said, stopping in his tracks. "Milk? Sugar?"

“Please!” she shouted. “Um, no... No sugar thanks. Just milk. And not too strong.”

“No problem!” he repeated, starting to slowly walk back towards her. “How’s the job going?”

“Some progress...” she said with a sigh. “I tried installing a fractal algorithm and re-encoding the stream with multi-phasic data sweeps, but it’s like isolating an isolinear frequency transmitted through a triaxilation trans-space relay.”

Tariq just stood in silence for a moment.

“It’s like... reinventing the wheel... while riding a unicycle... in the bath.”

Tariq continued to stand in silence, his brain clearly not making any sense of the already partially misleading analogy. She’d wanted to say on the moon, but that would prompt the obvious question, which moon? and then they’d be back to square one.

“It is very difficult, and it will take a very long time.”

“Makes perfect sense,” he said with a laugh. “Milk and no sugar, not too strong, then?”

“Yes. Thank you,” she said. “I, er... I don’t normally speak to... um... people.”

“No problem,” he said, once again and smirked to himself. “I won’t lie to you, I had suspected as much.”

“I have found one interesting thing though,” she added proudly. “It’s a class 2 trans-spacial carrier wave with an encoded data algorithm.”

He shrugged, prompting her to continue.

“It’s Alliance! The ship that’s sending it is one of ours.”

The next morning, she headed up to the bridge much earlier than she would usually be out of bed. Today felt different somehow. She felt

energised; she felt like what she was doing was important, and she was enjoying the experience immensely.

She was welcomed to the bridge, and even the Commander came to wish her well, insisting she call him John. He had suggested he have someone bring her some breakfast, but when it became clear he had Ted in mind, she politely declined in favour of continuing her work and remaining hungry.

“How’s it looking?” asked the Commander, as he hovered a respectful distance away.

“Right now, it’s looking good!” she said. She sat back from her console and pointed to the monitor. Remembering what she’d practised the night before, she continued, “I’m rebuilding what I can from the original data-stream, and getting the computer to fill in the blanks. This round will be complete any second now, so I should have some new information for you.”

“Excellent!” he remarked. Waving at the eternally irritated Logistics officer, he shouted “Ted! Bring us a tea and a coffee. Chop chop!”

Moments later, the computer chirped that the first data reconstruction was complete.

“Excellent!” she said with a satisfied grin. “I’ll start the next round now. It’ll take maybe another hour, maybe two if we’re not lucky. There won’t be much that’s salvageable after that, if this hasn’t already fixed it.”

“Well, you’ve already exceeded my expectations!” he said. “Alliance’s best couldn’t have done half as well, and I’ll be sure to tell them that.”

She smiled coyly as she perused the data. “Hmmm, it’s still heavily fragmented with amplified signal noise...”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s like... trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle, but most of the pieces are missing, and most of the pieces you do have are from different puzzles.”

The Commander appeared no closer to understanding.

“It’s just communication scraps, most of them are junk.”

“Well, does it tell us anything new?”

She continued to look through the data, until her eyes fixed excitedly on a familiar data stream. “It might. I’ve found a video fragment.”

“Let’s have a look then.”

She gave the command, and the monitor flickered to life with a hiss of static. Coloured boxes flashed over the screen accompanied by garbled electronic noises as the data tried to unscramble itself. Suddenly, the interior of a small vessel flashed into view. All seemed in order—no smoke, no fire...

The screen then went black, and flashed back to life again showing the torso of a man hurtling towards the computer, and punching down hard onto the controls. “Emergency, emergency,” came the partially muddled screams. Then the screen went dead once more.

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Hmmm. Not much there to go on.”

“It does confirm that it’s a distress signal,” said Vikky, a little defensively. “And we now know that it’s definitely an Alliance vessel, with a human crew.”

“That’s very true. Good to know I didn’t send our guys out on a wild goose chase. Anything else?”

“Possibly,” she nodded. “I have a set of numbers here. The format looks like a location.”

“Let me see,” he said with sudden urgency.

As she pointed to the screen, the Commander eagerly read the numbers out to himself, his lips moving as he did so. Suddenly, his face darkened, and he looked straight at her with a grim expression of exasperated frustration.

“What is it?” she asked nervously, sensing something was wrong. For some reason, a chill ran up her spine.

“You’re right—it is a location. It’s right here. We must have been their destination, or their last port of entry. Nothing is booked in or out that matches what little data we have on that thing. It’s all very peculiar!”

Lunch was bad. Very, very bad. It wasn’t so much that the food itself was bad, as it was in fact quite palatable. However, the fact of it having been delivered to her cubicle by Ted, made the whole experience astonishingly disagreeable. Having to endure a tirade of passive-aggressive abuse did little to improve on it.

“This is how serial killers get started, you know?” he said thoughtfully, watching her intently as she navigated the macaroni he had brought her from the bar.

“No fish today, then?” she asked conversationally, in an attempt to change the subject to one slightly less worrying.

“I didn’t ask,” he shrugged.

“It’s just that... fish was what I asked you for!” she said softly.

“I like fish,” he began. “They’re calm, they do their own thing, and they don’t get in anyone’s way.”

“Yeah,” she said, struggling to balance several pieces of macaroni on a fork.

“Except the Graggor fish from Beetlforx 10,” he continued in his dull monotone. “They’ll strip the skin right off your bones in a

matter of seconds. If I were a serial killer, that's how I'd do it, I think. Nobody forgets a good flaying."

"...Right."

"Graggor fish are also a rich source of riboflavin, if you're lucky enough to eat them first."

As she found herself trying to decide whether or not to just ask him to leave, or just hit him with whatever came to hand, a voice called out loudly from across the bridge.

"Commander!" shouted the voice.

She turned to see what was going on, but took pains not to stand out while doing so. It seemed everyone else in the room had also turned to watch though, so she relaxed a little and poked herself out a bit further, for a better look.

"I wonder if there's much riboflavin in macaroni?"

Everyone else had turned, except Ted, who just carried on as before.

She stared raptly as one of the station pilots spoke frantically to the Commander. They'd lowered their voices, so she couldn't quite make out the conversation, but it seemed to be about crates of beer. The pair then proceeded into the Commander's office, and closed the door behind them.

"What do you think that was about?" she said with a shrug.

"Fish?" Ted suggested hopefully.

Just then, a bleep from the computer told her she no longer had to make polite conversation with him. She turned her attention quickly to her terminal. The final round was complete, and any data they were going to salvage was now in front of her.

A video clip! Longer than the last one, and mostly intact. Excitedly, she instructed the computer to display it on her screen.

With a blaze of hissing white noise, the screen flickered to show the inside of a ship. It was the same ship, but something was out of place...

When the sound flickered on, the channel was filled with screaming. She watched in silence, with morbid dread that something horrifying could flash onto the screen at any moment.

“No!” yelled a voice, a painful scream that seemed to be choked off. That was then followed by coughing. Then, the screen flashed for an instant; an image of a man fighting with another man filled the screen, and one definitely had an easy advantage over the other.

Then it was silent.

“Wow!” she grimaced. “I think by the time our shuttle gets there, it’ll be too late.”

Ted nodded, and pointed to a readout beneath the main screen. “What’s that?”

As she squinted at the tiny readout, her eyes suddenly lit up. “It’s the ship’s designation. With that, we can find out who it is!”

Ted leaned into the screen and read it for himself, mouthing the letters and numbers silently to himself as he did so. “Which ship?” he asked with a deep frown.

She wasn’t quite sure how to interpret the question. “What do you mean?”

“You said it’s the ship’s designation,” he said, seeming rather confused himself. “Which ship is it the designation of?”

The question seemed pointlessly pedantic, but she sensed he had some genuine need of clarification and his confusion seemed to be turning to worry.

“It’s... this one right here; the one that sent the distress call. The one we sent our shuttle out to investigate...”

Ted took a step back, and remained silent for a moment, his eyes rolled up to the ceiling, seemingly considering something of great importance.

“That’s... perplexing!” he said finally. “You need to go and talk to the Commander. Right now!”

She shrugged and looked back to the monitor, confused by Ted’s sudden change in demeanour. “What is it?” she asked.

“That designation,” he began. “That’s our shuttle.”

Vicky continued to stare on with confusion.

“That’s the very same name and number of the shuttle that’s on its way to investigate!”

“So that’s why I’m leaving!” said Vikky firmly. “This place is wrong. Something is very, very wrong with this place, and I don’t want to be any part of it.”

“Lovely story. Thank you!” Marrta beamed a happy smile, and began to walk off, quite content with what she’d heard.

“And you?” said Vikky, stepping forward to stop her. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“I already told you,” she said with a shrug “I’m Marrta Slicko from Brof, and I wanted to hear your story. It was very good. Thank you very much.”

She turned and wandered off, sipping from her cocktail as she went, a very confused-looking computer engineer flustering behind her.

“Where have you been?”

“Talking to people,” said Marrta simply. “Hearing their stories. I am a tourist, you know? That’s what we do.”

“Well my ship’s been delayed,” Gary grumbled. “I’m stuck here another three hours, but three hours here is usually more like a day, maybe two. Another drink while we wait?”

“We could...” she said as she dropped her empty glass casually to the ground, as if it meant nothing now its contents had been spent. It shattered into tiny fragments. “Or you could leave and go somewhere private instead, and I could procreate your brains out.”

Gary looked at her with an expression of mild surprise and moderate disbelief. “Sure,” he said. “If you insist.”

The room was dark. Not so dark that she couldn’t see, but dark enough to see the stars through the thick, heavily plated window. She flicked open her personal communicator and pressed it up to her ear. As she waited, her attention flicked from star to star as her face beamed a happy smile.

She glanced over to Gary who was sleeping soundly, snoring in fact, and she was confident that a quiet conversation wouldn’t wake him.

“Daddy!” she said finally, as the trans-space channel connected.

A tinny voice emanated from the communicator, that spoke for several seconds.

“I’m on a space-station,” she said excitedly.

“I don’t know. I’m not really in a rush. Maybe a few more months. I like travelling for now. I like you paying for it too.”

“AEOS-401,” she said with a shrug. “Yes, I heard that too, but the danger is what makes it fun.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Suddenly her smile vanished. “Yes.” she said. “I’ve found it, that thing you wanted was here. It’s too late now though, it looks like they tried to use it in a shuttle, but didn’t understand what it was. They caused problems and I think that time is now splintered and they may have damaged the fabric of reality.”

The voice on the other end said something.

“I love you too.” she said. “Bye, Daddy!”

She smiled and closed the communicator.

The Racer

Lieutenant May frowned to himself as he scanned through the personnel files of the passengers who had come aboard the station. It wasn't everything he had hoped it would be, and his situation was looking grim.

"Definitely not!" Commander Barrow told him with a caustic grin. "She's weird alright, but not the kind of weird that you're looking for. Sorry!" He looked away with a very smug expression of being enormously self-satisfied.

"Not weird like your cousin Edmond?" the Lieutenant asked pointedly.

It was the Commander's turn to frown, as he grumbled slightly under his breath, "It's Edwina now, as well you know." He shifted around awkwardly in his seat. "It's a big galaxy: lots of people change genders, and races, and have fragments of animal and plant DNA incorporated into them."

"... and mechanical eyes that glow red when they're sexually aroused?" the Lieutenant added for effect. "Lots of mechanical eyes..."

If the effect he had intended to go for was the frustration of his slightly superior officer, then he seemed to have hit the mark perfectly.

Commander Barrow fixed him with a stern frown and said gruffly, "I told you that in confidence. You know my entire family are horribly ashamed of him... her... it!"

"I think the currently preferred pronoun is Xhazzargghaaghaboogoo!" the Lieutenant said, nodding in agreement. "Were all those modifications really necessary just to get into regional politics on Altaire 4?"

“A politician... in my own family...” the Commander sighed, shaking his hand in disgust. “My father died in the war for people like my cousin. If he was alive now, he’d be turning in his grave.”

“I guess, compared to your cousin, this Marra person is pure meat and potato!” May said dismissively, sounding more than a little disappointed about it.

“That’s not funny!” the Commander told him sternly. “You know my cousin is 22% meat and potato!”

Lieutenant May grinned back. “So what about this guy she’s talking to?”

“It’s not what you need!” Barrow said a little too forcefully, and sounding a little too happy about it. “Look at him...”

“You don’t know that! And you don’t know how badly I need it.”

“Oh I know!” the Commander told him. “I know better than anyone.”

“Well look,” he said, and pointed to the main viewing monitor in the console that took up almost all the space in the small security office. “They talked, they had a discussion that lasted some time. He told her something.”

“So listen to their conversation!” the Commander goaded.

“You know I can’t do that: it’s illegal!”

“Run a filter then!” Commander Barrow suggested. “I’ll approve it.”

“Really?” his young face lit up expectantly. “You’d let me do that?”

“I know how much this means to you! Now, I’m legally obliged to explain to you the process in detail, to ensure that you are fully versed in what it is, and perhaps more importantly, what isn’t

going to happen, after which you will confirm that you understand, and then we can get on with it.

“Once the process is started, the machine will parse the entire conversation in a matter of nano-seconds for any signs of criminality. If anything is found, the law obliges us to review the offending parts. If nothing is found, then no privacy rights have been violated, and no laws have been broken. Do you understand the process?”

“I believe so. So we simply run the Narrator process, and the computer will tell the entire story to itself like some hamfistedly shoehorned plot device, reporting back to us anything criminal it finds?”

“Precisely. Would you like to do the honours?”

Lieutenant May was already working on it.

“So, is the Narrator reliable?”

“It’s as objective as the source material; it depends who’s telling the story,” the Commander assured him lazily. “You know, I’m something of a history buff, and it might interest you to know that this precise technology was actually developed as far back as the last quarter of the Twentieth Century. Back then it was considered an extraordinarily dangerous tool, despite how mundane it’s become now. Computers have always been exempt from privacy laws, because it’s not like they can be prejudiced, or judge you at a personal level. Humans are a different story: what goes into your head has legal consequences.”

“The law is a nuisance sometimes, isn’t it?” Lieutenant May noted dryly, setting the computer to do exactly what he’d suggested.

“Look how boring that kid looks!” he told him, pointing to the screen. “You want to hear what he had to say? You really want to hear that?”

The Lieutenant shrugged. “Not in the slightest. I’m setting it to start right as he began to tell his story, and I’m hoping against reason that I don’t find what I’m looking for. If I can eliminate him without hearing a word he has to say, then all the better”

“What an unimaginable thrill this is going to be!” he replied, just a little bit too sarcastically.

It began.

He balled his fists tightly, flexing his fingers over and over again, looking around the place nervously with a pair of wide and fearful eyes. Then he ran the tips of his fingers over the palms of his hand. They were wet, clammy and hot, just like his forehead. His back was cold and damp, and the fabric of his shirt clung to him uncomfortably, causing him to shift around in the chair, making him look even more suspicious than he already did, which was more than suspicious enough.

He knew that his behaviour was going to attract attention if he wasn’t careful, and that made him even more nervous still. This in turn made him look even more suspicious, and as his mind followed this trail of thought, he realised he also now had a headache, his stomach was gurgling nervously and his heart was thumping in his chest. He tightly balled his fists a bit more. It didn’t help, of course, and hadn’t in the entire history of mammals with opposable thumbs.

His skull was on fire, his mind burning his thoughts away. He could barely focus, and what little conscious thought he could bring to bear came only with an effort of will. He had never been one to strongly apply his will, and even more rarely did he make any great effort to do anything whatsoever. As he was now being asked to actually do something out in the real world, he found that he was on shaky and unfamiliar ground.

He was afraid—more so than he'd ever been in his entire life.

Even as he'd stood by and watched everything that he'd feared the most, happen right in front of his very eyes, he'd still not been this scared. If anything, he'd watched the events unfold with a curiously meek acceptance of it all.

Once the initial shock had worn off, everything had seemed calm—better, almost, in some way. He'd been left with a sense of disbelief, a disconnection, like it wasn't really happening, and certainly couldn't be happening to him. How could it? How could such a grim and terrible thing happen in such a benign little life?

But it was happening, and there was no pretending it wasn't. It was happening right now, and it was happening all around him. He was trapped within the snapping jaws of fate. He'd walked knowingly right into the heart of it, like a fly taunting a Ducturion insect-flower, a monstrous, glowing funnel of pink death for anything unlucky or unwary enough to fly near it.

He'd seen a holographic video of one in school many years prior, and the image was now as fresh in his mind as it had been when he'd first laid eyes on it. For a moment, he was lost in his imagination, stalking through some thick green jungle, as a gigantic and fearsome organism sucked him in, to be digested with horrifically vicious acid that slowly sizzled away his flesh and melted his eyeballs right out of his open sockets, keeping him alive long enough to enjoy every moment.

The creature secreted a potent drug into the digestive enzymes that made the whole process rather pleasant, actually tricking the brain into finding the pain enjoyable. In fact, animals that had struggled against it and lost only a limb or two were often known to go back and stick their whole head in to get the full force of the experience.

All thoughts of being dissolved away until his brains pleausurably dribbled out of what was left of his skull were oddly calming. He could happily accept the finality of it all; his problems were over now, and it was comfortable to settle into the last few minutes of unspeakably wonderful agony for the reward of the frozen emptiness beyond.

But the harsh light of reality penetrated back through the clouds, and he found himself in the worst of both worlds. He was living the life of a hapless prey, attracted to the irresistible allure of the flower's potent pheromones. He was the one unlucky and unwary enough to fly near it—the trap—the irresistible draw he had no choice but to follow.

Fate was a path that he was now condemned to walk, wherever it might lead him. He suspected it was nowhere good, and probably wouldn't have any pleasurable pink tunnels waiting for him along the way.

"This is boring!" a voice cut into his meandering, somewhat nonsensical thoughts.

Corey Baker glanced as nonchalantly as he could to his left, running his fingers casually through his mop of uneven blond hair. At first he pretended not to notice her, but then he realised who it was. He looked again and sure enough it was that girl, the one he hadn't met yet, but would one day meet aboard a transport vessel out on the Edge. She was inexplicably sitting right there next to him listening to him talk.

But then, of course she was.

"Boring?" he said. "This is my life!"

"Does it get less boring?" she asked with a smile, but a smile that seemed awkwardly polite.

This was a ridiculously stupid question as she was asking about the future in the past tense. He opened his mouth to tell her so, but instead the words, “Yes, unfortunately it does,” came out instead.

He let out a relaxed sigh. His acting would earn him no awards if they caught sight of him, and as he pretended, unconvincingly, to be looking at nothing in particular, he saw two of them down the hall.

The hall was grey and beige and whoever had designed it seemed to be toying with the people who would have to wait there for hour after excruciating hour. There was nothing much to see, featureless empty walls stretched along, being nothing but functional, and a sterile smell hung in the air, neither fresh nor stale, and somehow nowhere in between. It was infuriatingly benign and the act of having to look at it the numbness of it was as stressful as repeatedly bashing your head forcefully into it.

He stared for just a moment too long and caught himself doing it, startling himself out of his daze. He huffed a silent rebuke to himself, hoping that his gaze had gone unnoticed. Down the hall the two of them chatted with light humour, he even heard a laugh echoing softly along the walls. Corey sighed softly to himself. They didn’t appear to have taken notice of him this time.

They would. He knew that they would.

It was only a question of time before the inevitability of his situation caught him up, and then his journey would come to an end; his future, his past, all of it would come crashing down around him and he would spend out his days locked away for criminal conspiracy. Compared to that, having his body digested seemed luxurious.

He gritted his teeth and sucked in a lungful of air through them. He mentally steeled himself, with forced optimism. He would make this, he told himself. He would get this done, and get out

before they found him. They might not know his face, and they might not begin looking for him until after he had been scanned.

Regardless, it was all a matter of time now, and the question was whether or not he had enough of it to get away.

“OK, it’s getting better now!” she said encouragingly.

She didn’t need to tell him that, he already knew it was. “I had to try. I was here to try.”

“Corey Baker!” came a voice from behind a desk.

The name didn’t register immediately, as his mind was busy elsewhere creating scenarios that taunted him with possible capture. Moments passed before he dimly became aware that the name called was his own, and his body involuntarily began to rise from the seat. He raised his arm to the height of his shoulder meekly, and smiled a haphazard sort of nervous grin as he waved stupidly back at her.

The woman behind the desk ushered him over impatiently with a much more purposeful wave of her own.

His feet clattered on the ceramic floor, and his footsteps echoed around the gigantic chamber, every sound sending a fresh pang of nerves up and down his spine. As he walked over, he cast a glance down the hall.

They were still chatting—they still hadn’t seen him.

“I’m Corey Baker,” he offered weakly as he arrived at the desk. It was high enough to come level with his chest. He reached out to lean on it casually, glancing back over his shoulder once more as fresh sweat prickled uncomfortably on his brow.

He wasn’t the only one there. Further down, another man, a little older, was no doubt trying to get his visa sorted out just the same. Paperwork was changing hands, and the woman behind the counter was grinning smugly and sending him off to talk to a brick

wall. Corey's heart sank at how difficult all this seemed like it was going to be.

"How can we help you today, Mr Baker?" she said mechanically, the drone of someone with no interest in what they were doing, and almost certainly none in him.

"I need a visa," he said with a shrug, equally mechanically. "An Alliance wide-travel visa."

"I see."

She began pressing buttons on her console, and purposefully didn't make eye contact, or show any signs of pretending to be in the slightest bit attentive.

He noticed the colour of her skin. It was darker than his by a wide margin, and her eyes were an unusual shade of green. He wasn't sure what that meant in the wider scheme of things, but it probably meant she wasn't entirely human. She didn't seem alien either, not that he had any experience of such things. Perhaps she'd been engineered, he wondered? So many people had been these days that it was blurring the line of what it actually meant to be human. He noticed that her brow had a little ridge on it, as if there were a series of ribbed bones beneath her skin. She smelt vaguely of onions, or at least one of them did.

He pondered all this deeply before it occurred to him that it didn't matter in the slightest, and he tried to push the whole thing out of his mind, where it had no purpose being in the first place.

"This is the right place, isn't it?" he asked, too long a silence having already passed between them until he felt a burning need to fill it with something, anything.

"It is," she said with a nod, and exaggerated blinks of her heavily made-up eyelids. A wry smile soon formed on her face. "You've never left the Earth's solar system before, have you?"

“I haven’t.”

“It’s strange how many people in the Alliance never do...” she began. It was conversational, with a sarcastic, and slightly mean, hint of condescension to it. “Did you know that 97% of the galactic population live and die in their home country—not the planet, but the actual country they were born in—and never live anywhere else?”

He shook his head, and flashed her a raised eyebrow gesture that sat somewhere between not knowing, and not knowing because he didn’t care, but largely leaning towards the latter.

She continued regardless.

“We have interstellar ships buzzing around everywhere,” she continued. “There’s the Merchant Fleet, private traders, and that’s just the space dwellers. Then there are the people that work away from home, or just travel for fun. The remaining 97% of the population though? They’re content to just languish at home watching holovids, scratching their backsides, eating Cheesy-Puffs from an oversized bowl, and avoiding eye contact with their neighbours when... when they inevitably run out of Cheesy-Puffs, and have to pop out to get more. It’s sad really. Such a wasted opportunity.”

Perhaps it was the specificity of the reference to his favourite holovid snack, but Corey couldn’t help but take this observation a little more personally than perhaps it had been intended. Was it a thinly veiled attack on his lethargic passivity? His lethargic passivity was often attacked and, due to its very nature, it was a hard thing to defend. And, of course, due to its very nature, it frequently wasn’t.

“Sad,” he agreed, shifting his eyes from left to right and suddenly craving a bowl of Cheesy-Puffs. He wondered if he’d rather have a bowl of Cheesy-Puffs or be digested by a pleasurable pink

tube. Would it be possible for both to happen at once, he thought to himself. “Very sad.”

“I mean, there’s just no excuse for showing that little interest. There’s a whole wide universe out there, right!” she continued, wilfully ignoring that what she was saying was as nurturing to the fragility of the human condition as an oversized bowl of Cheesy-Puffs, in which, it was widely believed that, both the cheese and the puffs were artificially made from reasonably toxic chemicals. In fact, the truth was far more appalling and the cheesiness was simply a by-product of the awful, genetically engineered things the snacks were actually puffed out the back end of.

Corey had, at that moment, no way to know that his unconscious mind had worked it all out for him, which was why he couldn’t get either of these seemingly unrelated details out of his mind.

“Right.”

“Personally, I would never date a guy that hadn’t lived in at least three different solar systems,” she continued further, as she stamped papers and pressed buttons. “Other womenoids can settle for less if it suits them, but I don’t think it’s an unreasonable bar to set. There’s a kind of sophistication in a well travelled man, and I need sophistication in my life, because you only live once. You have to be ambitious, or you’re just a waste of everybody’s time.

“And he has to get on well with my felinoids. If they decide they don’t like him, then he’s just no good. He has to go.

“Felinoids are an excellent judge of character!” she muttered to herself.

“Sorry, how long does this take?” he asked, hoping against the odds that this wasn’t some kind of bizarre flirtation, and wondering

how felinoids were such a good judge of the measure of a person when she had several, at least, and they hadn't killed her yet.

He began to wonder how someone with so many pets was able to travel at all? He felt that all this strongly implied that she had no grasp of irony.

"Oh, no time at all," she said as the moments dragged lazily by.

Relief washed over him.

"I can tell as soon as he comes in the door. This one guy came over this one time, and Mercedes—she's my Exotic Shorthair: a bit of a madam, but absolutely scrumptious—she just gave him this look, you know. I knew straight away that he had to go, because..."

"Miss..." he interrupted, accidentally cutting her off mid-sentence as she paused for an unusually long breath. "How long does the visa application take?"

"The what? Oh..." In the space of a second, her demeanour deflated back down to that of a tired bureaucrat, a bored cog in a dull engine, driving a wheel of monotony through immeasurable depths of drudgery. She let out an audible sigh as she continued, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. There are a number of forms I need you to fill in first."

"And once they're filled out?"

"It'll all be done," she said with a nod. "Your visa will be ready to pick up... some time tomorrow morning?"

Corey almost collapsed in front of her at the news.

"Tomorrow?! I need it today. I'm leaving."

"Well most people come back the next day," she said, sounding as if she cared neither one way nor the other. "You can wait if you like, but you'll be waiting a long time."

"Fine, I'll do that then," he said.

Her expression betrayed nothing, and the seconds ticked past while his initial confidence in his decision began to evaporate inside him.

“Um... How long is a long time?” he grumbled weakly.

“Once the forms are all completed...” she began thoughtfully.

“Assuming they’ve all been filled in correctly—and I will be checking—somewhere around... 5 hours 59 minutes and 59 seconds, give or take.

“Be warned though, that it’ll take longer if you make any mistakes, longer than that if I make a mistake, and longer even than that if you check any of the currently designated trigger boxes in the personal history section.”

“Trigger boxes?”

“Unpopular dissent. The section covers things like... prior associations with criminal organisations, involvement in anti-establishment uprisings, assassinations, election rigging, genocide, the narcotics industry, software piracy, oppressive rhetoric towards protected classes, that sort of thing.

“They’re just a formality really, but depending on social climate and the tide of public opinion, it may turn out you assassinated the wrong world leader. The trigger box would alert us to that, and some additional punitive hours would be added to the process.”

“I haven’t assassinated anybody, so I’m sure I’ll be fine,” he said wearily.

“Really?” she sniggered to herself, and it was not a pleasant sound. “If you’d been involved in the attempted assassination of Senator Kovalesky last month, you could have knocked two whole hours off the processing time. He’s not well liked right now, and many believe strongly that he deserves whatever he has coming to

him! He gave a speech once and one of my felinoids hissed at him, right around the time I accidentally trod on his little tail.”

He closed his eyes and sighed.

“Of course, if you’re willing to part with 150 credits, we can waive the processing time completely—you’ll get the permit as soon as the forms are submitted.”

150 credits? Six hours of his time was not worth that, especially given that the next transport wasn’t due for another eight. “It’s fine, I’ll wait,” he said with far less enthusiasm than before.

The woman shrugged a reply, and carried on typing something unknown into her console.

Corey glanced around. The two of them weren’t chatting anymore. One of them was reviewing data on a pad, and the other was looking around in the opposite direction. They weren’t facing him, at least, but it meant that they must be looking for him, and the dread tied a fresh knot in his stomach. He realised his head was pounding again.

“What’s your reason for travelling?” she asked, her piercing voice shaking his meandering thoughts and bringing him back to the sterile, bland visa-office, full of dejected travellers.

“Travel,” he said with a weak smile. “I guess I don’t want to be one of your 97%.”

“Good for you,” she said without a shred of sincerity. She turned towards a row of cabinets and began thumbing through a number of different rows of forms. “Ever think about joining the Alliance? Getting a job on a ship is easy enough, and it comes with all the travel you want. It’s the best way to see the universe, and the quickest way to live in three different solar systems. There are ships where you’re even allowed to take your felinoids on board.”

“No,” he said, glancing back at the two Alliance security officers who were chatting again. This time it seemed more serious; this time it was work. “No, I never did. I really don’t think they’d have me.”

Waiting was hard for Corey. He had little in the way of patience in any case, and far less when time and the odds were so heavily stacked against him. Every second that passed was like a dagger pressed into the nerves in his spine.

“OK!” interjected Marrta. “This is getting boring again!”

“I don’t know how to make it interesting!” he grumbled. He held up his hand and gestured around, “This is how it is. I can’t make it up, it just is this way.”

“Maybe just tell the boring bit a bit quicker?” she suggested.

He nodded sadly. “I was booked on a transport that was due to leave the next morning, and worse, security were there in the visa office, hunting me, closing their net around me while I waited for the mindless bureaucracy to run its ploddingly slow course.”

“So what happened?” she said with a smile, but it sounded a little like she was grumbling as well.

He was booked on a transport that was due to leave the next morning, and worse, security were there in the visa office, hunting him, closing their net around him while he waited for the mindless bureaucracy to run its ploddingly slow course.

He took out his pad and flicked through it mindlessly. He had already sat for a full half hour, taking in every detail of the sparse waiting-room. Four other people were sitting on the soft, ergonomic, and yet strangely uncomfortable chairs, waiting for their turn to be disappointed by the draconian system; others walked in and out regularly.

The systems were slower on Earth, the heart of the Alliance. Earth had higher standards of conduct and efficiency, and the latter came at a premium. It was a sacred place that had to be secured from the rapidly changing and expanding galaxy around it. Alien species were a reality, genetic engineering was common, brick walls were artificially sentient, and fine cognac could be squeezed out of a space elephant, although they rarely survived the process. The universe was a silly place, and Earth was resolved not to let itself be part of all that.

On Earth, such nonsense as flying monkeys and women with more than two breasts just wouldn't do at all, and none of it went unchecked. Earth was a place where things still made sense; a place where things proudly made sense; a place where things were forced to make sense, in the same way they always had.

He had read in the databases on the Wikiweb that out in the Edge, the common euphemism for the very front of the Frontier, applying for a travel visa took mere minutes, and could even be done electronically. Nobody cared very much in the colonies, he assumed. On earth, there was a right way to do things, and every other way was assuredly wrong.

He glanced around again, and noticed that the two security officers had vanished. He found that strangely chilling. While he could see them, he knew he was basically safe. He could run: he could hide if he saw them turn against him. Now they could be anywhere doing anything, watching on monitors, checking his records, or opening weapons cabinets and arming themselves for a lethal confrontation, as they so often did in the holovids his brain rotted away in front of, while the Cheesy-Puffs worked their strangely similar magic on his small-intestine and, presumably, his large one, if his understanding of anatomy and logic was correct.

With a weary sigh he returned his attention to the pad, and flicked open the diary entries. A frown flashed over his face for an instant as he remembered the chain of events that had led him there, and it vanished just as suddenly as the events played out in his memory.

“This isn’t a very good story!” she told him.

He scowled in reply to her oddly grinning face. Her black, empty eyes started pulling him into them. “...But,” he began.

“What had actually happened?” she insisted. “Why were you there? What were you running away from?”

“I was getting to that!” he told her with a sigh. “It had all started pretty innocently, just three weeks earlier, I think!”

He was almost sure, if he was able to remember any of it correctly, not that he was totally sure what was real anymore. The games, the holovids, his memories all ran together like a great painting where someone had carelessly dragged their hand through the middle, blurring the detail into a horribly vivid smear.

Corey Baker bleakly glowered in annoyance at the display monitor set into the far wall, as the red lights flashed and the siren wailed softly through his room. He groaned as he rubbed his face, trying to erase the tiredness from his eyes. He felt as though it was the monitor itself that was to blame for all this, even though he had set the morning alarm himself. The choice was either to set an alarm, or face the consequences of languishing asleep and wasting away his pointless life. The choice wasn’t really his, any more than his pointless life was.

He dragged himself wearily out of bed and perched himself on the edge. He ran his fingers through his untidy mop of dirty blonde hair, which more or less always looked the same as when he first got

up, even after the most stringent of maintenance. That is not to say that it ever got particularly stringent maintenance, unless he had a date. Dates were, unsurprisingly, even rarer than stringent maintenance.

It was time to face the world.

“Morning sleepyhead,” said his mother. Her voice was as pleasant as having his testicles gently caressed with a cheese-grater. “How nice of you to join us.”

Corey stepped into the kitchen where his brother was already working his way through a mountainous breakfast, as if it were nothing at all. He didn’t even bother to look over: why would he?

“Frankly, I’m amazed you could even be bothered to drag that flabby carcass out of your bed in the first place, you pathetic layabout,” she grumbled with a gruff, heavy voice that hadn’t been formed by anything like the amount of cigarettes and whiskey that you would imagine.

“I just got up, Mum,” he grunted weakly, flopping down in his usual chair at the table, huffing like the miserable teen that he no longer was, and therefore had no excuse for behaving like. “Can’t the barrage of verbal abuse wait until I’ve at least got some coffee in me?”

“Don’t talk to your mother like that!” said Paul sternly, as he continued shovelling food into his already very occupied mouth. “We can all do without the two of you starting up again,” he most likely continued to say through the mound of half-chewed pancakes filling his enormous face. Equally he might have said, “We cabbage all screw the blue startling blub wagon,” which is a more phonetically accurate rendering.

Marrta smiled at him innocently and leant forward, resting her elbows on the family dinner-table. Her languid black eyes stared forwards unblinkingly, as they always did.

“This was your life? I can see why you felt the need to run away from it.”

Corey screwed up his face, scouring his mind.

“This isn’t what I was running away from.” He looked over to their faces and a fresh pang of guilt shot through him. “They’re my family.”

“That’s fantastic!” she said, her smile widening into a sickening grin. “That means they’re not my family. I have to say, I think that’s better all round.”

Corey opened his mouth to protest, to defend them in some way. His brain didn’t bother furnishing him with any witty rebuke so he just sat there frowning, a weak grumble at the back of his throat.

Marrta shrugged and said, “It gets worse, doesn’t it?”

Corey nodded back sadly.

She leant back and made a tutting noise with her lips. He watched her fold her arms across her chest before she added, “Well, at least the story has finally properly started now. Let’s get on with it.”

Corey returned his attention to his mother.

“He’s a slack-jaw, Paul. He’s lazy! He’s a lethargic lackadaisical loafer that drinks his coffee out of a paper cup! All those years he was mollycoddled... He’ll never amount to anything now. He’ll never be anything more than... an albatross; a ball and chain locked tightly around his poor mother’s neck; a burden of shame she must carry on her own fragile shoulders until the day she dies, miserable, and alone.”

Corey rolled his eyes at his mother's non-ironic theatrics.
"Give it a break, Mum..."

"She's right, you know," said Paul. "You need to do something with your life! You need to be more like me. Make something of yourself. Be a man you can be proud of being."

"Why?" he sniffed. "I didn't ask to be born."

"What was that?"

His brother slapped him round the back of the head, hard enough to make Corey wince in surprise, if not outright pain. He looked over to him, and quickly averted his eyes back away.

"Nothing," he grumbled sadly.

"Yeah, nothing!" said Paul, scooping up yet more food on his heavily-laden fork, which judging from the size of him was the last thing he could possibly need. "Nothing is exactly what you're amounting to. You need to get yourself out there! You need a proper role-model in your life, not endless Cheesy-Puffs and holovids."

Corey sighed to himself in half-agreement, wondering to himself what would happen if his proper role-model was a holovid character sponsored by Cheesy-Puffs. Suddenly a piercing voice in the opposite ear startled him enough to make him jolt upright and forget all about it.

"You listen to your brother now, you festering little puss-bubble!" shrieked his mother. "We can't have you sitting about all day, scratching your acne-pocked backside while stuffing your face with toxic chemicals, out of an oversized bowl. This is Earth, not some la-di-da commune on Alpha-Centauri 3.

"Eating is for people that work, and if you're not out there bringing something into this house, then godoid help me I'll smack that sad little expression right off your stupid little face. You see if I don't!"

“You know things have been tough since dad stopped coming home. We all need to pitch in.” Paul reached over and punched Corey on the arm. Not hard enough to be painful, but enough to catch his attention. “Understood?”

“Understood,” said Corey sheepishly, covering his arm. He looking away awkwardly, wishing this would all just end. Every morning it was the same; every day the threats, the theatrics, the insults, the bullying, the outright aggression. He continued to sit in silence, waiting for whatever came next, and trying to avoid making things worse, as things were often made, even without any effort on his part.

“He gets it,” said Paul rolling his eyes. He resumed shovelling food into his oversized mouth and most of it went in; some of it stayed there.

His mother wiped a mop of hair from her face as she breathed upwards on it, blowing her fine, wispy, greying locks from in front of her eyes. She grabbed a tray with a plate of pancakes from the serving hatch, and gave her youngest son an acidic glance as she let it crash noisily onto the kitchen table before him.

“You promised you’d take the rubbish down to the reclaimer yesterday,” she said, a little less harshly than just about everything else she’d said that morning.

It didn’t mean he was off the hook and he knew it. “I’ll take care of it after breakfast, Mum,” he promised.

“It’s just at the end of the garden. All you had to do is drop three bags of waste into it, and walk back to the house. That would have been the end of it.”

“I know. I said I’ll...”

“It would have taken just 20 seconds, but I guess even that’s too much to ask.”

“Mum! I forgot, alright? I was playing the games. I’ll do it after breakfast.”

She let out a loud huff and shook her head in dismay. Her hands were crossed over her chest as she fixed him with an admonishing gaze. “Ever since you dropped out of college, all you’ve done is mope around the house all day, every day. If you don’t start getting your life in order, you can go and find somewhere else to mope around. Right now, you’re useless to me. You’re dead weight, just another mouth to feed.”

“I’ll get a job, I guess...” he said with an apathetic shrug.

Martha raised her hand to attract his attention. “Is your mother really this bad?”

He nodded and grimaced. Was she though? He had to wonder how much his memories had been flavoured by his own opinions and biases.

“She’s always going on at me to get out,” he grumbled, scowling ahead. “The simple truth is, there were no jobs to be had. I had already been scanned and licensed, and was registered for a vacancy in a maintenance parts store, which would be assigned to me just as soon as the right number of people already filling the positions stopped coming home.

“Until then, all I could do was wait. I knew it and they knew it just as well. So I had no choice but to take the abuse, until finally, one day, I’d be given a job in a building that stored bits of machinery.”

She nodded back and frowned a little. “And that was really all you had to look forward to?”

He sighed to himself. The crushing sense of defeat and emptiness was often more than he could stand. He felt empty inside,

like his soul had been trampled, like all the energy had simply been scooped out of him leaving him a shallow, broken husk.

Only Cheesy-Puffs made it all feel just a little better—his life at least. They made visits to the toilet a great deal worse.

“Simple as that, eh? You’ll just go out there and get a job?” she snapped with her irritatingly shrill but gravelly voice. “What you need to do is to get that hunk of meat you call a body down from that cloud you’ve been sitting on, figure out what it is you want to do with your worthless life, and get on with making that happen.

“You don’t see Paul sitting around picking gragglings out of his scalp. He’s only licensed to work in the delivery and warehouse services, but that hasn’t stopped him making a name for himself, of sorts.”

“You have to take control of your life, or life is just gonna walk all over you,” added Paul, helping himself to the top couple of pancakes off his brother’s plate, and stuffing them into his mouth before he could even consider objecting. “Take a leaf out of my book! Don’t be a no-one, be a someone—be like me!” it was assumed he probably said, or words to that effect, something like them or perhaps nothing that resembled them in any way. What Corey did know was that none of this unwelcome advice was of the nature of consuming more Cheesy-Puffs while watching even more holovids. He feared he might be drifting out of his depth.

“I know...”

Corey frowned and folded his arms, scowling petulantly. He turned to Marrta and said to her, “Paul was never anybody special. He was always just a grotesque joke of a man that most people could barely stand to be in a room with; a conceited moron that was so assured of his own importance that such belief bordered on mental illness.”

“You don’t know anything, and that’s just your problem right there,” said his Mum dismissively. She unfolded her arms and stepped away, her rant seemingly over for the time being. Or was it? “You are so feeble minded; you have a soggy sponge in place of a brain. Godoid missed his sacred toilet and shat through a cloud the day you were conceived. I should have listened to the doctor, and had your foetus donated to science—at least that way you would have been of some use to somebody. Instead, you sit there day after day, a plague of locusts for a soul, consuming, devouring, never giving anything back.

“The world is truly a worse place for your being in it. You are a waste of perfectly good cellular material that could be better employed powering amoebas, so on, and so forth.”

Martha eyed him suspiciously over his mother’s unlikely outburst.

Corey frowned to himself. Was he just bad at telling stories or was his story really this horribly dreadful?

“Don’t worry about her. Come to work with me today,” continued Paul, chewing on a never-ending mouthful of food. “I’m going down the yard. There’s work to do, and you might as well make yourself useful.”

“Me?” Corey shrugged, as his mother continued reeling off creative insults just out of ear range. “What the hell can I do?”

Paul stepped into the personal transport, as his brother sat in the passenger seat beside him, wondering just how much worse this day was going to get. Experience had taught him that the concept of worse was seemingly infinite, and remarkably creative.

It was a simple vehicle, bordering on crude: an old battery-operated anti-gravity craft designed to operate purely in the

atmosphere of an E-Normal planet. Operation was laughably simple —the driver told it where he wanted to be, and the computer made it happen, usually with the absolute minimum of fuss, as far as anyone said publicly. In fact, a large number of deaths occurred in these kinds of crafts, but they were mostly attributed to pilot-error.

The instruments didn't even relay any real operational information; they were just a simple interface and a monitor that displayed your progress. It was a vehicle that a person with the abilities of a small child could operate safely, even after a night of heavy drinking, on the tail of nine months heavy drinking by its mother during the entire course of his or her pregnancy. Paul had only a little difficulty.

This vehicle was old, so old that it barely qualified for travel worthiness. It was certified, of course, but each year's review brought it one step closer to being scrapped.

Anything larger than a toaster, of course, was scrapped at the owner's expense, and there was an additional administration fee on top of that. Earth was a place of safety, after all, of rules strictly observed, and the punishment for not observing them, doled out harshly. People had stopped 'coming home' for far less.

"I've got three shuttles now," said Paul proudly, shattering the sulky silence that had descended during breakfast, with the grim finality of his fork crashing into someone else's pancakes. "And that's not including this hopper. I've got a second hopper, which isn't working at the moment, but still... Three shuttles! How many people can say that? Not many!"

Corey shrugged apathetically, which was something he did a lot in conversations with his family. In fact, he rarely did much of anything else.

“Three shuttles,” he repeated loudly, a note of definite pride in this slightly dubious achievement. “Two are battery-powered, and one has a Type 3 cold-fusion reactor.”

Corey remained silent, but engineering was his interest, even if shuttles were not.

“Did you hear me? Type 3! That’s the type of engine they use in those big guns that can blow up whole ships. If it was to explode, you’d see the blast from several kilometres away.”

Technically, at three kilometres you wouldn’t actually be able to see it, or anything else ever again. Corey kept that to himself.

“How did you get shuttles?” frowned Corey, his voice respectfully lowered. “You don’t qualify for them, so how do you manage to get them? I’ve seen your status credentials—you’re listed as an unsuitable role model for children, and recommended for menial work only. You once scored low enough to qualify for immediate recycling.”

“How indeed..?” Paul laughed to himself, some joke he wasn’t yet ready to share. “My new one needs some work, you know!”

Corey turned to stare out of the window. He suspected he knew where this was leading, and that he wasn’t going to like it. To be fair, he already didn’t like any of this.

“Like what?” he finally grunted with a shrug. He doubted his brother knew enough about basic engineering to even explain what the problem was. The same was true of Corey in terms of human psychology.

“It just needs a bit of attention, that’s all.”

Corey continued to look on, somewhat bemused by the direction the conversation had taken.

“Look, I know you dropped out of college, but I think you learned enough to work on a shuttle, didn’t you?”

It was a rhetorical question; Corey somehow knew he was doing this whether he liked it or not. It was now just a question of how much he wasn't going to like it.

"All I'm asking for is a bit of routine maintenance, a diagnostic scan... maybe some circuits need going over and some power conduits need checking for integrity. Nothing I don't honestly think you can handle. It'll be good for you—get you out of the house, get you productive, get you actually being useful for once."

Corey let the comment hang for a moment. He knew he really didn't have a choice, and, worse, he knew he was going to be going along with this whether he liked it or not. "So you want me to work for you?"

"Good godoid, no!" Paul turned to face him, his ugly, piggy little eyes glaring at him with a sparkle of pure amusement, or utter condescension. "You can't work for me—that would be illegal. You'll just be in my yard, spending your free time tinkering on my shuttles. If I paid you, the law would come down on me hard, and Mum would lose the house. And what would happen to you then, if I stopped coming home? Where would you go? You can't live in the games, can you? Cheese puffs aren't free, are they?"

Corey opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it. Sadly, Paul had made a perfectly valid point: Cheesy-Puffs weren't free at all. If the authorities knew he was hiring employees, then life would become considerably more complicated than life on Earth already was. The point about Cheesy-Puffs was even more valid, and was concerning him greatly.

Corey turned to Marrrta, who was sat behind him quietly taking it all in. "Paul wasn't right about everything, some people did live in the games. They were permanently harnessed into the virtual world for the remaining years of their lives, fed the liquidised remains of

the dead through a hose, while their minds and their bodies were slowly stripped from them, cell by cell.”

Martha’s voice replied, “It’s a punishment? They do it as a threat to keep the population in line?”

Corey nodded darkly, his eyes narrowing. He said, with his voice respectfully lowered, “It was a living death that could take decades. For some it was a sentence; for others, recycling was an escape from a life like mine. I had briefly considered volunteering for the program; almost everyone has at some point. For volunteers, they give you an artificial reality that’s fun and exciting. Nobody knows what they do if you’re sentenced to it but the stories I’ve heard make it sound terrifying.”

He had read about the outer-rim colonies before, lived a life there in the games, seen it in holovids. They were lawless places where people were free to do what they wanted: no order, no infrastructure, nothing working the way it should be. It was anarchy, crime, war, corruption. It was the dream, and he had found he fantasised about it endlessly.

He said softly to her, “Earth has always had data chips, control-webs, re-education camps, planet-wide foreclosure to the banks—these things served a purpose, and I can barely even imagine the hell that life without them must be; but hell is free. It might just be a place where I can find out who I really am.”

As he pondered the unfortunate reality of his life, he remembered that the story must go on.

“You’ve got three shuttles, Paul!” he began. “You need a full-time engineer, not me.”

“No, I think I’ll do just fine with you,” Paul told him. “You’ve got three years of university under your belt—you’re as qualified as any engineer where it counts.”

“Three years, and all of it for nothing...”

“Yeah, well this isn’t the Alliance Military academy,” said Paul, scowling. “So long as you know which end of a spanner to hold, and know the difference between a toilet waste removal valve and a reactor-core injector, you’ll do fine.”

Corey rolled his eyes and groaned to himself. The two items were essentially interchangeable.

“What if they find out?”

“What if they do?”

What indeed? Even the least bad thing he could imagine sent shivers down his spine. He certainly wouldn’t be sentenced to the games! That was just for the lucky ones.

“I dunno,” he said with a huff, a last ditch attempt to get out of this. “Three shuttles are going to take a lot of looking after. You don’t know what’s involved.”

“I know very well what’s involved,” said Paul with a wry grin. “One of them is more demanding than my wife, and twice as difficult to maintain.”

He looked off into the distance through the small windows, and frowned thoughtfully.

“...Though it is quite good looking, and it doesn’t use as much fuel; it’s not as hairy either.”

“Paul’s yard was nothing more than a small patch of land with a broken-down hangar that looked like it had been dumped haphazardly from a fairly large height, right down into the middle of it. It was large enough for half a dozen small auxiliary craft to fit in comfortably, and still have space enough to work on them. It was fully fenced off, and had adequate security, tighter security in fact than was warranted on Earth to protect a few old shuttles that were

only an inspection away from being recycled at the owner's expense; perhaps with him along with them."

The sun was high in the sky on this particular morning, and the heat bore down on them ferociously, biting into Corey's vision. They both shielded their eyes with their hands as they stepped out of the transport, after it made a textbook landing on an invisible cushion of anti-gravity before coming to rest permanently on its duralium belly, all done with no discernible contact that could be felt inside.

The door to the storage bunker clattered open, the rollers shook to life and the door slowly chewed itself away, revealing the interior of the dark hangar after silently scanning Paul for authenticity, an electronic eye sweeping his DNA for approval.

The electronics were the usual fare, but the shutters were crude, an ancient design that was rarely seen anymore. Corey contemplated them, the use of bearings and rollers, wheels and axles. The thought pre-occupied him for a moment, all other thoughts washing out of his mind as the machinery went round and around his head.

"Gonna come and see my shuttles then?" Paul's voice cut into his thoughts with the unpleasant suddenness of an overweight man snatching his breakfast. Corey blinked several times, and realised he'd been lost again in his imagination, his thoughts drifting off into the endless maze of his own mind.

Paul was gesturing inside the hangar with a smile on his face like that of a proud father—prouder in fact than he'd ever been at the prospect of actually being a father.

"Sure, whatever. You know I've never really been interested in shuttles though. I always wanted to specialise in reactors; capital ships travelling at speeds impossible to imagine," he mused, his mind

filling once more with thoughts of grand romantic escapes from all this.

Paul just stared at him, but he didn't even notice. His head ached, a dull throb was growing behind his temples.

"And what's wrong with shuttles?"

Corey looked over, snapping himself back to reality as he noticed his brother's angry glare, the one that usually preceded some unwarranted pain, or other indignity. "They're alright. Just not my thing," he muttered.

Paul swaggered headway into the dark, dusty and dishevelled hangar. His arrogance struck Corey sharply, the pride in what was little more than scrap. Corey wanted no part of it, no part whatsoever but, as usual, fate had rolled his dice for him. There had always been the question of whether your fate was laid out before you, or you had a choice, and humans created their own destiny. Earth was now where that question was finally answered.

"I guess it's all a bit boring for a young achiever like you?"

Paul shouted back to him sarcastically. "A college boy with a bright future can afford to look down his nose at his brother's business, can't he?"

Corey let out an indolent huff of protest, too quiet for Paul to hear.

"Let's not forget you weren't even good enough to finish college."

Corey didn't need to be reminded of that fact and he frowned grimly to himself. "I was good enough not to be listed for recycling, if I couldn't pass a make-up test in two days!" he muttered, too softly to be heard.

Marrta's smiling face was suddenly in front of him, causing him to reel in surprise.

“Dropping out of college isn’t something you are proud of, is it. It still pricks at you like a splinter in your soul.”

It was almost like she was reading out his own story for him. He could only nod in agreement. He added, “I’d begun the course with genuine enthusiasm for it, a thirst for knowledge, and what I believed was a little raw engineering talent, but despite all of this, I found myself falling further and further behind all of my classmates.”

Of course, he hadn’t benefited from the mandatory grade-ups and fast tracking of the protected classes, whatever they actually were, but such measures were only there to level the field, not to give an unearned advantage. And as he couldn’t compete once the game was made ‘fair,’ he clearly couldn’t be up to the cut—not by a long shot. As it happened, the only other person of his social and ethnic status that even survived the first year had dropped out too, and rumour had it that he had taken a job aboard a cruise ship as a waiter, somewhere out on the edge of the Frontier.

Voluntary recycling had accounted for most of the rest.

At a time when the kindle of Corey’s enthusiasm had long since been extinguished, he found himself doubting he’d ever had any talent in the first place. It had been brought to his attention by faculty head Maureen Rasheed that he was a toxic presence on campus, and that he should strongly consider quitting for the safety of the other students. It was nothing he hadn’t heard numerous times daily since he began the course, and he could certainly sympathise with the sentiment. But hearing it from such a high-ranking office meant that it had perhaps been time to take the hint.

“I don’t think I’m better than anyone!” His headache deepened, and a faint buzzing sound started in his ears. It was like a small drill was running inside his head, and not in a good way, like it

was in the games. This was unpleasantly real, as much so as it was really unpleasant.

Marrta looked away but even staring at the back of her, he knew she was smiling. “Earth!” she said, sarcastically shaking her head.

“Well get your eyes off that patch of mud you’re standing on and get in here,” shouted Paul, shunting Corey back to reality.

Before he even realised, he was doing just what he had been told to. He watched his own feet as he shuffled forwards.

Paul gestured with an even broader grin than before as his hand motioned towards the three small vessels that sat within. “Now have a proper look at these shuttles, and tell me you’re not impressed.”

As his eyes quickly adjusted to the dark, and as much as he would have hated to admit it, Corey was impressed. There was a larger transport shuttle refinished in a pearlescent white colour, and a smaller military-looking machine, slender and sleek which had obviously been worked on extensively. The configuration was odd and unfamiliar.

Languishing at the opposite side of the hangar bay was an alien vessel, an ugly sand-coloured thing with protrusions and equipment bolted unevenly to the exterior of the hull which flared dramatically at the front.

It was the sleek, grey Alliance transport that really caught his attention though. Corey couldn’t help but smile as he took it all in.

“I see you like that one,” Paul nodded as he led them closer. “That’s my favourite too. That thing is unique, there’s not another one like it anywhere.”

“Is it fast?”

“Yeah!” he said with a grin of self-satisfaction. “It’s very fast. So fast in fact that it’s how I ended up with the other two.”

Corey frowned, not quite managing to follow the logic of what was being said.

“I race!” said Paul, his voice lowered respectfully. “And sometimes I win. Those two other ships were won fair and square.”

Corey turned to him, slightly startled, as this all began to make an odd kind of sense.

“Mostly fair...” Paul added suggestively with a wink.

“My brother was a boring, overweight man with almost no redeeming features. He ate too much, he was married to a plain and boring girl who shouted too much and made too much noise when they were all together, making me wince in embarrassment and, often, disgust. She smelled vaguely of wet fur and he’d never been able to work out why, which was perhaps better all round.

“He was everything I was afraid of becoming himself, and what I hated most in others. He was a bully, he was arrogant, he was a selfish pig of a man. And yet despite all these things being true, he suddenly had my respect.”

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” said Marrrta with a knowing smirk. “Our entire understanding of the world is based on guesses, projections and perception. It’s a house of cards that can all come crashing down if a single thing is placed wrongly.”

“Yes!” he had to agree. “This was not fear, not knowing to keep my head down to avoid it being punched or kicked. It was actual respect. I couldn’t help it!”

“I had three others as well,” Paul continued with a shrug. “Sometimes I lose as well. But mostly I win, and I win enough to do well.”

Paul handed him a mug of coffee that had a vaguely metallic taste, served from a neglected dispenser that sported scorch marks around the service hatch. Corey had managed to martial his thoughts somewhat, the fog clearing after reality punched a hole where his consciousness couldn't quite reach.

The transport shuttle demanded his attention, even more so now he knew that she was more than just a pretty ship. It was a racer with a history and a story behind it. It was success, it had been earned, and had attracted still more success on top of it. She was everything he was not, and the allure was too strong for him to ignore.

"I got into all this about 4 years ago," explained Paul as he sipped at his drink, not seeming to notice the poor taste which was very, very poor indeed. "It's not strictly legal, you see."

"I know that!" Corey managed with a frown. "Everyone knows that. Shuttle racing is banned, isn't it?"

"Sometimes it's no problem. Small local races are completely approved and overseen by the authorities. You don't make anything on those—the government takes it all in taxes.

"Those races are all about building status. The government turns a blind eye to the unauthorised events, because if they stopped those, there'd be no interest in the smaller ones and they'd lose their revenue. We race the small ones so we can qualify for the illegal ones. It's a win-win for everyone.

"The best races are all done in secret. There are blind spots around the observation net, you couldn't bring a ship in, but a few shuttles... Nobody notices, or even particularly cares. People get paid not to notice."

Corey was now listening intently.

“There’s prizes too, parts and tools we need to upgrade the racers. There’s even a league table. You have to earn points to go up to the next league to qualify for the bigger races. It’s all quite sophisticated.”

“And dangerous, I’d imagine...” added Corey.

“Yeah...” Paul nodded in agreement, perhaps a little proudly. “You’re practically strapping yourself to a bomb.”

“I meant if you get caught...”

“I won’t get caught,” he said, his arrogance showing that it was even larger than his stomach. “I’m already in the third league. I’ve almost got enough points to qualify for the second, and I have three years to get to league one, where I belong.”

“Why three years?” Corey sipped at the terrible coffee and winced but carried on drinking it regardless.

“There’s a race out past Saturn every five years and it’s for first league racers only. It’s the biggest event with the highest stakes, and it’s on in four more years.” Paul lowered his voice as if sharing a dark secret. “It takes a whole year to prep a vessel and train for it, so that gives me three years to qualify. I can do it; I’m very good at this! I’m actually ahead of where I need to be.”

“You think you’ll win in that?” he asked, pointing to the fast shuttle.

“Godoid no...” he replied bluntly, with a cruel little chuckle. “I’ll need something bigger, and much more powerful.”

Corey gestured towards a tiny, military-looking thing languishing behind the three complete vehicles, his eyebrows raised inquisitively since it looked like no racing vessel he’d ever imagined.

Paul shook his head. “I’ve got to find something else. That thing is long past her prime, and not much use for racing. Even a tourist wouldn’t set foot in it.

“It’s a local service-pod, a one-man thing designed for personal local transport. It’s sold anyway, some guy bought it with an idea of upgrading it to go travelling, if you can believe that? I can’t imagine anyone wanting to spend more than a few minutes locked inside something that small, but I made good money on it, and that’s what counts.

“My racer is heavily modified, with better engines, but it’s not up to the sort of racing I’m interested in. I’ll need to find something else but I do have something in mind... We’ll see how things pan out over the next few races.”

Corey just nodded along; he really didn’t know what questions to ask.

“Maybe I’ll win something.” He pointed to the small alien craft. “I won that last week. Great manoeuvrability, but no power. Not enough to win anyhow...”

“You won that?!”

“That’s how it works,” Paul grinned at him. “Come on, let’s take a ride...”

The Alliance ship was frighteningly powerful. The acceleration pinned him back in his seat, even with the internal gravity compensating at full efficiency. The speed it managed was just incredible; it moved faster than a man who was late for a date with a pair of sexually frustrated Swedish twins. Paul pointed this out, laughing at his own joke.

“Paul isn’t very clever!” Marrta noted, quite correctly. “He’s blunt, simplistic. He sounds like he has the subtlety and finesse of a sexually frustrated teenager.”

Corey shrugged. He certainly couldn’t disagree. “He’s not popular. I’m afraid he doesn’t really respect women!”

“Why should he?” she asked, seeming a little confused. “On my colony, nobody expects respect. The expectation is upon ourselves, that we should work to earn it.”

“But you should respect women!” Corey frowned thoughtfully.

“And I do,” she explained. “If they deserve it. People like Paul are the ones we respect least, the kind of people who demand it, who think they should have it just because it’s what they want.”

Corey didn’t quite know what to make of that, but did enjoy the idea of entire colonies hating people like Paul.

The small vessel was out of the reach of orbit in seconds, and still seemed to be pulling faster and faster. The view through the window was a blur as reality streaked by outside, pinpoints of stars wrenched into great white lines, like scratches across the ink-black canvas of the universe.

“Wow...” Corey managed to say with a stupid grin on his face, as his brother worked the modified controls with a staggering degree of competence.

“I know. She’s something, isn’t she?” he said proudly, and Corey felt he was under-selling it.

“She is something,” Corey agreed, his heart pounding with excitement. His head was buzzing, the headache forgotten, his mind clear for once; clear enough to think about nothing more than the shuttle, at least. For just that moment, it was enough.

“What I do isn’t always totally legal, so I need a guy with me I can trust. You’re my brother, so I can’t think of anyone better. You get them ready, keep them moving, and I’ll fly them.”

There was silence except for the static whine of the power-plant as energy shuddered through the metallic hull. Corey could barely think, he body was filled with electricity and he felt alive, more alive than he had ever felt before.

“You really think I’m up to it?” Corey asked excitedly, as his world became as bright and vivid as the games, for once. His reality has always been fed back to him through a plug, jacked into a socket at the base of his skull, everything else was a slow, awkward grey slog. Was this a game? Was his body being dissolved in a recycling centre somewhere, feeding back this wonderful delusion? Perhaps, ultimately, none of that really mattered anyway?

“Absolutely,” Paul told him, banking slightly to bring the passenger window away from the sun. “Just do as I say. It will get Mum off your back, and get you out of the damn house.

“She is right, you know, you’ve got to do something. You can’t just waste your life away, rotting your brain in front of holovids and games.”

Corey stared momentarily out at the sun, dimmed by the self-adjusting black viewing-port. Below them the Earth, sitting in the sky, like it was hanging from some unthinkable cosmic tether.

“And I’d get to work on this ship?” he said, almost to himself. His hand slowly traced along the inner panels.

Paul looked over at him. “Maybe fly it one day; who knows?”

“The next morning, things were different. My mind wasn’t as fogged as it had been before, I even had some energy, there was much less crippling depression and my eyes weren’t burning with pain as I opened them,” he explained to Marrra.

“You felt like you had a reason to live!” she told him. “That must have been a new experience for you, after spending so many hours living a second-hand life through entertainment and damaging your brain with stims.”

He picked up the electro-stimulant that sat on the bedside table beside him. It was a small, black device that administered a measured

charge to his temple. It was meant to help, but it rarely did anything other than make him feel worse.

“I was told to use it...” he said softly, just staring at the thing in his hand. “I never thought much about it until that moment!”

“You didn’t use it?” she asked.

“I won’t!” he said with an odd sense of resolve. “I didn’t. I’m better off without it.”

“Good for you!” she said with a beaming smile.

“Why are you in my bed?” Corey said, frowning at her. She shrugged. “It’s your story!”

He was up and eating breakfast even before his brother, which was a family first. He ate quickly, like a man with a purpose, which didn’t escape his mother’s notice. As Paul came down from the upstairs apartment, she nudged him in the ribs and gestured over to his brother with a disparaging nod.

“What did you do to him yesterday? Switch him for a better one? If so, I approve, I like upgrades, as you know!” She spoke with a hushed voice as she squinted her incredibly expensive bio-mechanically-augmented eyes, which could now see enough of the electro-magnetic spectrum to really start her worrying about using communicators, or even walking outside.

What had started as a joke about having eyes in the back of her head, had quickly given way to a physical augmentation procedure that now let her actually detect various light-waves straight through the rear of her own cranium. It had been quite an expensive process, but not as expensive as the sleeping drugs she now relied on, since her eyelids had been rendered essentially useless. This, in part, helped to explain why she was so miserable for much of the time. The greater part of the explanation was the large mass forming

between her ears, in a part of her brain where large masses were, frankly, least welcome. The mass itself was a growing issue, and the fact that she was now aware of it, and terrified of the consequences pretty much summed up the rest.

All in all, she regretted having her eyes replaced with highly radioactive spheres, which cost so much that her husband had stopped coming home midway through paying for them. This was also why she was now a borderline alcoholic and had drunkenly explained all of this in horrifically graphic to Corey, many, many times, often in his bed with him, whether he liked it or not.

“Nothing much—just showed him the value of an honest day’s work,” Paul told her smugly. “I had him help out with some mechanical tasks. I must have caught his imagination.”

“So it is still the same old him then?” she said, sounding somewhat deflated. She sniffed the air around Paul’s face suspiciously for a moment, and seemingly satisfied that he was free of the fetid stench of treachery and betrayal, that only a mother can detect in her own children, she continued, “Well, it seems you’ve knocked some sense into him, for now.

“About time too.”

With this, she wandered off to get a start on her chores; chores which she insisted on doing herself, before invariably complaining about having to do them. This was somewhat ironic given that most could be performed automatically by cleaning drones that were widely available, and cheaper than bottled water which, of course, was prohibitively expensive. This was despite it not being nearly up to the quality of the freely available tap water, which was undrinkable at best, and had to be boiled and purified with potent deodorising granules that made it taste strongly of really stale coffee,

slightly of urine, and just a little bit of rats, that were so fed up of drinking it that they'd drowned themselves in a fit of depression.

Bottled water simply had to be set fire to in order to purify it, which was far more convenient all round.

"You're up early for once!" Paul slapped his brother playfully on the back, but way too hard to be really considered playful. "Did you wet the bed?"

Corey smiled awkwardly back, and carried on eating something that tasted vaguely like scrambled eggs on toast, but with the consistency of porridge. It smelled like something he couldn't quite put his finger on, but was left with the distinct impression that if he had, his finger might have been worse off for the experience.

"So you're still up for working with the big achiever of the family?" Paul said and lowered his voice as if they were sharing a dark and elusive secret.

Corey nodded, and reflexively glanced around to see if anyone was within earshot. He realised that he had no idea why he'd done this.

"I have a proposition for you..." Paul added mysteriously, as he began glancing around as well. He leaned forward and lowered his voice still further. "I have a race, tomorrow night. The ship needs fully prepping to make sure it's ready."

Suddenly it all became very real, and Corey found himself having second thoughts about the whole thing, though he knew that any protests would fall on deaf ears. He knew, in fact, that they were more likely to attract the kind of persuasion that would leave a mark, perhaps even a scar.

"You want to come with me? You want to watch how the real men do it?" continued Paul.

He didn't. He was quite sure he didn't, but for some reason he found himself nodding. He had often wondered what a real man was and how whatever it was that they do was different from the way he did what he didn't do very well.

"We've got work to do then!" he said finally, slumping back in his chair and scooping up a mountain of food which he piled into his gaping mouth. "Well, you have—I have to keep my strength up. It's not easy being awesome, not that you'd have any idea about that..." it was assumed he probably said, or something about horses.

Corey smiled to himself as he saw the sleek Alliance shuttle. He just knew he was going to smile involuntarily every time he saw it. It was utterly beautiful to him, slender, delicate, powerful and angry-looking. It was a ship he had wanted since he first set eyes on it.

Never had he felt power like it, the raw thrill of unleashing the full potential of a machine that was capable of delivering that much energy was utterly addictive, and he was a willing victim of that addiction. It was like sitting inside an electro-stimulant that actually worked.

"I don't understand the appeal!" Marrta told him, almost sounding a little jealous of it.

As his eyes froze on her; he absorbed every curve, every line of her beautifully crafted hull. He was dazed for a moment, lost in the memory of being lost before, of sitting in that shuttle. It was like sitting inside freedom. "It's just beautiful!" he told her.

"In what way," her voice came close to demanding an answer.

"When I'm inside her, just for a moment, I feel like the man I always wanted to be," he said.

Marrta turned away and huffed to herself.

Paul slapped him on the shoulder. "Not that one, you idiot..."

He pointed, and Corey followed his finger, all the way over to the dirty alien ship. His mood deflated somewhat.

“We’re racing for ownership tomorrow,” explained Paul. “I’m not risking the pride of my collection. I’m going to race that thing instead.”

Corey glowered accusingly at the alien vessel, the monstrosity that was somehow blamelessly keeping him from the Alliance transport shuttle. He blamed it anyway. “What is it?” he grunted.

“Proxili,” shrugged Paul dismissively as he led the way to the generously proportioned machine. “Or that’s how it started. There’s all sorts in there now; it’s like every other racing shuttle—a unique mess.”

Martha grinned once more and said, “A bit like your family.”

“Proxili? It’s really alien?” Corey asked again, a little awkwardly, furrowing his brow. “Is it armed? I’ve never worked on an alien ship. I’ve never even been close to one. I met three aliens at university but one just turned out to be a mentally ill Asian man with identity issues and access to a lot of green paint.”

“Of course it’s armed!” Paul snapped and stopped in his tracks, turning to glare at his brother. His eyes were angry and burned with that temper of his that scared Corey to his core. “Some of the events have a PAW section. We have to hit targets on our way through.”

“Particle Acceleration Weapons?” Corey stammered nervously. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temple as a dark headache began to cloud his thoughts. “You have PAWs? What would happen if you got caught with them? What would happen to me?”

“You’d be in trouble, because I’d blame you for everything!” he said evenly. Then he laughed, but for a moment, Corey believed he meant it. He couldn’t see anything funny in any of this.

“But I’d be in just as much trouble for the over-heated atmosphere drive, the upgraded reactors, the illegal high-speed processors, and the shield generators.

“Does any of this bother you?”

“Yes!” Corey snapped angrily. Of course it bothered him, you would have to be insane or stupid for it not to!

“It doesn’t bother me!” Paul assured him forcefully. A little more calmly he continued, “But maybe it should! These races are illegal for a good reason.”

Corey rubbed his chin, a thoughtfully nervous gesture. His headache was back at full-force now; the ringing noise inside his head was now almost as loud as the voices outside of it. He looked over to the shuttle and the noises all went away. He didn’t even notice for a moment, he just stared.

Paul continued, “The power output from the generators is far above what these ships were designed for. They’re effectively bombs held together with structural-cohesion fields, gaffer tape and good luck. The engines are usually taken from bigger ships; they have no place bolted onto the tiny hulls of a shuttlecraft. Weapons are the least of our problems. My biggest problem is worrying about my idiot brother pointing the right end of the spanner at my ship.”

Paul’s unusually solemn tone caught the right emotional resonance in his brother who replied with a silent gaze.

“This is really dangerous, Corey. This is dangerous, and that’s why it’s fun; that’s why I do it!” He paused for added effect. “Now this Proxili ship has plenty of power, but it’s not delivering it to the engines. I think the safety equipment is blocking the flow. I need 30% more power fed directly into the sub-light drive, and I need it by tonight.”

“I can’t be a part of this,” mumbled Corey, with a feeble, apologetic little whine. He glanced at the shuttle, but his eyes flicked over to his brother who moved closer, catching his eye.

“You are a part of this.”

The buzz became a rush. He heard it click on inside his skull, a noisy, jarring sound. He winced, as the headache sent a jolt shooting through his temples.

“Paul...” he said meekly, stepping back fearfully as his brother came closer.

His face was red, and his fists were clenching; he looked angrier than he’d ever seen him.

“Get your tools!” he growled through gritted teeth.

Corey had nowhere left to go as he backed into the wall behind him. The sound was now a waterfall, roaring through his mind. “I can’t...” he said weakly.

A red light flashed on inside his head and left everything in momentary blackness.

Colours, light and sounds faded slowly back in. His face was suddenly painful, more painful than ever before, and his mouth was filled with the unpleasant taste of copper. He was disoriented, but as his thoughts cleared, he found himself on the floor, his face in pain, his neck sore, his head throbbing angrily.

He was moving; he was being dragged upwards by something stronger than him, wrenched off the floor. His eyes focused to the furious face of his brother glaring into his eyes, his hand clenched, and his fist bloody.

“You want me to hit you again?” he shouted, spitting the words into his face.

Corey held up his hands, and whimpered for it to stop.

“You’re doing this!” came a growling voice, grave and severe. “You’re going to do what I say! I’m not having this anymore. I’ve tried to be nice to you, but I’m not having it!”

Corey clenched his eyes shut, waiting, hoping the worst was over. He could hear a voice sobbing softly the word no, over and over again. He realised dimly that it was his own.

“I’m the one who’s been paying for you; I’ve earned what I can to put a little food on the table, enough for Mum, for you, for my wife and boy. Do you know how hard that is in a world like this? Do you?”

Corey looked away. Fear had gripped him—fear of violence, of confrontation, of another punch. Fear of his brother.

“This is my life,” said Paul, a little more calmly. “This feeds our family; this is everything to me. You’re not just sitting upstairs out of the way anymore, lost in some fantasy game or rotting your mind away, staring endlessly at holovids. You’re a part of this, so you had better get used to it!”

Corey just stood there, his eyes swivelled to the floor, his body slumped over. He heard the footsteps melting away into the darkness and he heard a voice.

“I wanted you to fight. I really did.”

Corey just stood there, vaguely aware of a tear running down the side of his face.

Again her voice came to him and it said, “You’re just not built that way though, are you?”

There was no answer.

There was a huge crowd along the starting line, larger than Corey had dared to imagine. It was inside a disused warehouse, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, in a small country that nobody really cared

about. It was hot and sweaty and buzzing with biting insects. Shuttles of all different kinds were lined up ready to be abused or swallowed in a flaming explosion of misfortune, as unwary and unqualified pilots pressed their poorly-conceived designs beyond their poorly-understood limits.

This was, of course, the main reason for the popularity of the sport. More was wagered on the likelihood of deaths of the unfortunate, than on the fortunes of the survivors.

Corey flashed his eyes over each in turn, examining them briefly as he stood next to the alien monstrosity.

Marrta looked at him with a suspicious little light in her eye. She asked, “Is this one not beautiful?”

Corey turned to her and time around him seemed to pause as he did.

He said, “It was a shambles—the circuitry was barely held together, the engine core was from a much larger military ship, and the engine nacelles had a set of huge coils stuffed in them that must have been taken from an Alliance scout, at the very least. I recognised energy converters from heavy weaponry used in the engineering system, and engineering systems controlling the weapons.

“In short, nothing should work, and actually not very much did; even less worked correctly.

“I had run diagnostic scans all day and fixed as many of the glaringly obvious faults as I could find, but the simple fact was that I had really no idea about how the shuttle managed to stay functioning in the first place. It was either a work of genius or a disaster waiting to happen. Both were equally not unlikely.”

It would have taken a better engineer than he was to figure all this out, and most of them had killed themselves like a rat in the drinking water, literally in most cases.

“I had managed to do more than Paul had asked—34% more power was now being fed into the engines, which were capable of delivering a brutal degree of energy. More importantly, and the only thing I really knew for certain, was that the heater worked, the seat no longer squeaked and there was a custom-fitted coffee-cup holder that pointed in the proper direction.”

Whether Paul, or even the computer, could handle the upgrades was a totally different question altogether, and one that was foremost on his mind. It was nice that something was foremost on his mind, although having anything going on in there at all had been a bit unsettling at first.

The other shuttles parked around the massive dockyard were not much better to look at. One enormous shuttle had its rear loading ramp open. Where there should have been rows of seats, there were now banks of coils and equipment, most of it totally unfamiliar to him. There was also a huge, and very clean, civilian shuttle that looked very fast, but it was nothing compared to the Alliance shuttle back at Paul’s garage.

“This is my brother!”

Corey heard the voice and reacted to it slowly, the words taking time to penetrate his meandering thoughts which were elsewhere, somewhere locked at the back of his mind, and they seemed to fade as he was dragged back to the real world of his imagination. He looked round to see the rotund form of his elder brother introducing him to a very tall, very slender man.

He had unusually large hands, and eyebrows with the thickest, densest hair he had ever seen. They were perched on top of a huge

forehead, which was shaped ideally for keeping the rain off his lips. The stranger held out one of his disproportionate hands in a gesture of greeting and slowly dribbled on his own shoes.

“Was that him?” Marrta asked, with a certain note of gravitas to her voice.

“Yes!” he said and then he turned to her with a curious frown. “What do you know about him?”

She smiled a knowing smile and replied, “I know how to spot one of them when I see one.”

Corey wondered exactly what she meant by this. Turning his attention back to the stranger, he shook his hand. It felt cold to the touch, and he withdrew it as quickly as he could.

“I see you have regarded the shuttle!” the stranger said, with a gratingly unpleasant accent. He cast his attention over the worn exterior of the craft, but didn’t seem to really see it. “What do your eyes tell you? You answer me now!”

Corey cringed at the site of his shuddering, uneven movements, his blubbery lips and his weird skin, that was just a little too translucent. He had hollow, almost milky eyes without a spark of humanity in them.

“Fast. It looks fast, Sir.”

“This is Trakkir Trakic,” said Paul. “He’s pretty famous around here.”

“Famous, yes! I am what you would call... a hybrid. I was re-engineered with advanced DNA fragments to augment my already exceptional intelligence. I’m taller than 83.8 % of the human people-things, and between 17 and 25% of my brain... is mechanical!”

He spoke as if he’d learned his social skills from a schizophrenic speak-your-weight machine. Not only was his accent gratingly unpleasant, but he also produced peculiar clicking sounds

which enunciated some of the harder consonants, and placed a little too much emphasis and volume on some words at the expense of others. He also hissed all of his 's' sounds uncomfortably too long and, as he spoke, rivers of whitish, frothy liquid lashed about on the edge of his lips.

"I don't like him," said Marrra as she scowled fixedly forwards.

"But enough with the pleasantries. It was my remarkable brilliance that was responsible for the T-14 shuttle, released last year," he said. Without a discernible pause he continued, "Your silence tells me you know of that which I speak. And now this ground-breaking vessel is the logical progression of that work. Fast barely scrapes the surface of its superlative capabilities, just as genius barely scrapes the surface of mine!"

Corey looked at his brother and raised an eyebrow.

"Trakkir is helping me to refit a transport shuttle," explained Paul. "His upgrades should make one powerful enough to get me to the Saturn endurance race."

"And what of this?" Trakkir ran his massive bony hand over the exterior plating of Paul's own racer. "This vessel of Proxili fashioning. It is also... fast?"

"She... well... she has plenty of power," he said unevenly.

Corey agreed that this much was certainly true. Whether anything, or anyone, could handle it was a totally different matter.

"Power, yes! Power it has," continued the man, returning his attention to Paul. "You there! You do not overestimate your abilities. You must be very careful with this!"

Corey held up a portable viewer which threw up a flawless hologram, presenting an artificial perspective of the field. His attention flitted

between that, a giant 3-dimensional projection of the track above the yard, and the racers below as the ships began powering up.

“I hope someone dies!” Marrta said, rather tastelessly. “I like this story but I think it needs more drama. A good old-fashioned fiery death would make it work!”

Corey frowned and flashed her a caustic glare. “Be careful what you wish for.”

Several racers were rocking visibly on their anti-gravity drives, their fields so over-sensitive that holding a stable position seemed almost impossible.

Expectation hung thickly in the air as the seconds ticked down to the start.

Corey noticed his own breathing was laboured, his hands wet with sweat, his throat dry and his heart fluttering nervously in his chest. He could only imagine how his brother must be feeling.

For a moment he pictured himself at the controls, but not those of the stubby alien ship. He was sitting at the elegant interface of the Alliance shuttle as it sped away from the Earth, heading out to the unknown to find a place where it truly belonged. It was free of the surly bonds of gravity, it had the power to make it out, the engines flared brightly, the ship soared onwards and was unstoppable. His hand clenched a metal lever and he pushed it forwards, gently at first and then he forcefully rammed it home. The shuttle sighed at him as space beyond twisted away and they blasted out through it together.

“I am almost certain your brother will win!” said Trakkir Trakic, with an alien nuance that sounded like total disinterest, but which could just as possibly have been a wry expression of foreknowledge, or hysterical excitement, or psychotic rantings of lunacy. It was too close to call without a solid frame of reference and the only thing he could think of that came anywhere close was an

odd little image languishing at the back of his imagination of a frog tied to a broom-handle.

“Paul’s good!” Corey managed nervously, despite never actually having seen him race before. He was almost as nervous about dealing with this strangely genetically-engineered man as he was about being there in the first place. He seemed as socially competent as a trained attack dog, but entirely without the enthusiasm.

“Yes! He has what it takes to win,” agreed Trakkir with a certain solemnity and/or excitement. “I have invested greatly in his talent. Statistically, a winning outcome is even more likely than his gruesome death, on this particular occasion.” His words trailed off as the lights began to flash but he sounded as though he was fine with this either way.

Marrta tutted. “Remind me, which of those two outcomes are we hoping...”

“Silence!” yelled Trakkir loudly, cutting her off mid-sentence. “It begins...”

As the green light showed over the yard, the full fury of 23 hopeful racers, with more ambition than instinct for survival, was unleashed. Atmospheric engines flared brightly and engine coils were awash with light as they forced full power into them, ready or not.

Mostly not, as it happened.

The ships blasted away, kicking up smoke and dust while roaring loudly.

“And they’re off!” the announcement came loudly over the address system, and the crowds began to cheer in excited unison.

A small red vessel choked on the power and the lights flickered out, leaving it trailing behind the others, the first victim of the pilot’s over-exuberance. As the roar of the engines settled, the

little ship spluttered and the port nacelle fell off, clattering loudly to the concrete floor. It listed, the nose tipped, clipped the ground, and was suddenly spinning out of control amidst a shower sparks, dust and small parts.

It ended up lying helplessly on her side to the triumphant roar of the crowd as flames gently licked at the hull-plates and a desperate clawing motion could be seen inside the front windows.

“Most of them, at least. Some of them have just lost their no-claim discount. I’m sure there’s going to be plenty more in a bad mood by the end of this race!” the announcer gloated. Then he added, “At least, from those that survive long enough to be in a bad mood!”

Corey clicked the announcements to mute as he watched his portable viewer, his eyes fixed on the digital display, his own excitement steadily building, along with his growing trepidation. He could only watch helplessly as the shuttle made it towards the front of the pack, running nose to nose with the leaders—a small green shuttle-pod, the massive ship he’d noticed earlier, an Alliance shuttle, and two other things he couldn’t even begin to identify, one of which appeared to be made primarily out of a packing crate. Nobody had the lead—the ships swapped position regularly, but this group seemed to dominate the front of the pack, with the rest trailing some distance behind.

“The targeting trials are first,” said Trakkir Trakic as if the whole thing were an inconvenience, or the most exciting thing he’d ever seen—one or the other, or both, or something completely and utterly different altogether. “They must hit two of the target markers as they pass through. Most will slow down for this, and even the fastest ships lose their positions... easily. Remember: don’t number your squillebs before they erupt!” This was followed by a wheezing

laughter, or possibly a coughing fit. There was a considerable amount of drooling too.

“What if they don’t hit two?” asked Marrta, sounding fairly enthusiastic, even for her.

“Then they will be destroyed!” he enthused with an inhuman wail and a dismissive wave of his bony arm.

“Destroyed?!” repeated Corey, aghast.

“No... disqualified! My apologies, but the words sound very similar to me. Very similar indeed.” Closing his eyes, and sucking up air noisily through two rows of poorly arranged teeth, he continued, “There are three hundred targets in random positions. They only need to knock down two—no more—then they may proceed to accelerate once more.

“The faster they get in, the more easy shots are available, and the less time they lose. The early porcupet succumbs to the crillcruk!” This was followed by a bizarre huffing sound that resulted in bubbles of goo emerging from his oversized nostrils. It wasn’t entirely pleasant to look at, or listen to.

“That all sounds incredibly disagreeable in every possible sense,” said Marrta with visible disgust.

“Your imaginary counterpart’s civilities are wasted on me!” the engineered man grumbled in an ungrumbly unfazed manner. “Indeed, my senses are finely tuned to a perturbing array of frequencies. There is no sanctuary for the Parasite, the lofty eavesdropper beyond, or the people of the wall.”

Did he really remember the conversation this way? Or was it just how he remembered remembering it?

One thing he did know for sure was that the races were way more complicated than he’d imagined. It wasn’t just a case of running faster than the others; there were subtleties, tactics even. He

found his palms oddly sweaty, his head thumping, throbbing with a dull ache. In his mind, he was there in the seat of the shuttle. He saw himself lining up, the drone targets locking on as he guided the tiny shuttle through the track with the gentlest of touches.

A cheer snapped him back to the reality of his imagination.

Paul, and the huge vessel, seemed to enter the field at roughly the same time, although judging the field was far harder than it looked. The viewer gave very little away to his inexperienced eye. As Corey glared at it, it suddenly reported weapons fire. He swung his attention to the big main screen for an exterior view, and the crowd began cheering more loudly than ever. Several targets erupted into flames as the lead ships tore through, hitting them as they went.

“Excelsior!” Trakkir enthused solemnly to himself, with an excited growl of barely contained apathy.

Corey breathed heavily. Paul had cleared the first stage easily, but his adversary now had the lead. “What’s next?” he gasped.

“Obstacles,” came the reply. “Yes! They have to pass through the trailing edge... of a debris field.”

“At the speed they’re going?!” Corey turned to look at him, alarm taking hold. “They could all be killed doing that, couldn’t they?”

Trakkir turned slowly and deliberately to look back at him, wide eyed, as he began vibrating, bouncing up and down on his seat to the excited sound of several short-breathed nasal chuckles. “Yes! They could all be... disqualified!”

Corey didn’t quite follow. “Disqualified?!”

“No no no... The other one...”

Corey gulped nervously.

By the time Paul narrowly avoided the first of the rock-solid obstacles of solid rock, five other ships had already left the race after

failing to hit the targets, and two others were now so far behind that they were effectively removed from the whole thing. The crowd erupted into cheers of encouragement as a little green shuttle joined Paul and the larger ship as they crossed the threshold of the debris field.

“Your brother’s ship is inherently inferior,” Trakkir noted dryly, wiping his damp nose with his sleeve. “The green ship is smaller, and more manoeuvrable, but the pilot is a velnard! His head is too stupid for his body. His aggressive manoeuvring will squander that advantage, you’ll see! Your brother’s skull, that will soon put him back in the lead. Skill. Something like that.”

Corey was relieved to hear it, whatever it was that he’d heard. But the large viewer was showing the three lead ships snaking between lumps of floating rocks and shards of metal, each larger than the hangars the ships had been stored in. Corey was more nervous than ever.

He saw a shuttle explode into flames in a huge eruption of fuel and debris, as another nudged past to take an easy lead. He saw himself in the pilot’s chair, guiding the small ship, beating everyone and winning the day with her breathlessly giving him everything she had left to give.

With a grimace, he pulled his wandering mind back to the here and now, or at least the then and there.

Paul suddenly took the lead; he came in close to a huge chunk of rock and blasted past it at full power. But in doing so, he drew in three others, and the huge, jagged shards of stone seemed to close around him like a noose. The big viewer showed his imminent death and the crowd gasped and then went grimly silent. He blasted through at the last moment, to a resounding cheer of approval.

The big ship kept with him, but the little green one, as predicted, hung back. They were flying too close to the bigger pieces, almost challenging them for dominance, instead of plotting a faster, easier course.

“I don’t like this!” Corey whispered to himself. He cast an acid glare at the big man next to him.

“The final challenge is next. It is not your brother’s strongest area.”

Corey held his angry stare, narrowing his eyes.

“Three orbits of the system’s star, manual control only.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too hard...” Corey almost allowed himself to relax slightly, but the tension was eating him alive. He was shaking, sweat drenching his back.

“It is a test of accurate manoeuvring. Stray too far from the sun’s gravitational pull and you waste valuable time. Venture too close, and you will die! A horrible fiery disqualification awaits those who venture too close!”

“And Paul... he usually takes the orbit too wide, right?”

“Your brother is currently still alive!” he said, as though that answered everything, which it effectively did.

Corey glared back at the screen, blinking fixedly. Would his brother take the safer course or the faster one? Would he ever see him again? For a brief moment, he wondered what it was that he really wanted to happen, but quickly shook the idea from his mind.

“Do you really want your brother to die?” Marrta asked, not sounding shocked, or even particularly surprised. She just sounded vaguely interested.

“I don’t know!” he told her. “I don’t know what I wanted.”

He wanted the shuttle.

The bigger craft had the lead, but only by a few lengths of the ship. The other was now several seconds behind, and unless one of them made a mistake, they were no longer any threat to the leaders. The two blasted towards the sun until the glowing ball of energy became so bright that it blanked out the main viewer. Corey switched to the computerised display.

“On completing three orbits, they will enter maximum fast for a final dash to the finish line,” said Trakkir. “Speed is a mere formality at this distance—the one that exits orbit first has already won.”

Corey thought quickly and this made sense—only the seconds lost in the orbital challenge would make a noticeable difference. He was sweating, as nervous as if he himself were locked in the little metal tube with the controls of that ship before him. But, he could only watch as his brother continued to risk his life for the thrill of the crowd.

Both vessels suddenly appeared from the opposite side of the sun from their first half orbit. The big one still had the lead, but the Proxili shuttle was flying on top, maybe only a fraction of a second behind, possibly even less.

The crowd went wild as they came into view, and Corey breathed an audible sigh of relief that his brother was still there. All sensors were inoperative on the other side of the gigantic star, leaving him with only the vague hope that all was well.

Both ships seemed locked together, manoeuvring as one, as they banked into the second circuit of the star. They vanished from the viewer and the crowd quietened down somewhat as the small green shuttlecraft came into view, followed by a tiny Alliance ship.

Corey waited with baited breath. Sensors were useless now as the two ships went back round to the opposite side of the throbbing

inferno that blotted out everything beyond. The screen hung uselessly at his side as he waited for the main viewer to show the ships. He could hear his heartbeat as the blood pumped through his ears, the tension in his chest was making it hard to breathe. The pressure felt like it was crushing him under the weight of it all.

Suddenly, the ships burst into view. This time, the big craft had stolen a longer lead—it was now ahead by the length of two shuttles, but the Proxili ship was challenging hard from behind. The crowd let out a unanimous roar of approval as they came past the optical receiver. The green ship followed a few seconds behind to a muted cheer and crowded a small Alliance ship deliberately. The little craft banked off to avoid a collision, and began to descend into the glowering furnace of the sun.

The crowd let out a gasp as the shuttle floundered in the gravitational maw of the star. For a moment it seemed to stabilise; the optical system zoomed in to capture the action, and the crowd was moved to silent awe. Then in a flash, the ship was gone. Simply, cleanly and without ceremony, the little grey craft was swallowed by the broiling energy, vanishing in a small but dramatic little white flash to a gasp of horror from the audience.

Corey hung his pad to the side, mirroring the shock of the crowd but, unlike them, he had a personal investment. He wasn't simply a spectator, here for the thrill, the silent hope of seeing a disaster. He could only resent them all for giving the racers this motivation, the drive to risk their lives to entertain them with this ultimate gamble.

"He ventured too close," added Trakkir, as though the death of the pilot was of no more consequence than a bug crushed under his boot as he walked along.

Moments later, the Proxili ship flashed past the curve of the star once again, and vanished in a blur of pseudo-motion. The bigger ship followed just seconds behind, but it was already too late—there was no hope of taking the lead.

“Congratulations. Your brother has been victimised!”

As part of the pit-crew, Corey was among the first on the scene as Paul’s alien shuttle came in for a slightly uneven landing.

It ground to a halt, and the glowing tips of the nacelles finally went dark to a riotous applause from the adoring crowd. Corey loathed the sound of their baying, their goading people towards ever more foolhardy acts to earn their approval.

Eventually the systems equalised and the hatch opened, clattering to the ground noisily with a loud hiss of escaping gasses. Paul dragged his generous proportions from the hull with some difficulty, even though it was designed with generous proportions in mind.

Corey felt sick; he was barely able to stand, and he felt dizzy, awkward. The crowds were making him anxious; just watching the race had stressed him almost to breaking point. He stood waiting while Trakkir slowly ambled over to join them, strutting oddly gracelessly on a pair of long, spindly legs.

“Well?” roared Paul in triumph, throwing his arms in the air proudly.

“I can’t believe it!” Corey gasped. “You won! It was amazing!”

Behind him, some way in the distance was a chorus of distant cheers.

“You’ll get used to it!” said Paul, still flushed with adrenaline and laughing to himself in victory.

“I thought you’d lost it when they had you on the second orbit!”

“No chance,” said Paul, shooting a knowing glance towards Trakkir. “I had a few tricks left up my sleeve.”

Paul took him out for breakfast the next morning, much to their mother’s disapproval and annoyance. This time at least, Corey wasn’t the main target of either.

There was an eatery near the hangar yard, which Paul frequented often, many times after eating too much at home. The food was good, tasty and home-cooked; no processed proteins were involved. Corey noticed the difference of every mouthful with some surprise. He was so used to the bland, almost tasteless, processed food that fresh, real food woke up his senses. He wasn’t sure if he even liked the experience.

“So what do you think?” Paul smiled.

“Good.” Corey nodded, flicking his eyes back down almost as soon as they made contact. “You can really taste that it’s food.”

“I meant the race, moron!”

Suddenly the bland, empty food seemed the better option. It wasn’t threatening; it asked nothing of him and he owed it nothing. It was safe and easy, and it didn’t come with so high a price.

“I didn’t sleep last night!” Corey admitted. “It was scary. People died. I sat there and watched someone die for real. It was like in a game but it wasn’t a game.”

Paul nodded to himself and grinned. “Yeah, it was awesome!”

“Awesome?” Corey frowned and shook his head as cold hold tendrils of dread traced up his spine. “I don’t like this.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Paul grunted through a mouthful of a little bit of everything on the menu, all mixed together. “I won a ship

last night which you're gonna strip for spares. I've got junk all around the yard you can use, so fit it back out to standard and we'll sell it on. The parts I'll sell separately to other racers."

There was an arrogant twinkle in his eye.

"That should keep us going for a few months," he mumbled through a mouthful of half-chewed food.

"Is that how it works?" asked Corey, while delicately biting a small mouthful of a hash-brown from the end of his fork. He could hardly object when he was literally eating the proceeds of the race; worse, he now knew that he'd been surviving on them for years.

"We can't live on grants, nobody can," said Paul, gesturing around with a chipped coffee mug. "If we played it straight, the family would have starved to death years ago. Nobody on Earth is surviving on what we're allowed to have. If you don't qualify for a government job, you're second-class. You're a wolf, or you're a sheep now."

"I know," Corey sighed.

"I'm only licensed for menial work, you know?" Paul frowned angrily. "I'm either not smart enough, or not good enough for anything better. The best work I could find would be working in a store somewhere.

"But I know I'm better than that; hell, even you're better than that! This is what I'm good at, and I'm damn good at it too! When I'm in that machine, I'm a winner."

"You certainly are!" Corey nibbled at the edge of a piece of toast. How could argue with that? He wished he could but the facts were undeniable. "Speaking of which, how did you win? I really thought they had you!"

“Yeah, about that...” Paul chewed his lip thoughtfully and took a swig of his coffee. There was a strange light in his eyes. “I’ve been offered a ship.”

“You won another ship?”

Paul shook his head and grinned. “I came pretty close. I was racing ownership against an old friend last night. He was the one who ended up as a bright little flash as he got swallowed up in the sun. He was a pretty good guy, and he owed me a lot of money. His reactor core belonged to me.”

“Oh...” Corey stopped eating. It was as if the world had suddenly scooped his soul right out of him. A dark grim cloud cast a shadow on his mood, his eyes darkened, and he looked down, staring at the table as his thoughts ground to a halt like the gears of a motor jammed up by a solid object pulled into them. The solid object in question was a human being who had been sucked into a star but, in reality, it had stopped nothing at all. It seemed that this death hadn’t meant anything to anyone.

“But I’ve been offered a ship,” Paul explained, fixing his brother with a furtive look. “This ship is just what I need to enter the Saturn endurance race, and it’s mine for a fraction of what it’s worth.”

Corey looked into Paul’s dead, soulless eyes and felt like he was drowning in his own broiling emotions. All this reality was confusing to him, he simply wasn’t used to it. He couldn’t help wondering if this was reality at all. What did the real world feel like, after all?

“It’s Trakkir. He found it for me, and he says he’s brokering a deal. Trakkir is an engineer—he builds specialist equipment, and sometimes... Sometimes it’s not entirely legal, and it needs testing.”

“Testing?” echoed Corey. This didn’t sound good.

“He’s offered to let me test a drive-system with him,” Paul shrugged and sat back heavily. “It’s new. I don’t really understand everything about the thing, but he’s willing to let us use a full-scale version in the next Saturn Rally. For a price, he’s going to let us install a test version in my Alliance shuttle and try it in the next race.”

“For a price?”

“Everything has a price!” Paul grunted. “This is my dream, I want that title—I’ll be set for life. I can finally get out of this place with enough to set myself up properly.

“Trakkir is a genius engineer! I’ll have to pay a licensing fee to use his designs, and I have to be quick to get a piece of this deal, but in a few years his designs will be standard throughout the Alliance. They’re a hundred times more efficient, which means they’re faster. Everyone wants to get in on this.”

“What if something went wrong?” asked Marrta who evidently was sat at the edge of the table quietly. Her left eyebrow rose up curiously.

“Exactly,” Corey agreed with a sigh. “I wanted Paul to see all this for himself but he wouldn’t.”

“You didn’t have much choice really, did you?” Marrta said, not really posing a question.

Corey said sadly, “I just sat in silence, knowing that my brother was too swept away with his ambitions to think rationally. I was too scared of him to bring it up directly, I was afraid of what I knew was going to happen if I dared to voice my fears.”

Marrta smiled, perhaps a little sadly. “Luckily for you, you have no dreams or ambitions of your own!”

Corey returned his attention to Paul as he continued speaking.

“Well I fired a test version last night...”

Corey already understood. “The final orbit around the sun? That’s how you beat them out of the last orbit? You cheated?”

“I fired the prototype for one eighth of a second on the far side of the sun, so the sensors around the track couldn’t detect me.” Paul gave the impression that he had no remorse or any sense of guilt. He probably didn’t and had never given the impression that he was even capable of such emotions.

“It worked and it gave me the advantage. It’s not considered cheating—anything goes in these races; at least as far as I’m concerned,” he said cruelly.

Corey stared at his brother disapprovingly, but soon looked away sharply. “Well... what is it? How does it work?”

“Trakkir calls it hyper-stimulated injection reaction,” shrugged Paul. “It pushes sub-light power up past 100% efficiency so you can break the light barrier, but still allows you to manoeuvre, even in orbit. The Proxili shuttle couldn’t handle more than a tiny burst, but my shuttle can take the strain for longer.”

“I thought that sort of technology was the stuff of rumours,” said Corey thoughtfully. “Interesting. So what does Trakkir get out of this? How much are you paying him?”

“That’s none of your business,” Paul snapped angrily, crushing any hope of protest. “He doesn’t have the money to build it himself, so this is a golden opportunity for me. He needs a proper test in the next race and, if it goes well, he’s going to fully support me to set up as a proper racing team in the endurance rally. He’ll build me a fully functional HSIR engine. After that, everyone will want his new drive. He’ll be rich and so will I. Everyone wins.”

“I don’t know about this...” Corey shook his head. “There’s something about him I don’t quite trust...”

Paul shrugged. “Like what?” he grunted dismissively.

Corey screwed up his face thoughtfully, trying to work out just exactly what it was that bothered him so much. Finally it came to him.

“Everything!”

Whether he liked it or not, the duty of fitting the equipment to the Alliance shuttle fell squarely onto his shoulders. The schedule his brother gave him meant he only had a week to fit the new drive machinery but it actually took far less. The modifications were mostly to the main computer and upgrades to the fusion coils. The rest of the time was spent in endless simulations and diagnostics.

Martha stood and looked around. They were stood in the dusty warehouse but it was darker than before, grimmer and more threatening. Corey shuddered as he stood beside the little shuttle. He looked at her wistfully, a sad little flicker in his eye.

He said softly, keeping his voice respectfully lowered, “I used the time trying to make sense of the equipment. Several times I tried to warn Paul, but he just shouted me down with orders to look after the valuable equipment, to keep my mind on the work, and just generally shut the hell up. This was usually interspersed with an array of mindless insults. In fact, it was mostly insults.”

He ran his hand over the warm grey hull. It was as smooth as glass and warm to the touch, as if metal had been laminated over with a razor-thin veneer of living liquid.

“Eventually I gave up and just did what was asked of me, at least that gave me time alone with my thoughts and I spent that time with the shuttle. At night I sat alone with it, just staring sometimes, my mind free for a few captured moments as it soared away to freedom with me at the controls of this powerful machine.

“All of reality existed for a fleeting moment in my dreams, imagined scenarios that were so real that they challenged my perception of reality, and so wonderful that my perception of reality couldn’t hope to come close.

“Reality, whatever that actually is, always found me though. Ultimately, it always would, wouldn’t it?”

Marrta nodded. “Reality is what you make it. You’ve spent too many years having it made for you. A difficult period of adjustment is only natural.”

He nodded. There was nothing left to say about it. He just sighed to himself and told her, “Before I knew it I was at the race.”

“Same place as before?” she asked.

“No!” he told her with a shudder. “I tried one more time to tell him...”

“Tell him?”

“Well, I don’t think she’s ready, but...” shrugged Corey as he stood by the transport shuttle, the racers all around him lining up at their vehicles. The atmosphere was electric, anticipation filled the air with infectious excitement that painted the world with a vibrant array of brilliant colours.

“She’ll do.” Paul gave him a sarcastic smirk as he took the passenger seat.

Corey stepped on board behind him, several steps behind. The computer was running yet another battery of tests, tests that had been run almost constantly for a week, running simulations of every conceivable scenario that could possibly go wrong.

Out of the eighteen octillion scenarios rendered, only four had not resulted in the entire ship blinking out of existence to be replaced by a ball of white hot flame the moment the test drive was engaged,

and that was only because the pilot never made it as far as the ship in those four simulations.

In one, he'd popped out, instead, for some chicken-soup after contracting a rare form of beer-related space-cancer; in another he'd come down with Poliviad flu which cost him a perfectly fine set of eyeballs. In the other two, he'd found out his wife had left him, and that his kids weren't really his, and he was either too depressed to get out of bed, or too drunk from celebrating, to pilot a ship, depending on the respective instance.

Still, the whole issue of blinking out of existence had been somewhat disconcerting. It was, of course, to be expected—the technology simply went beyond understood principles of physics; and given that he really didn't understand the technology in the first place, and didn't have a terribly firm grasp of the physics, there was simply no way to simulate it with any degree of accuracy. He understood this, even though right now the beer-related space cancer and the Poliviad flu posed the greater risk to Paul's safety, and he still didn't like it.

Not on this ship.

As his brother settled into the pilot's position, he said, "Trakkir has given me two tickets to go and collect the new ship. It wasn't cheap but she's all mine! All ours in fact!"

"Ours?"

"I put it in joint names," Paul began, goading his younger brother. "Just in case anything happens, you know?"

"You mean if something happens to you?"

"I mean if the authorities come sniffing around my yard," he laughed coldly.

Corey didn't laugh. He was a part of all this now, with no hope of escape. Owning half a ship meant swallowing half the risk. If Paul

was motivated by anything, it was less of generosity and more of self-interest.

“I could use a week away from my wife. A little break away on a cruise ship might be fun. I could head out to the Edge to collect my new machine.”

Corey glanced over briefly, and then turned his attention back to his work. “I thought he was giving it to you.”

“At this price, he is,” Paul sneered. “I’m just covering the costs really.”

“Will you be taking this shuttle?” Corey stared straight ahead. It was the question that had been on his mind all week, the one he’d been too afraid to ask.

“What’s it to you?” said Paul, hardly acknowledging him. “You know, I think I’ll take you with me, no expense spared. I’m sure you’d like to see our new ship; after all, it’s going to be your engineering project for the next few years.”

Corey leant back in his chair and sighed.

“That’s the spirit!” Paul turned and slapped him playfully on the back. Corey gasped and cringed away defensively. “It’s going to be awesome. A brand new ship and a powerful one too. FTL-capable, full powered PAWs, Class G internal processor. This isn’t just an upgraded shuttle, this is going to be a full endurance racer, the fastest machine ever seen on the circuit; and it’s mine.” He grinned widely to himself, shrugged a little and glanced over to his brother, adding, “Ours!”

Corey smiled weakly back to him.

“We’ve got to win today, first!” Paul grinned, totally drowning in his own abundant self-assuredness.

“I don’t know about this...” Corey gestured to the test drive interface meekly. “This drive system seems pretty dangerous. The

energy is ramped up far beyond what the ship is designed to handle. I know the new technology isn't standard issue and there's not much point trusting the simulations, but honestly, my gut tends to agree with them."

"Look at me!" Paul rubbed his own ample guts, which was, by now, also far larger than 'standard issue'. "Racing is far beyond what I was designed to handle! I like a challenge, Corey. Man is designed to be challenged. So shut up with your damn worrying—you're worse than my wife!"

A loud, shrill sound echoed through the metallic hall. Corey looked up expectantly. He watched as every racer, every engineer reacted. All around people looked up silently and, as he turned to his brother, he saw he was doing the same.

His stomach knotted in fear and his head swam. This could only mean one thing.

"They're calling us to the line!" Paul told him, for once his voice was soft and hollow and there was a note to the tone that suggested he was scared.

"Was this the beginning?" asked Marrita as she stood between them.

Corey nodded to her. "The crowds gathered for the race, braying animals crying out for blood and satisfaction. They were no longer any more human, in real terms, than Paul. They were just creatures feeding into the satisfaction of their primal urges."

Corey looked on, barely understanding what they could possibly get from all this. The ships were now lined up in their places. Each took their position at the beginning of the track.

His stomach was growling, his muscles shaking, his head on fire as the pain inside consumed him. There was no pleasure in this, it

felt like he was trying to boil himself alive in a bubbling cauldron of pure stress.

This time, the event was staged away from the planet on a colonised moon, orbiting Jupiter. It was a crude mining complex with glass shields, basic gravity compensators, and raw artificial lights. It was an ugly place, dark, grim and foreboding; somehow it was the perfect fit.

The mines had run dry decades earlier, and it had subsequently been deserted, but some areas remained functional and they were available to hire. Mostly it had been turned over to automated machinery, generating power from solar wings, or processing dangerous materials, far away from populated areas. This time there were three holographic projectors, each showing a different region, a different view of the course.

Paul seemed relatively calm for a man about to risk his life, stepping into an over-powered missile that was filled with untested equipment. The small, but heavily modified, transport shuttle was already powered up. The engines were spitting bright blue light from the radiators and a dull red glow was throbbing from the exhaust vents. Paul ran his hands lovingly over her sleek white hull with a smile on his face that he never got from anything else, not even his family; perhaps especially not from them?

“I watched jealously, glaring at him with impotent rage,” Corey said, not that anyone appeared to be listening.

An alarm sounded around the mine, and the crowd quietened in expectation. The pilots began making their final checks and headed towards their ships to riotous applause from the crowds.

“This is it!” Paul told his brother with a grin, slapping his shoulder. “This race pushes me up a whole league.”

Corey nodded and forced a very artificial smile.

“Just competing earns me points. If I can finish in the top 5, I’ve gone up. Getting to the rally will just be just a formality then.”

Corey nodded.

“Wish me luck!”

Corey watched, disconnected from it all behind his emotional barriers. He stared helplessly as the seconds ticked away. The little shuttle, that amazing machine that had awoken something inside him, was there and it might be the last time he’d ever see her.

No! He shook his head and fought the image right out of it. He wouldn’t accept or entertain the slightest possibility of losing her. The loss of Paul, he was happy to accept either way.

The small ships powered up ready for the start signal. The red light blinked over their heads, as every pilot initiated full power and slammed on the inertia-dampers ready to make a hasty start.

Then it happened.

With a white hot flash, the beautiful little Alliance ship erupted behind a veil of released plasma, a gigantic plume of burning-hot gas was followed by an explosion; a blast powerful enough to send the other shuttles scuttling over the track, pushing them along like twigs on a swollen river.

Corey stood with his mouth agape as the flaming ball of twisted metal lay smouldering on the track, the remaining shuttles moving away in fear, as if the devastation were somehow infectious, the ground beneath it melting away.

“Mr Baker...” called the young lady, stirring Corey from his thoughts, the memories of what he’d done to his brother, of the

ramifications of his mistakes and the consequences of whatever he'd missed when he had installed the equipment.

He looked up as she gestured him over with an impatient wave.

Corey glanced first to the end of the hall - there were no security officers to be seen and he was grateful for that. He heard every footstep echo through the massive chamber as he walked quickly to the raised counter, trying to step gently although it was to no avail.

All she had to do was issue a number and that was it, he would have a free visa to escape the wretched system, to get away from his home, his ruined life, his history, and the family that would blame him as soon as they found out what he'd done.

And what had he done? The fire in his skull had chased him, burned into his mind. Had he done it deliberately? Had he killed his brother? Had he murdered the tormenting bully that he had come to hate so much? He didn't know any more, at least he couldn't be sure.

Even if it had been simply an accident, then it was still his fault—he alone had installed the new equipment. The upgrade package had been scrubbed clean before delivery, and only Corey's prints and DNA were on it. There could be no doubt who was responsible, and the Alliance would soon come looking, with an accusing finger pointing directly at him. What the punishment might be, he shuddered to imagine.

"Your visa is ready, Mr Baker."

In the space of just a moment, he was awash with relief. The Alliance investigation hadn't found him yet. He was free; he was going to make it out before their iron grip finally closed around him. "That was very quick!"

“Yes, the processing time was waived completely at no charge. It seems you were lucky.”

No charge? Why?

For a moment, the turn of good fortune troubled him. Perhaps they were onto him after all, and were gently coaxing him into a trap at their own convenience? With a sigh, he conceded that getting caught six hours sooner was probably worth it, if it meant getting out of that office any quicker.

“I... I guess, somebody likes me then,” he smiled weakly

“Looks that way doesn’t it,” said the womanoid with a smile and a wink. “So, do you know where you’re heading to?”

“Anywhere away from here. A long, long way away from here!”

“The road, huh?” she said with a smirk. “If you find yourself back here when you’re better travelled, you should come and look me up!”

He nodded and gave her a polite but awkward little grin.

He wasn’t coming back.

Marrta Slicko stared into his soul with her languid black eyes.

He blinked and pulled back, recoiling in surprise that the story had been told. He had heard it, and his mind had told him it was just easier to tell her; somehow he’d wanted to tell her. He knew it had to stay a secret, but she had to hear that story, and that meant the words were going to come from him.

But he hadn’t just told the story, he’d lived it again. The memories were more vibrant than he’d ever experienced before.

What’s more, he hadn’t just relived it, he’d relived it with her! He clearly remembered her being there with him, despite knowing

that she couldn't have been. Had she rewritten his memories just to make the story more compelling?!

He shook his head, it all made no sense. She was smiling at him, grinning almost, as if savouring some delicious piece of food.

"That was a nice story," she told him. "But it wasn't what I was looking for. It was close, but not quite right."

A loud metallic clatter sounded through the ship as it docked at the station. They both took a moment to glance at the airlock. It was lit up with a red ring which softened and switched to blue as the doors hissed almost silently open.

He had been on the race track, the warehouse, the visa office. How could they now be docking with a space-station? The memories had already begun to fade away, like those of a dream. He struggled to remember but it was like grasping fine sand with clumsy fingers.

"But..." He didn't know what to say. He remembered then that he had told her all of his story and he knew he wanted to claw it back, to take back the words he'd spoken.

Suddenly her black eyes were staring back into his, or at least suddenly he noticed them.

"No," she said. "I won't."

He stammered something, confused. Why was she inside his head?

"Hush... You were kind enough to share your story, but it will always be your story. It will never be mine to share," she said. "I will speak about it to nobody."

"You won't?" he managed to say.

"Thank you," she said with a little smile as she turned and left him standing there, wondering what exactly had just happened.

He watched as she left, her furtive little gaze flicking around for who knew what? But he did know what. He knew she was

looking for another story. She was following something, something that had led her to where they now were. As much as he was going away from the past, she was heading towards her future.

Now he only had to board the station. Before that, he had to face yet another security checkpoint; another chance to be captured, another risk to take. He took a deep breath and made his way to the exit, fear filling his mind once more.

Lieutenant May exhaled loudly. “I can’t believe I just sat through the whole thing. That was excruciating!”

“That’s the risk you take. Some boxes aren’t meant to be opened!”

“It was a jumbled mess,” he grunted. “I bet half of it never happened!”

“The technology isn’t very reliable,” the Commander admitted. “It used to be, but we’ve added so many safeguards, so much de-opinionisation software and other clutter that what we get is usually just garbage.”

The Lieutenant grumbled to himself.

“So, this young man apparently perjured himself when he submitted his travel permit application, so that makes the whole thing slightly criminal. Legal obligation’s a bitch isn’t it!”

The Lieutenant nodded his head sadly. “How on earth did he perjure himself anyway? Was there a checkbox asking if he was involved in a criminal conspiracy that he forgot to check?”

“Yes, precisely that,” agreed the Commander to the Lieutenant’s evident surprise. “Things are a little different on Earth. That place is bonkers now!”

“Still, you’d be amazed how many people are gullible enough to actually fall for that one. And the looks on their faces when they get collared, it’s precious!”

“It sounds a lot more fun than what we do.”

The Commander nodded his head. “So what do you think: person of interest?”

“No. Not really...” Lieutenant May admitted with a weary sigh. “He’s acting a bit strangely, but that’s just guilt pangs. His brother, Paul Baker, was one of those idiot racers. They’re still sweeping his remains off a warehouse floor somewhere in the Sol system. Usual story, I’m afraid.”

“I see,” said the Commander. “Poor kid. I hope he’s smarter than his brother was.”

“His school report suggests otherwise. Anyway, get this... this Paul fellow’s racer blew up on the starting line, a plasma explosion, super-heated the engines and ignited by an over-charged coil.”

“Not again?!” Commander Barrow exhaled deeply. “Hyper-Stimulated Injection Reaction?”

His colleague nodded in agreement. “Trakkir Trakic up to his tricks again, and no sign of him now. There never is. Slippery character, but very clever: always a hundred steps ahead. He has an interesting file. If we could have found him, that would have been just what I needed.”

“How do they fall for this? I mean, Hyper-Stimulated Injection Reaction? It doesn’t even sound plausible. Who in their right mind would give him real money for this kind of made-up rubbish?”

“People do,” said Lieutenant May with a shrug. “It’s the oldest trick in the book. He overrides the safety controls to coax a few milliseconds of FTL speed from their drives, and confirmation bias does the rest—of course he must have a magical new technology

that's going to change the galaxy! He's just selling people what they want to hear. When the rewards are right, it tends to monkey around with the sense processing sub-routines of the human mind."

"Cognitive blind spots have always been an easily exploited human failing," said the Commander, wearily, as he sat down heavily in a big black chair. "Of course, if you were smart enough to understand half of what you're going on about, you wouldn't be in the mess you're in now, would you?"

He shook his head and a sombre, beaten expression settled on his face.

"So you think this Corey might know where Trakkir Trakic is?"

"The last six didn't, and they were the ones who dealt directly with him," the Lieutenant sighed.

"They need to catch him in the act, before his stupid tricks wind up killing even more people," said the Commander with a kind of lazy disinterest.

"So what do you reckon, should we arrest him?" he suggested with a hopeful smile.

"Corey Baker? What for? Having an idiot for a brother? You'd better arrest me too then."

The Lieutenant gave him a sly little look and said, "Didn't your brother have an affair with your wife?"

The Commander scowled back. "Ex-wife!" he said. "And that just proves what an idiot he was! Anyway, arresting him would make me late for lunch!"

"Is it that time already?" Lieutenant May looked worried, a deep dark frown settled on his face. "Then it's over. It's really over!"

The Commander nodded back, almost as darkly. "You should never have done this! You have only yourself to blame."

“I just...” he sighed. “I just thought...”

“You should never have made a bet like this with a man like me!” the Commander told him wryly. “Now you’ve lost the bet and have to go and ask that awful womanoid from sanitation for a date. What in the galaxy were you thinking?”

“She might not accept!” he said hopefully.

These hopes needed dashing and the Commander was the man for the job, he told him with a smug grin, “She’s going to accept!”

He rubbed his temples in exasperation. “You dated her once, didn’t you?”

The Commander scowled off into the distance. “And I can assure you there’s nothing sanitary about her,” he said assuredly. “But I wasn’t stupid enough to do it for a bet! I mean, what kind of idiot does something like that?”

Lieutenant May grumbled, almost to himself. “I thought something interesting would happen here, up in this security office. I mean, I had a whole week to find an interesting story to tell. It seemed like a safe bet.”

“I’m going for lunch,” he told him.

“Fine!” the Lieutenant agreed. “I hope they have the fish!”

“Trust me!” the Commander assured him. “After your date with her, you’ll never be hungry for fish again.”

The Dock Worker

Zero

A flash erupted behind his eyes. Burning, brilliant white light exploded through his mind in a momentary flash that obliterated all of his thoughts. His body jolted and he caught a glimpse of himself for the tiniest part of a moment as his arms flailed in involuntary motion. The light shone brighter and brighter, casting a halo around everything he could see. It was so bright that everything else was in shadow, fading out of reality. Slowly, dimly, he registered the crackling sound as the heat of the blast surged through him, sending a buzzing, burning energy to all of his nerves, lighting up his senses in sudden agony.

Then there was another noise and he realised with an odd sense of calm that the noise was his own voice, crying out in shock and pain. The shadows were cut by the sight of a brilliant, pencil-thin beam of light bursting out through the front of him. He knew with a grim sense of finality that he had been shot and he had no choice left now but to accept his fate as the last moments of his life played out before him.

About 6 seconds earlier.

He cast his eyes down at the blaster resignedly; it was already feeling heavy in his hand. He'd never fired one before: he'd never needed to. Now he was forced to wonder what bizarre twist of fate had lead him to this point, that he now had to use it in such a brutal, inhumane manner. But there was no time left for regret or second thoughts. Zero was the hour, and it was bearing down upon him now.

He could say it was self-defence and nobody would question it. The weapon would rip through his flesh, burn the life right out of him. He could put a weapon by the side of it and say he threatened him first. There was hostility between the two of them but surely nobody would accuse him of murder? He wondered if it was murder, was there even a law against this where he came from?

Slowly and deliberately, he levelled the ugly, brutal little gun, took aim, and squeezed the trigger.

Around 6 minutes earlier.

Doraz Bolla's head was spinning with all that had happened that day. The dock seemed worse now, an even grimmer, darker place than ever before. It was a place of plodding monotony that was marching over his soul, trampling his spirit right out of him with every step it took. It was a chain around his neck shackling him to the bad decisions that had led him there, and all the mistakes he'd made since he'd arrived.

He had come to hate the place, but now the hatred had become focused on a single man, and he didn't know if, or how, he'd be able to carry on working in a place he'd come to so utterly despise. He didn't know how he'd manage to carry on at all, and the only thing he did know with any degree of certainty was that he had no choice.

"I'm sorry about the way things worked out!" Calvin Kambon told him with an expression a little too forced to be entirely sincere. "I guess it could have been worse though, right?"

"You're sorry?" Doraz turned to face him, his expression twisting into an angry grimace. "You're sorry? Do you realise what this has done to me? Do you know what this means to me and my family?"

“Me?” he cried out. He pointed at his himself in surprise and his body stiffened defensively. “Is this meant to be my fault somehow?”

Doraz turned away in disgust and tried to control his temper.

He was stood in the loading-dock where he’d worked for several years, all with no prospect of promotion, no bonus and earning barely enough money to afford a shuttle ride home now and then to see the people he’d been forced to leave behind in order to start a new, better life for them all.

The time he’d spent there had not been better, it had been worse, far worse than he could have imagined when he had first set foot aboard. He had once been brimming with optimism and high hopes for the future but all that had been crushed quickly and thoroughly. Now he was trapped by the low pay in an endless cycle of work and exhaustion with no hope of any improvement up ahead, and endless, meaningless days behind him. His life was a blur of early starts and late finishes as endless cargo crates were unloaded from visiting ships to be reloaded onto other ships. He had watched them come, watched them leave, and played only a minor role in their stories.

Each person on each ship was a universe; a multitude of stories and connections to every other person in the galaxy. Each life reached out to touch every other in subtle and intricate patterns, and yet his own life went unnoticed by them all. He was unseen in the pages of their stories; a forgotten nobody that made no real difference and whose own life had no more meaning than the automated machines he supervised.

Back home, he had felt like his life had mattered and he had once had hope for the future. It was far from perfect, but his life had a purpose and a function. People missed him when he wasn’t there,

and he felt as though he were still a part of the wider universe, he had a place where he fitted in.

“No...” Doraz stared downwards, crestfallen as his anger gave way to a crushing wave of depression. “Perhaps the fault is my own, after all?”

“It’s just bad luck!” he shrugged and smiled a supportive expression that stopped short of implying that he really, actually cared. “We all make mistakes. The important thing is you still have your job; you have a future here on the station. Everything can carry on just as it was, and you just have to be a bit more careful from now on, that’s all!

“You shouldn’t beat yourself up over it.”

“Who should I beat up then?” Doraz turned to face him, his expression twisted into a sneering look of hatred, hate that was looking for somewhere to be pointed. “Who should I kill?”

Even compared to others of his kind, he was a small man and not naturally aggressive. His home-world was smaller than Earth, with lighter gravity, so his kind wasn’t built to be physically powerful in comparison to a normal human, but he was angry and his emotions were driving him now.

“Calm down!” Calvin told him with a chuckle. “It’s not that bad. There was no grade reduction and no penalty. All you have to do is make up the loss with time. You work an extra 3 months over your contract and have a negative mark recorded on your file. Everyone on the dock has at least two negative marks on their file; it’s just a part of the job.”

“3 months!” Doraz cried out angrily. “Do you know what 3 months means to me?”

The supervisor apathetically shrugged back at him and looked away with a flicker of a grin cruelly crossing his lips.

“I was due to leave in 7 weeks,” he began. “My wife is going to give birth to our first child in three months. Do you know how hard it is for people like us to have children? We’re engineered to be sterile! For us to conceive a child, we have to have our background examined to prove we’re worthy of continuing. We’re then subjected to an extremely painful series of genetic therapy sessions to modify us enough that it’s even possible for us to have a child. On top of the pain, they’re incredibly expensive; it cost us our entire life savings!”

“OK!” Calvin said like he didn’t care in the slightest. “I didn’t know... Congratulations, I guess.”

“Congratulations?” Doraz repeated sarcastically. “She’s living on Serra-Prime, where I was working before I took the job here. Serra-Prime’s atmosphere contains a dangerously high concentration of silicon. It’s so high, in fact, that it’s considered toxic.

“We need to be immunised every month just to survive,” he told him angrily. “But more than that we desperately need to get off that planet before we risk the health of our baby. Even if the child is born without any complications, the air is likely to scar its lungs before it reaches 6 months old because they can’t immunise an infant!” He paused briefly to calm himself. “That shouldn’t be a problem because it’s not likely to be born healthy. The immunisation we have to take is dangerous to an unborn child, any child, let alone a Grep!

“We have had to have constant medical support from a cross-species fertility expert. With all that against us, the baby is not likely to survive if we can’t get my wife off the planet.

“But I guess the future of my family is written in stone, and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.”

Calvin Kambon remained silent for a moment. “Why can’t she leave?” he managed finally to ask.

“Leave?!” Doraz yelled angrily.

He caught himself and took control of his temper once more. He looked around to the others, the few other workers around the sprawling docking bay. Nobody seemed concerned in the slightest by the sound of raised voices, but he continued more calmly in any case, taking a deep breath before he continued. “We’re trying to leave; we’ve been trying to leave for a decade. Back home I was a qualified engineer; I’m a level-5 mechanic cleared to service reactor-cores with advanced dispensations to operate singularity drives.

“I used to test jump-engines for integrity. I’m qualified to build Alliance, Proxili and even Alcas engines. The Alliance Trade Authority doesn’t officially recognise my colony qualifications, so while I wait endlessly for my records to be accepted by the examination boards, I had to find work.

“This was all I could get. It was meant to be an engineering post, but when I got here it wasn’t what I had expected. I’m here on 401 trying to earn enough experience credits to move up to the rank of supervisor so we can move to an inner colony when the baby is born.

“My wife has to work too, to help support the pair of us so I can continue to qualify for an Alliance work permit.

“The joke is that she could leave; she could leave any time but if she did, it would be the end of our relationship. She’s stuck there out of loyalty. She’s stuck on that planet because of me.”

Calvin Kambon looked away and remained silent.

“Nearly a decade I’ve been here!” he began once more. “I used to contact the boards every few days to ask if my qualifications had been approved. After a year, I was reduced to asking once a week. Now I just wait for a message, but in all this time I’ve heard nothing and I’ve come to accept that I probably never will.

“There’s been no progress. I just wait. I load cargo crates, and I just wait.”

“OK, OK!” he said, shaking his head and huffing. “So what can you do?”

“Nothing,” Doraz admitted with a weak expression of helplessness. “There’s nothing I can do, nothing at all. I just have to stay here now, work as hard as I can and hope that my baby survives until I can get my family away to a better planet and a better job.

“It’s not much to hope for, it is?”

“The Alliance wouldn’t let your kid die!” he said softly, shaking his head at him incredulously. “It just wouldn’t.”

“I’m just a Grep,” Doraz told him softly, his anger spent for now, and slowly being replaced with a crushing emptiness that was sucking him in. “I’m just a product. I’m human with all the same feelings and drives as every other, but I will never have human status.

“I guess that the Alliance has enough real humans to deal with, without worrying about the safety of a few modified clones.”

“I didn’t realise it was like that...” he said, shaking his head sadly. “I didn’t realise; I had no idea. Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“We were desperate,” Doraz slumped back and leant against a bulkhead. “We had no choice. I took this job as a last resort. It was a way to get us a safe home for our family. I didn’t say anything because it’s not our way. Can you imagine growing up as a tool? My entire colony runs to make engines, it’s all we do. We’re all of us just cogs in a machine, if I break, they’ll just make another one to take my place.”

“I tried to help you,” Calvin said softly. “I really did try.”

“Help me?” he sneered. “This was your idea of help?”

Doraz Bolla glared at Calvin Kambon, his eyes burning with anger. He lowered his brow aggressively and glowered up at him from where he stood, a full foot shorter than the normal human in front of him.

“You did this to me!” he growled through gritted teeth. “This is your fault. You did this to me and you don’t even care.”

“I...” he faltered as he tried to speak. “I do care, or course I care. I’m your supervisor; I was looking out for you. I was trying to help you save your job.”

“Well you did that alright...” Doraz shook his head in disgust and somehow managed to regain some of his composure. “I get to carry on loading cargo on a filthy backwater Alliance space station. Thanks to your help, I won’t even get paid for doing it for another three months.

“Thanks to your help my life is ruined and my future is dying on a diseased rock, light-years away from where I am. All thanks to the mighty, benevolent Alliance.”

Supervisor Kambon was growing increasingly impatient, it seemed, his hands clenching into fists. “Nobody thought this would happen. We all tried to fix the mistake you made. We treated you like you were one of our own.”

“No you didn’t!” Doraz roared, suddenly his expression was furious again. “I’m engineered! I’m not one of your own. I’m not human, I’m not alien, I’m a product. I was built, shaped into a template before I was even born, before I could even voice my own opinion, before I even had an opinion to voice.

“I’m a hired hand,” he snarled at his superior. “A disposable asset that comes cheaper than fitting an automated system to do a meaningless job for a payment that barely keeps me alive! I’m not one of your own, am I, Calvin? I’m not one of anyone’s own!”

“You’re not human like me,” he agreed, sounding just a little too proud about it. “But you’re not the first Grep to pass through here. Nobody meant to treat you any differently. It’s your own fault if you couldn’t fit in.”

“Grep!” Doraz spat the word angrily. “Genetically Re-Engineered Person! You even have a special word for us, just calling us human isn’t good enough for you!”

“Not many Greps on this station get to be supervisors, engineers or managers, do they, Calvin? We’re an underclass to you, and we always will be.”

“People like you just don’t stay long,” Calvin told him firmly, his face flushing as he battled to keep his own temper under control. “This is Alliance space, Doraz, on an Earth-run Alliance station. How many normal humans live and work on your home colony? How welcome would I be there?”

“So that’s it?” Doraz said quietly, sneering at him. He glared up to his supervisor angrily with fury in his eyes; a burning intensity driven by years of pent up frustration that had slowly festered into a growing hatred. “You just don’t like Greps...”

“I never said that...” Calvin said coldly, his voice rising to a level just below a shout. He pointed at him aggressively. “But what’s there to like about you, Doraz?”

“Well the decision may be made, and it may have been made against me, but things can change!” Doraz hissed through gritted teeth. “You have a responsibility in all this and you’re going to pay! I promise you that you are going to pay.”

“Careful!” he told him as he stepped closer, his face contorting into a snarl. “You might want to think twice about threatening me, you ugly little Grep!”

“Threat?” Doraz said in barely a whisper. “That wasn’t a threat. You’re going to pay; I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done.”

Doraz turned and began walking away, his feet slamming down hard on the metallic gantry. Each footstep echoed around the gigantic loading bay, empty of cargo except for a few scattered boxes piled at the edges. A few flickering lights guiding loaders to the storage areas.

He stopped for a moment and turned back to face his superior. Both glared angrily at one another. “You’re going to pay!” He sneered. They turned their backs on one another, both seething in their rage.

Approximately 6 hours earlier.

The door opened with a customary hiss, and the senior deck manager stepped out from his small office. He was not an imposing man, and made no effort to look like he was. He stood at average height, and was of a build that matched. He was in the later part of middle age and had the look about him of a man who was simply doing his job, with enthusiasm for absolutely no part of any of it.

Peter Watson controlled the loading bays. He told people, who didn’t want to do what they had to do, what to do. The few staff he had, those who maintained the automated machinery and supervised the machines, were people who had ended up there. Nobody dreamed of life in a loading dock and nobody aspired to be on a station as grim as that one. Most of his day was spent simply making sure people turned up more or less on time and didn’t leave until their shift ended. The irony was that he was as dissatisfied with his lot as everyone else, and honestly, he sympathised with them and often

turned a blind eye to it all. More often, the eye he turned was blind drunk.

Wiping away some powdered sugar onto his overalls, he sighed and assumed his professional veneer. The meeting he was about to lead was a nuisance, at best. He had no choice but to accept that it was a necessary part of his job, but it was something he dreaded.

He didn't enjoy confrontation; he didn't enjoy reprimanding the men. The only reason he even took the assignment was because he enjoyed manual work even less, and he was getting too old to be bothered with it.

He took a quick cursory glance at his data pad.

"Mr Doraz Bolla?" he asked as he stood back from the doorway to invite the junior dock worker to join him inside.

The naming convention on Doraz's colony was quite different from the Alliance norm, but he made no attempt to correct it. Now as not the right time to be seen as difficult, he knew.

"Yes, Sir!" he said with a flimsy smile. He stood up and headed to the doorway, looking really quite awkward inside his pale, grey skin as his yellow eyes flicked around nervously.

His supervisor had volunteered to escort him, which was customary under the circumstances, and it was well-known that someone else would be waiting in the office to act as a witness. Those were the rules, for better or for worse.

The Alliance liked to have rules to ensure fairness for all, and they took great measures to be seen to be following them, even if they didn't always make the best sense.

The manager frowned at both he and his supervisor, but managed a superficially courteous smile as their eyes connected briefly.

Doraz, of course, was well used to receiving such treatment. His kind were not well known, since so very few had elected to lead productive lives outside of their own colony. Doraz had been engineered and adapted to live in an environment quite different to Earth. It was a different kind of heart that beat in his chest and different blood that flowed through his dissimilar veins.

Peter eyed him suspiciously as he walked past, glaring fixedly into the back of his moist and hairless head. He held up his pad once again and read the report. His psychological evaluation was a matter of record and he'd reviewed it twice already.

It suggested that he was resentful for the treatment he received at the hands of his fellow workers. He didn't fit in, and made little effort to socialise or integrate himself into the community.

In the years he'd worked aboard the station he had made no close friends, and formed no social bonds. He spoke to nobody in any detail, and the few times he was seen out, it was alone in a dark corner of the lounge, cradling a drink and staring out into the stars towards a distant sun, countless light years away.

"Please sit down!" The dock manager gestured to a comfortable chair which somehow seemed ominous and slightly threatening, under the current circumstances. Doraz nodded compliantly, and sat down, with his supervisor taking a seat beside him. They exchanged worried glances and the mood inside the office remained grim.

"As you know Mr Bolla, our investigations are complete," Peter Watson began with a sigh, stepping behind his desk. It was a metal thing, cheap and durable, and the drawers running along the side were empty. "We believe we have established the facts, but we'd like to give you one last opportunity to add any explanation that you might feel we've overlooked.

“This is your turn to speak, Mr Bolla, before we make our final decision.”

“Sir,” Doraz began, clearing his throat with a little cough. “I intend to offer no excuse for the events that took place. I can offer only an explanation as to why such things happened, and an apology for my part in them. I can also assure you that I’ve learned from these mistakes, and intend to do a better job in the future.”

“We’re not looking for an apology or to assert blame here,” he said firmly as he rubbed his temples in exasperation.

This wasn’t the first time he’d had to reprimand a member of the team. They would often turn up drunk, or not turn up at all. Sometimes they would make mistakes, losing a packing crate after misreading a manifest. Still, he loathed every second of it. He didn’t enjoy being in a position of authority, of wielding power over others. He just wanted this meeting to finish as quickly as possible so he could go back to his normal, slightly boring, routine.

“Our role here is purely to establish the facts and to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of all parties. Put simply, it’s my job to make sure that something like this never happens again!”

“Yes, Sir,” Doraz nodded uneasily and hung his head like an admonished child.

“You’ve not made that easy,” he grumbled at him accusingly.

Doraz closed his eyes momentarily and said weakly, “Sir, I accept full responsibility for my actions, and will accept the findings of this investigation and whatever punishment you see fit.”

“So we are all in agreement on the facts then.” He sighed and casually flung his durable computer terminal on the desk where it clattered down into the hard metal surface.

He cast a glance towards the head of systems-maintenance who had reluctantly agreed to serve as a witness. He was recording

the meeting holographically and was awkwardly looking everywhere around the room, except at the man accused.

“We’ve discussed this at length over the last few days, and I think we’re all satisfied that we understand them.”

Doraz nodded expectantly. His supervisor said nothing in his defence, he was sitting with both his legs and arms crossed and he simply shrugged and let the meeting continue.

“It is our conclusion that the incident was an accident, an oversight. The consequences of this accident, while severe, were made without malice or intention on your part, Mr Bolla.”

Doraz allowed himself the flicker of an apologetic smile and nodded in agreement.

“The record-keeping of the incident is a whole different issue!” He rubbed his temples again before fixing the junior dock worker with an expression that reflected his resentment. “Do either of you have anything to add on this subject?”

Doraz turned to Calvin and the pair exchanged a slightly furtive look. It was Calvin Kambon who finally spoke.

“These things happen down on the docks. Sometimes mistakes are made by the delivery staff. Sometimes computer errors happen.” He gave a slightly conceited smile.

“Yes!” The manager nodded and looked the pair over with a knowing expression. “I suppose we’ll have to leave it at that then, as we have very little evidence to go on as to why the records appear so incomplete. A more suspicious man might say they look tampered with.”

Doraz bit his lip expectantly as he waited for the final verdict.

“With that said though, I highly doubt computer error was responsible. I think something else might have happened, but there’s no evidence to support my...” he paused for a moment, as he

regarded the pair of them. Doraz seemed nervous, the supervisor was grinning smugly. "... Suspicions," he continued, glaring at them momentarily before looking away to the witness and sighing to himself.

"Because of the lack of evidence, I have no choice but to record the issue as a simple accident," he said finally. "But I want you both to know something, something I want you both to take away and think about."

Doraz opened his mouth to speak, but remained silent.

The manager continued, "This error has cost the station greatly. We've lost a lot of respect over this, and we had precious little to begin with. Don't even get me started on the rumours; I've never seen so many rumours flying around and it's made us a laughing stock! Furthermore, I've been told that there is no way to supply a replacement for the goods in packing crate 'Delta 45T.' The entire delivery was experimental technology, and mixing it up meant some engine or other ended up getting fitted into the wrong shuttle. People died on that shuttle.

"Every worker on this station can kiss his bonus goodbye for the entire year."

Calvin Kambon smiled to himself, as Doraz cast him a resentful little glare.

"Because of the lack of recorded evidence, and because of the error itself, I see no choice but to penalise those most responsible.

"Accidents certainly do happen and we accept that, but the missing records don't add up. Either data has not been recorded properly, or it has been illegally removed. To let this matter go without penalty would be an invitation to an unacceptable level of conduct on my docking-bay floor."

The pair went silent, Calvin's smug smile vanishing abruptly.

The manager reached into one of the drawers of the desk and retrieved two envelopes. He handed one to Doraz with a stern glare.

“With the full support of the Commander, I’ve decided that Mr Doraz Bolla should have a negative conduct penalty recorded against him, a 3 month working suspension of payment and a reduction of experience level by two marks.”

Calvin shrugged at Doraz and gave him a wink.

“And you, Kambon...” he said, turning his attention to the supervisor and handing him the other envelope. “Your pay is suspended for the same 3 months.”

He began to protest, but caught himself and remained silent. He narrowed his eyes and glared accusingly.

“Honestly, Calvin!” continued the manager, shaking his head. “I expected more from you. Don’t think I don’t know what you two have done.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said with the merest hint of sarcasm.

The manager dropped himself into the chair behind his desk and glared menacingly at the pair of them. “If I could have done more to punish you both then I would have. I’m going to be watching you two! Nobody pulls this kind of crap on my floor. Nobody! People are dead because of you two!”

He stopped and eyed them both angrily but his eyes shifted to the supervisor. He said darkly, “I know what you did, Kambon, don’t think I’m as stupid as you are. If I ever get proof of this, you’re finished. I don’t mean finished about this station, I mean you are done in the Alliance. I’ll personally make it my duty to break you down until you can only find work holding Furk-infected penises while their owners take a leak, because they’re so repulsive that they don’t want to touch them themselves.”

Calvin looked away sheepishly.

He said finally, "Now get out of my sight!"

Roughly 6 days earlier.

It was the end of a long shift. Another long, endless drudge of meaningless work that didn't challenge or inspire him, and Doraz was exhausted from all of it as usual. He sat in the bar sipping at the first of two drinks he had ordered.

He always ended his shift at the bar; it had become a routine; almost a ritual. At first he would order something to eat and drink a glass of coffee, spiked with a single shot of rum. It helped to calm him down and put his thoughts back in order before he ate. The second drink was the same, and it helped him to wind down properly before heading back to his bunk room to read until he was tired enough to finally sleep, the caffeine having a rather different effect on his altered physiology and giving him a very mild sense of euphoria.

He did this every day without fail, except on his one day off each week. Then he would skip the rum until 2 hours before bedtime, and take two shots neat in a single glass. It made it special, something to look forward to.

"Barman, do you have any Grakkinfork?"

"Interesting choice..." said the barman, wiping around the inside of a glass with his apron and examining it up against the ceiling lights. "I'm afraid you're in the arse-end-of-space out here though, where coffee options are a bit more limited. We have weapons grade black, weapons grade without milk, and weapons grade without cream. Which'll it be?"

"Without cream, I guess. I feel like spoiling myself."

"One of those days huh?"

“Always!” Doraz allowed himself a weak little smile of self pity. “Always the same. Mind-numbing drudgery with one day blurring seamlessly into the next.”

“Cheerful as ever!” the barman grinned at him sarcastically and reached to the service hatch for a plate of boiled rice to which he added a very sorry-looking fish. A fresh delivery had recently arrived at the station from a colony specialising in making realistic food products that were so convincing that they were practically indistinguishable from the real thing, until you tasted them.

“You know what? I don’t have too much to be cheerful about.” Doraz took a big swig of his coffee and closed his eyes, savouring the sharp bitterness.

“There’s always something to be cheerful about,” he said earnestly as he served the simple dish to the modified man.

He thanked him with a curt nod and said sadly, “Like what?”

“Well...” he began thoughtfully. “We may suffer indignities and we may never shrug off the stigma of whatever kind of skin we live in, or where we come from, our families, or the beliefs of our kind, but we all have one thing to be grateful for!”

Doraz shrugged while chewing a mouthful of fish.

“At least we’re not Skelk! I mean, can you imagine?” the barman told him

“What?” he stammered, almost choking on his food at this unexpected turn of blatant speciesism.

The barman simply smiled back at him, “It’s bad enough being engineered, I guess, but the Skelk got themselves engineered accidentally, from weapons fallout during the war.

“You guys carry a ceremonial blasters under your jackets, I shudder to think what those guys have to carry.”

Doraz cleared his throat with a hearty shot of his coffee. The barman had a point. "Where are you from then?"

"Me?" the barman raised his eye to the ceiling as if deep in thought. "Lots of places. Wherever men leave their souls, their hearts and their minds: that's where I live. Where I come from is so long ago it doesn't matter to me anymore. I go forward, swept along by the impressions of memories, like a splinter irritating the flesh, but too small to be seen by the eye."

"I believe that you're a very strange man!" Doraz told him.

"I just serve drinks and food!" The barman had an expression that Doraz couldn't quite make sense of, an enigmatic half-smile.

"That's something you can really believe in!"

Through the open door the figure of his supervisor entered. He saw Doraz and headed over, raising his hand to catch the attention of the barman.

"Beer!" he called out rudely. "Large."

The barman nodded and carried on.

"Dorris!" Calvin began. Another new nickname. "I can see that you're eating and I don't like talking shop after work so I'll keep this brief."

Doraz sighed wearily at him.

"They've fixed a date."

"A date?" he asked, not quite following his meaning.

"There's going to be a hearing," he told him solemnly. Doraz's eyes widened in surprise. "They've set a date for the hearing 6 days from now. Apparently they're already investigating."

"Only 6 days?" Doraz grey skin seemed to flush as he gazed away nervously. "That's not long enough to prepare."

“Prepare what?” Calvin shrugged and grinned at him. “Just deny everything. These things are just formalities; they’re nothing to worry about. I’ve been to dozens of them.”

“If that was the case then why bother having them?” Doraz grumbled at him.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “I guess it gives people something to do. People like to look busy, they like to feel important.”

“This is serious!” Doraz snapped angrily. The sudden weight of a hearing and a full investigation was beginning to bear down on him. His head began to swim.

“You need to learn to relax!” Calvin told him. He slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “You Greps, you’re all the same.”

He snatched up his beer and left, heading to a table in the corner already occupied by half a dozen dock staff, all normal human. Doraz watched him go, his head a mess of jumbled thoughts, and the fear of losing the job he hated beginning to rise up to sit among them.

“Barman,” he began haltingly. “Can I get a triple rum? Neat, please.”

Nearly 6 weeks earlier.

The automated loader was a painfully simple piece of equipment. As an engineer, Doraz appreciated the elegant functionality and the execution of a quite brilliant piece of design. He knew that anything could be complicated but it took real talent and hard work to make something simpler, to boil down the design so that it perfectly matched the needs it was meant to serve. The loader was such a design. He was required to do little more than supervise it. He simply led it along as it floated a few inches from the ground, a small strip of

golden metal along the bottom nullifying the effect of the artificial gravity. It had a series of arms which moved crates onto a flat loading platform to be carried about, strong enough to lift almost anything.

He walked behind it as it moved a crate large enough to hold a small reactor from a shuttle.

This part of his job was not so bad because at least he had time to think. His engineering qualifications were not officially recognised and on the worst of days he had come to accept that they probably never would be.

The local government on his little colony would have little likelihood of allowing the Alliance authorities to know that much about them. Doing so would invite too many questions as to how they maintained their workforce. Mass-engineering of an entire population was blatantly illegal under Alliance law, so such things only occurred far away from the heart of their space. Colonies at the Edge, far out on the ragged new Frontier did it frequently, or course. It was cheaper than modifying gravity, cleaning the air, adjusting the plant life.

Those things took time, and time had to be paid for. A fact of Frontier life was that while colonies grew into perfectly terraformed worlds, they would have to be productive enough to pay for it and that necessitated a workforce of genetically re-engineered people who could tolerate the conditions before normals came along and took from them everything that they had worked to build.

The monotony of his job had inspired him to take matters into his own hands. For 3 years now he'd been studying an Alliance engineering course so that he could qualify again for a job he had done successfully for over 20.

The course was tough, far tougher than he had thought, because technology continued to develop so fast and he was no

longer a young man. Almost daily there were new reports to read which changed the nature of the previous work he'd submitted.

The big problem, as far as he was concerned, was that his progress was slow; it was painfully slow. When he finished his shift each day he was exhausted, it was an effort of pure will that kept him going for a few more hours to get anything done at all.

He wrote reports all through his one day off each week, and read reports every evening. During the day he thought. He thought about warp-jump-stimulators and anti-matter reactors, field-coils and energy exchanges. He thought about anything to keep his mind from settling into the boredom of loading crates from one docking area into another.

A chirp issued from his communicator. He looked around in surprise; it was only the third time in nearly 8 years that somebody had actually contacted him.

"Calvin Kambon to... Dorris Brollan?" it said.

"Doraz Bolla here," he replied hesitantly, assuming it was a mistake of some kind. Why would anyone speak to him?

"In my office. Now!" the reply came simply.

He looked at the massive crate in front of him and pondered for a moment. It was too large to leave in the middle of a loading dock, but his supervisor had demanded he head to his office immediately.

He grimly admitted to himself that he didn't know what to do. Should he dash to the office, thoughtlessly complying with the curt instruction, or should he complete his task first? His job was so mindless that it had robbed him of the ability to think for himself, and now he stood, unable to decide how best to follow the orders of a man who was clearly two braincells short of a pair. Warily, he

decided to pull the docking crate to the nearest wall, to hoist it out of the way so he could go to the office as quickly as possible.

“On my way...” he sighed, losing a little more of his self-respect in the process.

Calling it an office was something of an exaggeration. It was little more than an alcove at the side of the bay where the heating exchangers were situated.

Originally it had been designed to be a service bay, but the exchangers were so efficient that they only needed a maintenance inspection once every 5 years, so Calvin Kambon had claimed the space as his own. He had put up a makeshift desk and sat behind it in an office chair that he swung around in as he spoke, for no reason that Doraz could make sense of.

The room was littered with small boxes, paperwork, pads and other old equipment. A box of weapons sat forgotten at the corner of the room, confiscated from packages they’d handled, and nobody had taken the time to report them to security yet. It was the product of an undisciplined mind.

“Well!” he began with a condescending grin. “It looks like you’re in trouble, Grep!”

Doraz fixed him with a disapproving glare but it seemed to have no effect on him.

“Your little mistake...” he explained, looking quite smug about it.

“The crate?” Doraz frowned to himself.

“They know about it,” he told him, nodding to himself.

“They’ve found out. I hoped they wouldn’t but they have. I honestly didn’t think they would!” His expression made it clear he had hoped for no such thing. “You’re in trouble now!”

“And you take no responsibility for this?” Doraz asked pointedly.

“Me?” He stopped swivelling in the chair and glared angrily at the dock worker. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means...”

Calvin rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well,” he began finally after a lengthy pause. “I agree that this mistake happened while you were doing me a bit of a favour.”

“A favour?” Doraz raised his eyebrows. “A favour?”

“What would you call it, Grep?” He smirked.

“My name is Doraz Bolla!” he told him firmly. He added angrily, “Human!”

“Alright, Dorris,” he said with a smile. “You know you really don’t fit in here? You’re just not one of us. I’ve tried to help you, but you just don’t make any effort to join in with the rest of the guys. You’re just not a docker.”

“Because I’m engineered?” he asked angrily.

The supervisor waited for a moment, goading him with a wry smile before he shook his head.

“You’re just not a dock worker. You don’t talk to the guys, you don’t join us for meals or drinks. Nobody knows what to make of you. I’m gonna be honest: not a lot of the guys here trust you.”

“Because I’m engineered?” he said again, but more pointedly.

“If you like!” he admitted with a shrug. “It’s not easy to trust you people, is it? We don’t know what might be going on inside your twisted little head. You could have been changed in ways we can’t even imagine.

“It’s even harder to work with a Grep who never joins in, never gets to know the other guys working around him.”

“It’s just who I am...” he said defensively.

“And now we have this little accident to deal with!” Calvin told him with a very animated sigh. “Now how do we know it actually happened the way you say it happened? How do we know you didn’t profit from this in some way? How do we know you weren’t waiting for something like this?”

“You could have been waiting for my back to be turned so you could get your hands on the stock for all we know.”

Doraz frowned. The silence between them dragged on awkwardly, the pair glaring at one another but maintaining a barely tolerable facade of civility. Tempers on both sides were in danger of flaring.

“OK...” It was Calvin who broke the silence and leant forward across his untidy desk. “I don’t think you did this for a profit. I really just think this was an accident.”

“You know it was an accident, and you know why!” Doraz told him angrily.

“Yeah...” he shrugged. “Well here’s your chance to finally make a friend by keeping your mouth shut.”

Doraz began to speak but stopped himself; the things he wanted to say could cost him his job if he were to say them openly. He was too angry and now wasn’t the time for this.

“There is a way out of this, you know,” Calvin told him with a grin. “I can help you. It’s hardly first time someone has made a mistake down here. It happens all the time.”

“You’d help me?” he asked with a frown. He was more than a little suspicious.

“If you keep your mouth shut then we’re friends, more or less,” he told him, his voice lowered into what amounted to a threat. “Friends help each other.”

“Is keeping my mouth shut going to help me?” Doraz said.
“What is it you’re suggesting?”

“I know how to cover your tracks,” he told him with an ugly smirk, the self-confident expression of a man who knew his territory well. “I can alter the records to make it look like anything I want. I can make it look like two crates had the wrong number on them. I can make it look like your loader is faulty and didn’t give you the right information. I can make it look like a ship delivered or collected the wrong load, or delivered it to the wrong place.” He flashed a self-satisfied grin. “I can make it look like you’re the best worker on the entire dock.”

“I am the best worker on the entire dock.”

Almost 6 months earlier.

The large loader was a hateful thing to use, and consequently he hated using it. He sat perched on a slab of plastic that was designed to accommodate the proportions of a normal human, but his spine was different and the ergonomics of the chair were painfully unpleasant. His back ached horribly after every long shift, and the current one had already stretched on to just over fourteen hours, with still no end in sight.

His stomach growled at him. Plastic cups of water and little bars of reconstituted protein were not going to do. He needed food: proper food, a meal where he could sit down quietly and eat in his own time, knowing the shift was over and the time that was left was his to use as he saw fit.

The night before had afforded him one of the rare opportunities he had to speak with his wife via long-range communication. The connection was, as usual, terrible. He could barely hear her and there was a significant time-lag through the trans-

spacial connection. He had chatted with her as late as possible, which just made him more tired for his shift the next day. It would be another month before he would be able to make the long trip back to visit her.

Running the loader was his least favourite job on the floor. It was the biggest cargo shifting tool they had on the station: all of the awkward, large containers had to be moved with it. There were endless small details to watch out for and endless reports on every movement.

He came to a large crate; not as ridiculously huge as some of them, but large nonetheless. He stepped off the loader wearily and scanned the identification with his pad, rubbing his temples slowly and sighing deeply to himself. He grunted to himself, stretching his back and trying to ease some of the tension from his aching bones.

He rapped his knuckles on the side of the grey plexisteel box and the sound of his hand knocking rang dully around the cargo bay. He looked around. The late shift was quiet and there was nobody to speak with, nobody else on duty. He was usually given these shifts and he knew why.

Calvin Kambon woke with a start and his head was burning painfully.

“Computer...” he groaned. “Lights, raise them 50% of normal.”

The computer complied and the illumination half-heartedly swept the darkness aside.

He dragged himself to the side of his bed and reached for his data terminal. His fingers slipped and it took him three attempts to pick it up from his bedside table. He grimaced at the condition of the room. There was something about waking up in this state that made

his lifestyle seem even more awful than it really was, even though it really was that awful.

In fact, his cabin never looked much different; he was naturally untidy but waking from a clouded stupor brought some strange sense of focus and the mess pricked at even his moderate sensitivities. Marvin had a lot to answer for.

He checked the pad and realised what he'd already guessed; he had over-slept by several hours. He glanced over the staff rota. In his condition he was hardly going to be able to function at work, but somebody would cover for him. Somebody always did.

Doraz finished scanning the identity of the package. He grumbled wearily as the first of many needless questionnaires appeared on his terminal. It was a safety report to fill in before he could even begin the proper processing of the cargo. He sighed to himself at the prospect of filling in yet more senseless reports just to confirm that he felt it was safe to make a machine drag a box from one bay to the other.

A bleep suddenly came from his communicator. He was so surprised that he jumped, looking around for the source of the noise before realising it had come from his shoulder.

“Kambon to Bolla,” a voice called out.

He shut his eyes and grimaced to himself, suspecting he knew what was coming next. “Bolla here.”

“Bolla,” a smug but restrained voice called out. “Something has come up. I’m not going to make it in tonight!”

“Sir!” he began, reigning in his annoyance as best he could. “You’re already one and a half hours late for your shift. When is cover going to arrive?”

There was a notable pause. "Cover is already there, Bolla." Doraz could almost see his grinning human face. "You're going to have to pull another 5 hours until the morning shift arrives to relieve you."

"I'm already way over my duration!" he protested weakly. It wasn't the first time this had happened and the outcome was always the same. "I need to go home. I have many things to do."

"Home will still be there in 5 hours, Bolla!" the voice sniggered as it spoke.

Doraz fumed silently to himself, already resigned that nothing he could say was going to have any bearing on the outcome of all this.

"I bet there's nothing much going on down there anyway, is there?" the supervisor asked dismissively.

"A consignment of experimental technology and two shuttles have been delivered from a heavy transport," Doraz told him, hoping that such valuable and unusual cargo might make him show the slightest glimmer of responsibility. "One of them is a new model that we're meant to forward on to AEOS96, the other is for us.

"Apparently the hull has expired so it's been sent for us to strip for spares and then recycle."

"Is that it?" he laughed over the communicator. "Well I'm doing you a favour then. You'll get time and a half to sit around all night looking pretty."

"But Sir..." he protested weakly.

"Kambon out!" And with that the communicator went dead.

Doraz was suddenly alone again, but more alone than he had seemed before. The docking bay seemed bigger than ever and as the incoming message ended, it seemed to have doubled in size. There was not a sound except the low rumbling vibration of machinery, life

support and heating ducts working in the background. No life. No people. It was a dead place with just him there to mind the shop; to mindlessly watch as nothing happened.

He glanced down to his pad and sighed. In the box was a shuttle, and after that there was only one more to move and then that was it; the work might be over but the shift would continue.

Suddenly his temper took hold of him. He shouted out in frustration, a roar of pure rage as he threw the pad across the room. He instantly regretted it as the small device shattered against a wall and he stood once more in silence.

“Damn!” he grumbled to himself. He shook his head and allowed a tiny smile at his own stupidity to flutter across his lips. It wasn’t like him to lose his temper like an angry little child. He was better than this! Perhaps he had been around these normals too long already, he wondered.

He rubbed his eyes as he stepped towards a service dispenser fixed to the wall. “Coffee... black... three sugars...” he ordered, hoping it might help him to focus through the rest of his shift, even if the caffeine wouldn’t wake him up.

He yawned involuntarily and realised just how very tired he actually was.

To download his work schedule to a new pad would take nearly an hour. It would require authorisations, reports and endless questions. It didn’t matter, he told himself. There were only two shuttles to send to their bays. It wasn’t like he was going to make such a silly mistake as to get that wrong, no matter how tired he was.

He allowed himself a smile at the thought of the trouble it would cause if he mixed the two crates up.

Precisely 6 years earlier.

Doraz Bolla stepped out through the airlock onto Station AEOS-401. He looked around optimistically, but it was a lacklustre place and his hopes began to fall away almost instantly. They had not been high in the first place.

A man in an Alliance uniform stepped forward with a portable terminal and looked him over.

“Grep?” he said, somewhat suspiciously.

Doraz nodded and smiled thinly. He was used to a little bit of prejudice: it didn’t bother him as much as it once had.

Even his wife had regarded him suspiciously when they’d first met, 3 years earlier. They had been at an engineering seminar on Mars, at the heart of the Alliance. It had taken three months just to get the permits to allow him to travel there as a representative of his colony.

It had been a grand unveiling of a new kind of compact energy reactor that increased efficiency by some 4%.

Like him, she had found the entire thing ridiculous and a group of them had given up on the endless lectures and gone off to find something to eat. She had probably only spoken to him out of charity; he was isolated from most of the others because of his rather odd appearance, and nobody seemed to want to have very much to do with him. It had been his first time off-world and he’d never met a normal human before.

His confidence had been low.

They had talked and eventually she told him, in confidence, that she was re-engineered too. Her modifications were more discreet, mostly brain augmentations to make her more capable as a designer. She was luckier than most, as she was able to pass as human, and was consequently treated as such.

She came from a colony where such reactors were conceived, while production was outsourced back to his. The legal and moral implications of widespread population modification was ignored by the Alliance, so long as it happened a very long way away, and there was a benefit to them in not interfering.

But he was more used to them now.

"I'm Doraz Bolla," he told the man, assuming he was security. "I'm joining the engineering crew on the docking gantry."

The Alliance man looked over his terminal before looking him over once more. "Welcome to the station," he said with a bored monotone that didn't hold a shred of sincerity.

"Calvin!" he called out as his old friend sat by the bar, drinking heavily. "Most people wait until their shift ends before they sink 5 bottles of beer."

Calvin Kambon turned slowly. He saw him and grunted rudely, "Go away, Marvin."

"I heard, you know!" Marvin told him. "I heard what happened."

"Good for you!" His hand tightened around the bottle and his gaze remained fixed forward.

"Why did she leave?" he asked. He snapped his fingers twice in the air and caught the barman's attention. He pointed to the bottle in his friend's hand and held up two fingers. The barman nodded. "You were married for what, 4 years?"

"Almost 4!" he sighed. "I wasn't the best husband in the world, I guess. She said it was like being married to an autistic gorilla that had no ambition and the social graces of a brick."

“We all make mistakes!” Marvin thanked the barman with a nod as the two bottles arrived. He handed one to his friend as he sipped from the other.

“She found someone else,” Calvin said. He smiled and shook his head as though remembering a joke. “She left me for a Grep! Can you believe that?”

Marvin remained quiet, shaking his head in disgust.

“Pale skin, green hair, fingers nearly twice the length of mine. He couldn’t look more ridiculous if he tried, and yet for some reason, she thought he was better than me!”

“Greps...” Marvin shook his head. “They’re everywhere this far out in space. You know, we’ve got one joining our work detail today. He’s grey with a wrinkled up face and weird little eyes!”

“Damn!” Calvin grunted. “They really are everywhere, aren’t they? If we don’t watch out, they’ll take over, you know?”

“Bolla, his name is!” Marvin sneered. “He’s joining my engineering team up in the reactor levels. I was looking over his records earlier, and he’s married to a human, if you can believe that. She’s actually quite pretty.”

Calvin stared at his beer for a moment as if he were furious with it. “If you’d told me four days ago my wife had been cheating and was going to leave me for a man whose head was the same colour as my office walls, I would have laughed in your face.

“I tell you what... I’m not laughing now.”

“You know what I heard?” Marvin lowered his voice and glanced around the bar. Nobody was close enough to hear, and it wasn’t like anyone cared to listen in any case.

Calvin shrugged.

“The Alliance is powerful. Earth is so powerful that the Proxili, the Alcas, the Skelk, none of them can stand up against us, that’s why they had no choice but to join us.”

Calvin nodded and turned to stare eye to eye with his friend.

“I hear it’s a conspiracy. The aliens have figured it out: they can’t fight us because we’ve grown too strong, so they’ve come up with a plan to wipe us out by getting us to destroy ourselves genetically. We’re breeding ourselves out of existence.

“It’s happening all over. These Greps are stealing our women to stop us breeding. In a few generations the human race will be too weak to fight back. In the end, we’ll have to hand the Alliance over to the aliens. They’ll beat us without firing a single shot.”

Calvin shook his head and frowned. “I don’t know...” he grumbled. “What can we do about it, right?”

“Look...” Marvin said as he lounged back in his chair. “You’re having a bad day.”

“Bad day?” Calvin sniggered sarcastically, the term barely doing justice to the way he felt.

“I have an idea that could help to cheer you up!”

They both went silent as a man sat down a few seats away, his face grey, his skin wrinkled and dry and tiny yellow eyes glinted out from beneath the folds of oddly discoloured flesh.

“Is that him?” Calvin gestured behind. “Is that your new Grep?”

Marvin nodded solemnly. He flashed his friend a cruel grin and said, “Why don’t you switch the rota around? Send him down to work with your team on the loading dock. Let’s see how he likes that.”

Calvin laughed cruelly. “You think we could get away with that?”

“When do we ever get caught?!” Marvin slapped him on the arm and nodded. “Come on, let’s get you properly dunk, shall we? If you’re up for it, I have something a little stronger back in my cabin!”

“You look like a man who could use some Grakkinfork!” said the barman, the first person on the station to ignore the fact that he didn’t look exactly like they did. “I finally got some in!”

“I’m not really into coffee.”

The barman nodded with a smile. “Spend enough time here, it’ll soon grow on you. Why don’t I get you cup?”

Doraz smiled. “That sounds great, thanks!”

“First day here then?” the barman asked as he started preparing the order. “It’s a daunting place at first, but not so bad once you get used to it. You shouldn’t let it get to you.”

“I won’t!” he told him uneasily, watching as the two civil officers headed off, weaving an uneasy path towards the exit.

“And don’t mind them!” the barman told him. “It’s the end of a long day for a lot of the people here. They tend to blow off a little steam. They’re harmless enough... mostly.”

“I could never get the hang of drinking,” Doraz shrugged. “My metabolism is a little different from humans.”

“Well they do more than just drink!” He told him with a little shrug. “They’re floating off on a cloud tonight.”

“Cloud?” Doraz frowned, his mottled skin folding in around his brow. “I thought that was just a rumour; I didn’t think it really existed.”

“It doesn’t!” the barman smiled a strange expression of knowing more than he was letting on. “It is just a rumour, but don’t tell them that. Some rumours are very powerful. You have to be

careful with rumours or else they'll find a way to lead you astray, just like they did those two!"

Doraz wasn't sure he wanted to understand.

"Let me ask you a question," continued the barman. "What's five times five in base six?"

"Forty one," he answered, as if it were obvious.

"I knew it... You're from Tralia 4 then?"

Doraz nodded back, quite impressed. "What gave it away?"

"Your fingers. Three on each hand, four on your feet, right? It was a design decision: engineering standards on your colony require mathematic fluency in base six and base eight."

"You know, I don't think I'd ever heard that before. It certainly makes sense."

"I've often wondered though. Why do people from your colony carry two bottles of scented water in your luggage, have a picture of your colony ready to put up in your cabin, and carry a ceremonial ion-pistol under your jacket?"

Doraz nodded and laughed.

"I'm impressed again at your knowledge!" he began. "The scented water is part of our religion; it's the tears of our god given form in this world. The picture of our planet is a reminder of where we come from, to keep us humble. The pistol is presumably just good sense."

"And you have all three?" the barman asked.

"None of them!" Doraz shrugged. "I'm an engineer: I don't believe in magic space water, and the only picture I carry is of my family. As for a pistol... This is Alliance space: it's very safe, and it's illegal to walk around armed. The truth is, I've never owned a weapon in my life. I never will."

“Good man!” the barman told him. “I’m beginning to like you!”

The Lady

Rob slumped into his seat with an exhausted sigh. It had been another unpleasantly 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 could never expect to shudder equally haltingly. He would soon spiritually transition from an empty shell of a bored and unsatisfied waiter, to his true inner-self, which was 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, and not the good kind.

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. The present was rather grim as well.

"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 attractive 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 to have a very cordial conversation over dinner, with perhaps a glass of wine or two, and

then spend the next few days hoping she might contact him again, but secretly strongly suspecting that she wouldn't.

If Dave were to know such a thing, beyond the shadow of any 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 there was any way to 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 probably ought to be.

"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 that 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 agreed and grinned back at him. He ordered two drinks from the machine, which duly appeared in a shimmering beam of light. The light in question was 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 it.

"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 a pathetically apathetic 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 playing strip-poker in the gym. My hope is that it will go unnoticed there, or noticed less, at least."

"Your staff must love and respect you!" Rob noted dryly.

"They deserve it, someone thoughtlessly doubled our workload today!" Dave told him, proudly, presuming he was capable of such emotions as pride. "Well they did, obviously. I was practising my sleeping technique in the corner of the security office. It was mysteriously empty after someone reported people in the 'clothing and uniform department' who were suspiciously not wearing any of either."

Rob tried to reply but a normal human brain wasn't capable of such things.

Dave, who may have only been capable of such thing, continued, "People think that sleeping is just a natural process, like the instinctive manner in which we, as a species, have a burning need to deliver towels. Nothing could be further from the truth, it takes practice and dedication to really master the art.

"I find a thoroughly rousing round of strip-poker to be a thoroughly excellent way of preparing oneself, especially after working twice as hard."

He sat down heavily next to his room-mate and the pair drank heartily from 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 with a smug grin. “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 was 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 asked with a shrug, 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, intelligent 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, but significant, victory of

Dave's, where he had gained access to the afore-mentioned medication.

Rob had been forced to endure 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, quietly plotting Rob's next bout of stress-related injury, and injury-related stress.

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

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

Dave had a confidence with women, an easy charm he turned on as easily as flicking a switch. He was relatively good looking and he knew it, and coupled with his easy-going personality and quite severe array of mental illnesses, 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, had been 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 appeared to be so utterly bereft of ability that 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 dubious talents were not matched with less-dubious 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. 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 and began to suspect that tomorrow, Rob would wake up to find that shoes would be full of something that smelled quite appalling and had no place outside of a toilet, or even a colon. With that in mind, he was beginning to consider ordering his first ever fruit salad, to help the process along. He was a man who was willing to to extremes.

“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 hopelessly 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. It's not like we can switch roles, is it? We're not the same person who's just imagining part of himself as a whole different person?"

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

"We're not, are we?" Dave frowned thoughtfully, directing his comment at a non-descript wall he had a frequent habit of making wry knowing comments towards.

Rob shook his head and shrugged. "I don't think so."

"So what do you know about her?" Dave asked, turning his attention back to Rob. "Is she travelling alone? What's her name? Where is she going? Does she believe that the meaning of life, the universe and everything is cheese? Does she have extremely poor sexual morals and incredibly low standards?"

"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 sadly 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; sometimes.”

“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. On most days, good or bad, you don’t even do that. In fact, you’re at your most productive when you do nothing at all.”

“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.

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 FP-2:346 investigator.

There was nothing flashing anywhere to explain what any of that meant.

“It’s long been a reality 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.

“A fact that is often ignored, though, 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 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’s image 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 adorned 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 utterly without merit.” 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.

“Off!” shouted Dave as if this was all a terrible 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 said, 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-sounding 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 rest of the species still existed in the American Museum of Ancient Horrors

(formerly the Tower of London) 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. He asked, “So you think you’ve got a chance with this brunette? You think a beautiful, intelligent young 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 over at him. “She had a slightly glowing purple 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, in fact, because even that’s on my side of the room. You actually have nothing of any value and no worthwhile skills. You’re not even a very good waiter. You can’t even make paper swans out of the napkins.”

His mood suddenly darkened for a moment, a grave look in his eye. 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, “You don’t look good!”

“This is my point! 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 Grep 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 any 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 the discomfort of you thinking you might have 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; they 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 do 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 said, speaking seriously, conveying 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 in horror. "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. Again!"

"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.”

The door slid closed behind him with a customary hydraulic hiss, or someone saying hiss, or a snake getting its tail caught. He ran his hand over his short ginger hair and then 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. Many of them 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 76th 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.

A woman appeared on the screen. She was quite conventionally 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 with what might have been either a very small ceramic incinerator pistol hanging limply by his side in his right hand, or a very large hotdog.

“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 group. 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 hostile 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. Maybe even more than that!”

He glared at the audience accusingly and flushed red with rage. The undeniably phallic object in his hand was quickly brought up to his mouth as the image cut to black, either to take a bite or to commit a very unimaginative, but highly effective, act of suicide.

The screen flashed to a shot of space with two small ADA vessels cruising along, quietly 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.”

“News off,” Dave said and 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 so expertly that it might have been 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 seriousness 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 or have any great awareness of anything that happens beyond the reach of the end of your penis, 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 range 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 said 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 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?” Dave was 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.”

“Five!” Dave corrected, suspecting it might actually be rather more.

Rob grumbled to himself jealously.

“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?”

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 had been 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.

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 PAW 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 brutally 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 decades, and we intend to maintain this enviable situation without another war, even though we nearly destroyed them in the last one and, projections show, we easily would again.”

“Computer,” said Dave as he walked through the doors, which slid open automatically with a sort of hissing noise that fitted in somewhere between a lethargically bemused snake and the sound of someone brutally violating a balloon animal. “Turn off the news and play some music.”

Rob glared at him and began to open his mouth to protest. Doing so would be as pointless as Dave himself.

“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 that 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. I was always going to win, since the universe might not have fashioned me into the most fortunate of life’s winners but it certainly did precisely the opposite to you.”

“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!” Dave grinned.

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; at least where his heart would have been if he was a Giflariaus-wilderhog.

“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.

“At one point, 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 84% 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 grumbled 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 an overweight 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 darkly. "She calls me the toilet-man..."

"We actually got talking about my degree in warp-field theory," Rob told him 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 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 from the mysteriously exotic secrets of her internal plumbing.

“That’s simply not how I do things, which is already firmly established, and books have been written on the subject.”

“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.

“There are three new news reports for this region,” the computer stated succinctly in an inhuman little monotone. “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 and Outbreak of sudden illness aboard passenger vessel tracked down to suspect curry made mostly from rats.”

“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 drone, which still sounded somehow disapproving.

The doors slid open suddenly with a hiss that sounded remarkably like someone was actually playing a recording of a hiss than an actual hydraulic 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 dessert wasn’t quite peachy enough.”

“Just stick it in the laundry. It’ll be fine,” smirked Dave, 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.

"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 water works, 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."

"Interesting." Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I didn't know you people could feel anger. I thought gingers didn't have souls. I'm pretty sure I read exactly that on the Wikiweb page I wrote about them, entitled Gingers don't have souls, a social experiment."

"We don't," Rob said and 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 before a morning of regrets."

"That is actually my mother you're talking about," Rob grunted and tried to look angry. He tried and he 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 and said, “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 than whatever passed for normal.

“She’d left a computer interface pad on her table and I checked it, like the responsible young service professional I am, for nude pictures. It had details of where the stolen shuttles were being transferred to. It even had a map open.” He shook his head sadly.

“There were no nude pictures. I searched quite thoroughly.”

“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 looked suspicious.”

“How do you know?” Rob asked. “How did 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 said and 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. He wore a badge on his overalls stating he was the factory foreman.

“Can you tell us what your own investigation has turned 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! 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 on getting anything remotely approaching sense out of this man. "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?"

"It's 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 AEOS-401," 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 a 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 considered shallow anymore.”

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

“Yes, we could do that. Or how about instead, we 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 and a boring conversation about warp-jumping."

"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 several 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. He looked up, a little confused and asked, "Is it that serious though? I'm not terribly good at judging these kind of things."

He glanced to Rob and shrugged, and Rob nodded at him that indeed it was.

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 that you seem to 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 the 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, but seemingly satisfied that this would be all the explanation necessary.

“I’m listening,” she told him sternly, her eyes boring into him with an intensity that went a long way towards making him feel uncomfortable.

“Rob can tell it better,” Dave said as he 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 he felt 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 apparent as he face flushed a delightful shade of crimson. “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 she 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, and bemused amusement.

“You had better explain yourselves, and be extremely careful about what you say,” she said coldly with a 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 ridiculously 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. 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 three but apparently it doesn’t count if you

make one yourself. Ironically it was making one myself that earned me the third 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 pair of imbeciles. 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 would have withered any normal person 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. I think we both do, Sir... I think."

"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 and in dismay at the depths of just how horrible it actually managed to be.

"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, it seemed.

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 other 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 that I did!” Dave told him. “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 said. 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 that I always thought looked like the plastic towel holders you get in hotel bathrooms.”

“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.”

The Travellers

Automated Voice to Text Protocol, testing. Check one two. Honjitsu wa seiten nari. Wei wei, ting dedao ma.

Journal – Mark Simons. Day 1.

Today I finally left. I've been planning this for a very long time and when it finally happened it was hard to believe it was all real. How many people can say they've done something like this, taken a ride into the actual edge of the Frontier without a proper spacecraft wrapped around them to rely on?

Not many!

Not many would want to though, to be honest! I couldn't even find a single person crazy enough to join me, which was I had to settle... for him.

It's not that I don't want to travel with Clug, of Clan Slug, I mean... I know I need to travel with someone. This trip would just be too dangerous to undertake alone.

It's just that... from the moment we met up in London, England, it just seemed like he did everything in his power to put my back up.

Still, I respect him for what he's about to do, and it's not a requirement of the journey that I have to like him...

Journal – Klarrg, of Clan Slargg. Day 1.

We left.

My travel companion is a pathetic human creature. He moans about everything, and is probably afraid of death.

Like all of them, he talks and he talks and he talks.

I do not like this man. If we get into battle he will be useless.
In addition, I suspect he likes speaking with women.

Pathetic!

Journal – Mark Simons. Day 2.

We had a pretty routine first day, just as I expected really.

We left Earth's atmosphere in our little pods, and once we were out of the solar system we went to faster-than-light for a brief moment to test our engines. Afterwards we went to full power.

Doing that in a ship is an easy thing. In one of these, it's not quite so straight forward. I got my reactor core up to deliver a pulse and it fired on schedule, my twin sustainer motors holding me at FTL-4 before the field collapsed.

It was quite a thing to see, the stars flashed blue and the heavens lit up all around me. Then, I was pulled into this glowing, seething mass of stars, and they seemed to stretch all around me. I've travelled at this kind of speed before, of course, but this was like doing it for the first time. I felt truly humbled!

We've come such a long way since the first FTL flight so many years ago. To think that now, a single man can build a faster-than-light vehicle in a back-garden shed with a few leftover parts...

It was certainly rewarding to see the instruments light up when everything worked properly. I actually managed to make it up to FTL-4.3 on my first try, and was still well within my safety margins. Clug kept up. Just... His engineering is pretty solid, but he's over-powered everything, so he's draining his charge much faster than I am.

On our first day, we went out beyond the rim of our solar system. I took a diversion around Mars to look over the construction yards before we engaged our engines. It's damned impressive stuff to

see space-ships coming together under those enormous scaffold structures that stretch out as far as the eye can see.

If it's amazing what one man can now do, then it's a hundred times that to see what dedicated professionals can manage when they come together with a single goal.

After we left the solar-system, we synced our navigation and went to full power for as long as we could. Our sustainer-fields broke up around the same time—I held out just a little longer, and Clug had to fire his engines a second time to catch up.

After that we coasted at sub-light speeds to our rendezvous.

The simple fact is, these pods can't make the whole trip alone. We will have to use transports for the really long legs of the journey. We could use warp-ways or make commercial warp-jumps, but there's nothing adventurous about that.

We met up with the SS Ophiuchi without a problem. We had already arranged passage, and they were waiting for us to arrive. That was a little embarrassing—I was hoping to be ahead of time and impress them but we were a few hours behind schedule. Luckily, nobody seemed to mind. We docked with them in their main shuttle-bay, and then we were off. We had a cabin booked for the next two days while the ship takes us out into deep space.

All I was in the mood for was food and drink. Tomorrow, I'm going to run a diagnosis on the pod, and make sure she's holding up properly. I gathered a lot of information today from her first major flight and now I have to use that to make sure we don't run into any problems.

Journal – Klarrg, of Clan Slargg. Day 2.

My pod is clearly superior. This is no surprise. It is more powerful, faster, and better armed.

I am a Krill engineer, but my heart is that of a warrior.

His is weak. If he went into battle, he would die a coward's death in mere seconds, screaming for his mother's breasts.

It burns my blood that so much of my ship is made from human technology, but still it came together with Krill ingenuity. I will learn much from this trip.

He invited me to join him for something to eat. He then ate a round thing with nothing alive on it. I was insulted and considered opening his throat with my teeth, but in the end I simply questioned his honour.

He did nothing to defend himself, except to offer me a slice of his... 'pisa'.

He is a fool!

Journal – Mark Simons. Day 3.

I had some reconstituted proteins for breakfast, which was every bit as delicious as it sounds, and then I went to inspect my pod.

Personal travel is popular in the Alliance, but still not exactly commonplace; certainly not as common as you'd imagine. Most people get by requesting a place on shuttles, or joining transport vessels but I wanted to do something different this time.

At first, I seriously considered getting my own shuttle. I tried for months, but even a small one was well beyond my means. I couldn't even raise the necessary authorisation to own a personal transport. I discovered after many months of research that you have to run a charter service to qualify for a complete shuttle, at least one that is capable of FTL travel.

In the end, during many tedious hours spent investigating the rules, I came across this idea. I'm not the first to do it, by any means, but it's rare enough to be really exciting.

It's like a kit. You simply download the plans and programs from the network, but you have to locate most of the parts yourself. The hard work was all done for you, you just have to be bold enough to assemble the parts together and sit inside the thing you've built.

The cockpit is an inspection-pod, but it's reinforced with a tri-polymer cage to prevent buckling; I certainly don't want it buckling in open space. The pod is a little one-man thing that's used on larger space-craft. It goes outside to make repairs to the vessel with an engineer sitting inside it.

At the rear I fitted a high-energy-burst motor. It's like a single warp-field coil from a small ship which creates a massive burst of energy. The energy is then fed to a pair of torpedo sustainer motors, which keep you going for as long as you're able to keep feeding them an additional charge from your reactor.

It's a cheap setup, but it works! It means I can sustain faster than light travel for hours at a time.

The pod was a piece of salvage, so I found that quite easily. It was the coil that proved difficult but, in the end, it's such a common piece of technology that when I had it replicated, nobody raised an eyebrow.

I had imagined that torpedo engines would be tricky, but they actually weren't all that difficult at all. It turned out they were no good for my use though. They run far too hot, and the plasma-wash would have fried me alive in my cockpit. I was pretty keen that that didn't happen for fairly obvious reasons...

Probes use much the same system, but run cleaner, so the sensors don't have to deal with the interference. They were also a lot easier to find. I wasn't looking forward to walking into a salvage yard asking for torpedo engines in any case.

It took around six months to put her together.

Oh, and she has atmosphere motors too! So this little pod can take me just about anywhere a normal ship can go. It's a good deal faster than a shuttle too. Arguably not as safe—not nearly as safe, if the truth be told—but it's a hell of a lot more fun!

I said to Clug that he should check his over too. He made a very Krill comment which made me laugh. He made some other comment and went off in a bit of a mood. He always seems to be in a bit of a mood. Perhaps he had a kitten that died recently?

I think it would be fair to say we're not quite friends yet.

Journal – Klarrg, of Clan Slargg. Day 3.

I went to the cargo bay to find Ma'a'H this morning, and a small furry white thing in a cage barked at me and then began to growl.

It was delicious.

The human was working on his inferior pod. It clearly couldn't stand up to the rigours of matching a Krill pod in open space. He dared to suggest I should check mine over to make sure it was functioning. I told him I should kill him where he stands for his insult.

My pod was perfect, of course. I will admit that the seat is slightly too small for a warrior's frame, but I had expected to compromise, and comfort is not my priority.

He invited me to watch him consume more small slices of round things that were not alive, but I returned to the cargo bay and found several things that were, and consumed those instead.

Security came to my room later and accused me of stealing something. I was angry and went to punch one of them until his eyes fell out, but Ma'a'H got in my way and they talked.

They talked, and they talked, and they talked, and finally the security guards got bored of listening to him and they went away to die by their own hands.

If I were on a Krill ship, things would be very different.

Tomorrow we leave the Ophiuchi, and have two sustained FTL runs to make. I expect the human pod to explode at some point, and Ma'a'H to be sucked into the vacuum of space to die a horrible death.

I have set sensors to record this event.

Journal – Mark Simons. Day 4.

Today was a long one!

We left the shuttle bay of the ship, which unfortunately faces rearwards. If we were able to leave forwards while travelling at relativistic speeds, we could have possibly configured the sustainer motors to keep us running and saved some charge.

Sadly it wasn't an option, and in any case, they weren't happy to drop us off any faster than one-quarter light speed. They have their rules, I suppose, and we have to respect that.

We'd travelled a hell of a long distance while aboard. It's funny how travelling like that becomes so mundane after an incredibly short while.

I had dinner in the upper lounge the previous evening. It was framed by huge ceiling windows that gave an astonishing view of the stars as they tumbled lazily by us. Clug barely seemed to notice anything that wasn't wearing a skirt, but I'm still impressed by the universe around me.

I ate, and slowly, the spectacular view seemed to lose its appeal. That's something about pod travel. You're sitting in a tiny coffin, encompassed by an energy field that's barely a metre wider

than your ship and it could collapse at any given second, shearing your ship and your flimsy human body to pieces so fast that your brain wouldn't even have time to register pain.

Oddly enough, while that's not very reassuring, it does make the world you live in seem much more real, vivid and exciting.

We levelled up and synced our navigation systems. If we didn't, we could end up anywhere. Given that our navigation systems are essentially recycled hand-held medical scanners wired up to a couple of surgical laser-scalpels, we still could end up anywhere, but at least we're a little more likely to end up there together.

We both fired our energy bursts and our motors latched onto the field. Again, the dark emptiness of space burst open and we were sucked into the gigantic white shard of light and the throbbing blue pulse as the stars streaked by us. It was like the universe itself had opened up and we were thrown headlong into the very heart of it.

It was a humbling experience, a thrill, and something I will never get tired of seeing and being a part of.

This was my maximum pulse, and I fed additional power to the sustainer motors, so I managed a three hour flight at very close to FTL- 6.3. Clug kept up this time. In fact, he was waiting for me when my field collapsed.

We did our routine inspection when we arrived. That was probably more daunting than the flight. We were just hanging in space, nothing around us but the tiny dots of white light from stars away at some unimaginable distance. If there was a malfunction there was nothing I could do but hope my rations and power held out until I was rescued. I presumed I would be entertained by the sound of hoarse Krill laughter, as he left me to my fate and flew off in the opposite direction, if such a thing were to occur...

My pod is essentially a metal shell wrapped around a chair. It's designed to house a man while he uses external tools for working on the outside of a ship. What it's not designed for is open space. It feels like you're sitting on top of the universe with an infinite distance beneath you to fall, an insurmountable depth above you, and endless nothing all around. Needless to say, you have only your seat to hold onto, and that's not holding on to anything at all either.

If you let it, that will send you quietly and irretrievably mad!

The checks were brief and then we were back on our way. We had a further two hours ahead of us to get to the outpost. It was a star base, a trading post on the edge of a basically unexplored region. There weren't many dark spots in Alliance space, so this was an exciting port of call for us. There were no life-supporting planets, no mineral reserves, no alien life... The whole region was a hole in the galaxy where nothing of interest resided. Consequently, it was the road less travelled and that was exactly what we were both looking for.

Another burst and we arrived. We had to maintain sub-light power for a further two hours to reach Starbase 401. By the time the station eventually swam into view, I was ready to crawl out of my pod and run the last few thousand kilometres on foot. I'm not expert, but I believe that's impossible. Or at the very least, not recommended!

When I did finally crawl out, everything ached. Everything!

The seat was designed to accommodate an average person for a whole day, but the engineer that designed it that way was either a sadist, or frighteningly incompetent and I'm not sure which is worse. My back, my legs, my neck were all angry with me for locking myself in that tiny little vehicle.

We were invited aboard the central station for some reason. There were shuttle-bays floating around the outside, but they let us take our pods directly to the main hub. I guess we were honoured, and I wasn't going to argue about it. It meant one less shuttle-bus ride and we were a lot closer to where there was likely to be a bar!

Luckily for us, there was a service platform. After a day in open space, if anything was going to show up as a problem, it would be showing up now. We were finally somewhere where inspection pods were a very common sight. We would be able to get repairs made or replacement parts fairly easily and that was reassuring.

Landing wasn't a problem. We were drawn in by a very gentle tractor beam and a forcefield locked the air in behind us.

Clug stepped out of his pod after me. He was clearly in as much pain as I was, but that was no surprise. His body is huge, and he looks as strong as a horse! Sadly, he also seems to have the brains of one.

One thing that was missing from the Ophiuchi was a bar. Station 401 was reported to have a good one. We had heard rumours that it was a highlight of the whole station and had the most competent barman in the sector, although we couldn't find any pictures of either on the Wikiweb. Of course, we headed straight there.

Well, not straight there. We arranged a cabin for the night first.

Clug made a fuss about wanting to sleep in the shuttle-bay with his pod. The deck-chief told him he was welcome to, and that he hoped he wouldn't find it too uncomfortable when life-support was switched off after the final duty shift.

He stamped his feet and ranted about his pride for some reason. That actually gets quite boring after a surprisingly short time.

I had a talk with him, and he calmed down somewhat when I told him I was going to the bar to get horribly drunk.

We were shown to the cabin by a man in civilian clothing who kept moaning about having to do meaningless jobs, like showing around idiot travellers who were too stupid to find their own rooms.

Even Clug was so surprised by his inventive grumbling that he forgot to threaten to kill him. That actually made a refreshing change.

He took some twisted pleasure in telling the Krill that the chief was probably joking about turning off life support, but this was after we had carried our luggage halfway around the station and were both gasping for breath.

I have to admit. I didn't particularly like this man.

And so to the bar.

I was almost looking forward to drinking with a Krill, and wondered if the rumours are true...

Journal – Klarrg, of Clan Slargg. Day 4.

Today nothing exciting happened.

We arrived at Station 401 without incident. The pod performed adequately, as did the human, for once.

We are sharing a cabin. He likes to soften his back with a mattress like a spoiled female. He has too much luggage—two huge bags, which I presume are filled with dresses, make-up and scented lotions for his soft, soft skin.

He says there is a bar. I will show him how a warrior drinks, and then I will punch him into unconsciousness so he does not attempt to mate with me.

Journal – Mark Simons. Day 5.

Never, never, never drink with a Krill!

I woke up in the early part of the afternoon with a pain in my head, a throat that felt like I'd been eating a bowl of razorblades, and a stomach that was full of, what I presume was, very angry rats that were intent on escaping.

We had gone to the bar fairly early, around 6pm by the station chronometer. I was hungry. Something about having your skin separated from a subspace-rift in the fabric of the universe by four millimetres of metal always gives me an appetite.

I ordered a beer and asked Clug what he wanted. He growled at the barman about Krill death-brew, and was handed a beer mug full of cheap Australian rosé. I thought the barman was trying to get himself beaten to death at first, and sat back in morbid curiosity at how events might further unfold. The Krill sipped at the horribly pink liquid gingerly, and then roared that it was truly a drink fit for a warrior.

The barman shot me a grin. I was almost disappointed but certainly impressed!

I had three beers before I ordered some food. Clug kept pace, but was drinking beer-glasses full of pink wine. It was all slightly surreal!

Food came. Mine was macaroni cheese with mushrooms. Clug had something that looked like they'd scraped off of the toilet floor. He said it wasn't delicious, but that he wouldn't have to beat anyone to death with it and then eat them instead.

The barman seemed lazily satisfied and just nodded back at him. He said a lot of people felt that way about the food, and that Clug's was actually quite a generous response.

You can't really get macaroni cheese wrong, but they tried anyway, and almost managed it.

We followed this up with more beer, and glasses of incredibly feminine wine for the most outwardly masculine thing I had ever seen. I wondered if he actually wears female clothes when nobody is looking? It occurred to me that I had presumed him male, but never having spent time among Krills, perhaps that was completely wrong. I have to confess to knowing so little about the Krill that I don't even know if they have two genders, like we do.

The barman decided that now was the time to ask us what we were doing on station AEOS-401.

I explained that I was a bored travel-writer looking for a new challenge. I had decided to build myself a personal transport, and settled on the idea of a pod. I found I was incredibly proud of myself for having done so. Whether it was the beer or that same pride, I can't say, but the conversation flowed very freely.

Clug demanded more drinks. From somewhere behind the bar, the barman pulled out a huge jug, obviously designed to be filled with enough beer to share with a group. He filled the whole thing with rosé and dropped a straw in it. He then pushed it to Clug and smirked.

"Let's see what kind of warrior you really are!" he told him.

Clug began sucking on the straw with a renewed sense of purpose, like drowning himself in pink wine would somehow give him something to truly be proud of.

The barman made small-talk with me about where I was heading. I mentioned the Ophiuchi, and he told me that it was the only really fast transport ship in service in this part of space, and the fastest in service outside of Alliance central command. He said he'd been on it once himself.

By this point, Clug was finishing up his appalling drink. There were other people at the bar. Several were looking on and frowning, and some were smirking at him. I was lost in abject disgust. How he hadn't dropped dead of diabetes by that point I'm still completely at a loss to explain.

He grinned back at me and his normally yellow teeth were now bright pink.

The barman told us the region was filled with weird stories. Ships vanished, empty ghost-ships appeared with their crews lost, time played tricks, and unexplained phenomenon occurred that baffled the best minds in the galaxy. Then he said something very odd; he said it had always been that way, or at least, it had now. I still can't quite make sense of what he meant by that.

Added to that, it was a hotbed for smuggling and general lawlessness. I was sitting next to a Krill who was slowly killing himself with Australian rosé, so I was partially immune to his tall stories but, even so, it was a fun way to pass the time. Who doesn't love a good ghost story, especially juxtaposed against the sterile technological backdrop of outer space?

After a few more hours, and a few more drinks we staggered off. I can still remember most of the walk, although walk may be a little too grandiose a description of what we eventually managed.

Clug had been impressively tight-lipped about his back-story. All I knew of him was that he was Krill, younger than me, and smelled slightly of flowers. I also knew he could build a pod.

In fact, his pod was quite sturdy, and he clearly knew what he was doing in that respect. In other respects, less so...

I asked him about his pod, but instead of talking, he began singing off-key and insisting loudly that we go immediately to the

Pods and finish getting drunk with cheap beer and Australian rosé wine.

The bay was dark and gloomy and we were alone, save for the hum of the reactor or the life-support pumps. I was too drunk to tell exactly which.

He told me he was an engineer. He seemed proud of this, but also a little cautious of telling me.

“Krills aren’t engineers,” he told me. “We’re warriors! But my father would be most humiliated if I failed to enter the Grand Krill engineering program. I must prove myself capable before I can qualify for a five year course, and eventually serve as an engineer aboard a ship. Only then can I find a way to earn my name.”

So this trip was his way of proving himself. Why he felt so ashamed of it I never did work out. There seemed a certain honour in what he was doing, but I wasn’t able to convince him of that.

We chatted about many things, and his conversation was more open than usual, thanks to his being horribly drunk.

“May I ask you an honest question?” he said without a shred of sarcasm.

I nodded and drank some beer.

“Are you fully a man?” He looked me straight in the eye, and chugged a huge mouthful of pink wine.

“I believe so,” I shrugged back. I wasn’t really sure what he meant.

“You act like a female. I would be disgusted in myself if I were like you.”

I believed he meant it. I don’t have much experience of Krills, but they always seemed to be a people who spoke their minds, such as they are.

“Can I ask you an honest question?” I returned.

He nodded his huge, ungainly head.

“Why do you have those huge bony bulges on your forehead? I’ve always wondered.”

“Thick bones protect your brain from injury,” he said without a thought.

“So they serve no real purpose then?” I added with a smile.

After a moment, he actually nodded his head in agreement, and we both laughed.

“We aren’t really a real race.” He put his finger to his lips and made a shhhh noise like we were sharing a secret. “We’re engineered.”

He didn’t appear to be lying, but this was the first time I’d heard of such a thing. “You’re engineered?” I asked.

“The Proxili declared war on the humans,” he explained. “War to them meant something quite different than what it meant to you humans. They were shocked when humanity responded with swift and brutal violence. They had no means by which to respond; they had no warriors, no fighters.

“They began a program to engineer soldiers, troops that could fight the humans on equal terms. They enhanced our musculature, our bone-density and our stamina.”

I was shocked, I’d never heard of any of this.

He nodded and slurred at me, “Yes! We are programmed with language, combat and other skills. We mature in only five years and are then fully-realised warriors, filled with the lust for blood and the will to die in combat!”

“Why have I never heard about this?” I asked, but I suspected that there was a better chance of him drowning in his rosé than actually managing to answer that.

“Proxili are ashamed of us!” he snarled. “My father told me they made us seek honour in death so we wouldn’t grow and mature. He said we’re easier to control this way. That was why my father wanted me to become an engineer instead.

“He said the Krill need to grow now and find their own identity. We need to put the war behind us and stop hating the humans. The humans didn’t make us, they weren’t really our enemies.”

“We don’t talk about this on Earth either,” I told him. As I thought about it, it did make a grim kind of sense. Humans would be just as ashamed of their hand in this as the Proxili.

“It is your fault!” he told me, flashing a set of snarling pink teeth.

“And... sorry, how is this humanity’s fault?” I asked, feeling like we certainly had a part to play but not that we deserved the full brunt of the blame.

“It just is!” he boomed.

We both took a drink.

“You don’t spend a lot of time around humans do you?”

“No,” he agreed. “You are the first I’ve ever met. I did meet a very delicious Skelk once.”

I asked him why Krills didn’t like to talk about this. He seemed confused for a moment, like his food had run off and hid in the corner. At least, his expression was the same as when that had happened aboard the Ophiuchi.

“We do not speak of things that go wrong. Our history that we teach is a positive one, it is meant to inspire our youth.”

I shook my head. That was probably the first thing he’d said that made any real sense at all.

“We were like that too. I was taught that back in the dark days, we used to convince ourselves illegal wars were justified long after they’d ended—before they’d even started, sometimes. We’d lie about terrorist actions that hadn’t really taken place, we’d lie about genocides that had taken place, that we’d been responsible for.

“We’d spy on, imprison, even murder our own people, all the time telling them it was for their own good. We always framed the stories to portray ourselves in the best possible light. We always had to be the good guys, and as far as we knew, we always were!

“And you know what we used to say to ourselves? We’d say, history is written by the victors, like that justifies it all, ignoring the obvious warning in those words.

“Eventually we learned that making mistakes is inevitable, and it’s learning from them that matters. Fooling yourself that you can do no wrong just... dooms you to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.

“We’ve grown up a lot since those days.”

Clug drank enough wine to kill a small elephant, wiped his hand over his mouth and turned to me, burping a little as he began to speak. “Shut up, human! All you ever do is talk and talk and talk! Do you ever stop talking?!”

It occurred to me at that point he’d actually been doing this for the entire time I had been speaking, pausing only occasionally to smack his hand hard across his forehead and let out a blood-curdling guttural roar that would echo across the entire bay.

Eventually he did settle down though, muttering something murderous under his breath and returning his attention to his rosé.

“Didn’t anyone tell you it’s rude to speak over people, with your mouth full, and while burping... And screaming... Go and do something honourable to make up for it!” I told him with a smile.

“The highest honour is to die in defence of your race,” he growled at me with pride, even though this riled against everything his father had tried to instil in him.

I looked over his little yellow pod covered in ground-in filth, and fitted with uneven modifications that were barely holding together. “That will do nicely then.”

Journal – Klarrg, of Clan Slargg. Day 5.

We drank a lot. There was no death-brew to be had and the reclamation system on the station appeared only capable of making cheese. I was given a drink that tasted adequate, and had the time of a warrior, except nobody was beaten to the ground. I was advised several times against it. humans have no stomach for battle, or anything fun.

I don’t remember much, but woke up feeling that Ma’a’H and myself are now friends, for some reason. I suspect the alcohol was tainted, but I will attempt to comply with this new arrangement and see if there is a basis for it, or if I’ve simply been poisoned. If it is the latter, reason dictates I kill him where he stands.

We met for breakfast at the bar. The barman was there and made a comment about how my head felt. I checked my skull with my hand, and it felt no different to usual. I wondered why he would say that, and why discussion of my bulges seemed such an oddly familiar topic. When he said it, I was alarmed and prepared myself inwardly for combat. It was strange, and less exhilarating than I would have imagined.

Ma’a’H joined me and ordered something weak and unsatisfying. I demanded that they kill something and bring it to me in a bowl of its own bile. Or better yet, just bring it to me as it squirms.

The barman asked if we still intended to head for the Frontier. He said it was a superior destination. He said it looked dangerous in the guides, and did not made an enjoyable family retreat. However it was peppered with terrible things that made for interesting stories.

I ate some of the creature he had presented me. It was too dead for my taste but he said that eating some of these pointy little furry things was doing him a favour, so I complied.

He laughed for some reason, and warned us to be careful, as the way was dangerous, and there were many hazards that would impede our journey. Anomalous warping and bending of space was well documented in the region, and external transmissions would often be impeded. Familiar features and landmarks would vanish without explanation, and power would deplete erratically. He said it behaves the way no other part of the galaxy does.

So our decision was made.

Fortunately for him, Ma'a'H agreed. Perhaps there is more to him than just talking a lot, and possibly wearing make-up.

Journal – Mark Simons. Day 6.

Today was a disaster. Well, not a total disaster, and not really for me. We left the station without incident... not that there are many incidents you can have while simply leaving a station.

We made a lower than usual energy-burst, and cruised for an hour and a half. We only managed FTL-3.

I dropped back to normal space as my field collapsed, and my little pod streaked back into the darkness of space which, to be honest, is a lot more daunting than ripping a tiny hole in subspace and hurtling through it at velocities your brain can barely comprehend.

There was no sign of him, Clug was simply nowhere to be found. I used my sensors and set them to maximum, but with sensors as good as mine, I might as well have opened the door and waved around a long white stick in an effort to find him. Consequently I found nothing.

I decided to change my sensors to scan for a metallic mass in the hopes he still was one, and not a debris field floating around in the vacuum with sticky bits of Krill all over it.

Then, with a flash he appeared, streaking along beside me.

I was relieved! He was too far to see visually, but I could see the flash, and my proximity sensor caught him and showed the scan of his vessel.

I opened communication and asked what had happened.

He sounded concerned. He had had a power fluctuation and his charge was all used up. That shouldn't have happened unless he had poured all of his available power into his four energy-sustainer motors in an effort to go faster than me which, of course, was exactly what he'd done.

I called him some names, but then he told me he'd literally run out of charge, and life-support was going to fail in another hour.

That was meant to be a redundant system. It was virtually impossible to make it fail, even if you were trying to breath in freezing conditions while terminally flatulent.

We were still moving at a significant velocity, so I scanned the maps for somewhere or something that could help us. There was nothing I was confident we could reach.

By then, I was getting worried.

My sensors were still scanning for metallic objects, and seemed to have actually locked onto something.

There was a ship up ahead. At least, it was something that looked like a ship. I told Clug to scan it and feed back what he could.

My scanners limped over the job of probing the object, and listlessly reported that it was a ship of some kind. Clug confirmed there were no life-signs, but that it had an oxygen atmosphere we could breathe.

We turned and headed straight for it.

I did some quick calculations. We would reach the object in 45 minutes, but the course correction would use the very last of Clug's power. He would have to breathe the stale air in his cockpit while the temperature dropped, but I was confident he'd make it to the ship before the situation turned critical.

He wasn't keen, but we both knew he had only two other choices—suffocation, or freezing to death.

I headed off at maximum and reached the ship in just a few minutes. I began scanning it more closely. It was a Alliance vessel—not military Alliance, but definitely of human origin. It wasn't on my listed on my records, but looked old to me; very old. It was listing helplessly but was still powered. At least there were some lights shining out from behind some of the windows.

I manoeuvred to the rear and found the shuttle-bay access. By now I was hailing the vessel constantly on automatic, but was getting nothing back from them. I switched my hail to talk to the main computer. It was online, but only barely—the basic functions were operational, but it had no navigation or weapons.

At this point, it wasn't a major concern. I just wanted to get Clug aboard so we could fix up his pod. The last thing in the world I wanted was to explain to his family that their son's remains were floating around somewhere in space looking angry, and slightly confused, through an inspection-pod window.

Also, and more worrying, his pod had all the beer on-board.

The computer accepted my verbal command to open the shuttle-bay doors, and they shuddered to life before me. The glowing yellow light behind the shutters meant that the interior was airtight. It looked like we were going to make it...

Blue is not a good colour for a Krill, but that was roughly what he was when he finally came aboard. He greedily sucked down lungfuls of air as he shivered openly, his teeth chattering behind his huge leathery lips.

I had used the tractor beam to tow him aboard. The ship's power-grid looked to be in working order, but I had no idea how anything worked. I worried that I was just as likely to turn him into a curry as to get him safely aboard. Luckily for both of us, everything worked out perfectly well.

He growled from the shuttle-bay floor where he'd slumped down beside his pod.

"I'm not sure we're better off," I told him. "This ship is deserted. Alliance crews don't generally desert a perfectly good ship for no reason."

Clug said something that sounded suspiciously like his own name, still gasping at the thin air.

"They don't often throw surprise parties either. It's not your birthday, is it?"

He hefted himself up, and reached into the pod to the spot below the chair where I kept the battery pack for the redundancy system that keeps my life-support system running reliably. He pulled out three lumps of ominous-looking metal, and jammed them together with a loud clank to form a hideous weapon.

"I have this to keep me alive," he said, grinning with notable menace in his fierce little eyes.

Clearly Krills have a poorer understanding of irony than humans. I drew my own weapon. I carried a tubular type-1 photon-pistol, factory rigged to fire a heavy stun blast, but not capable of delivering a lethal charge.

I didn't want to accidentally vaporise my date, while drunkenly confusing this thing with my toothbrush. This was a concern Clug didn't share, and as I noticed his grinning, chipped yellow and pink teeth, I realised that it wasn't a concern for at least two completely different reasons.

He laughed at me. "Are you going to fight them with your lipstick?" he said.

"And who are you going to fight on a deserted ship?" I retorted.

He opened his lips to say something, and then just turned away, hefting his ridiculous weapons and heading for the door.

"We will search this vessel," he said.

"I have a better idea, if not better then at least not so overwhelmingly stupid."

He gave me a suspicious stare over the barrel of his Krill cannon.

"Why don't we repair your pod, charge it up, and head back to the base. We can report this ship, and someone else can come and search it; somebody who's actually qualified to do so, and knows what the hell they're doing. Ideally, someone who's not an engineering student with an inferiority complex so massive that he compensates for it by carrying around a weapon so big that he can barely lift it, or a middle-aged travel-writer who specialises in writing sarcastic nonsense about places where he failed to get any attractive women to go to bed with him," I told him.

Clug turned to me and frowned thoughtfully.

“You mean... somebody not us?”

Journal – Klarrg, of Clan Slargg. Day 6.

The human flew erratically. It forced me to do something very clever to avoid crashing into his slow-moving pod, but after doing it, my own had run out of power and I was stranded in open space. He seemed set upon abandoning me, but I was able to discover an abandoned vessel and ordered him to go there and wait for me.

He complied, of course.

I heroically transferred all of my power to my thrusters and made the trip without life-support. A lesser creature would have perished in the attempt, but I was able to do it without issue.

I left my pod proudly, and began the task of finding out where we were.

I decided caution was our best approach. We were not equipped to properly search the vessel, given that I was a warrior engineer with little armament, and he was a mere human equipped only with a love of hearing his own voice.

I took out my small defensive weapon, in case we were attacked. Ma’a’H said he believed the ship was abandoned, but he was deeply afraid because he was not sufficiently skilled to make that assessment, and there could be things aboard that might hurt or scare him.

He begged me to search the ship on his behalf, while he crawled back into his pod and cowered like a small baby.

I asserted that the best course of action would be to recharge my pod, and head back to the station so we could report this abandoned vessel.

He began to cry.

Eventually, I decided that I had no choice but to calm his fears by acceding to his wishes. I left him in the shuttle bay while I went in search of the bridge.

Journal – Mark Simons. Day 6. Part 2.

Apparently Krill skull-bulges do have a function. The thick bones serve to protect them from having to hear what people are saying, and from having to process the information to help them make rational decisions. It also seems to serve as a warning to females, but that's just based on my observations aboard the Ophiuchi.

To be fair, his loudly yelling at them and demanding they initiate mating rituals in the dining hall during dinner did a fair job of warning them in its own way.

I insisted Clug wait in the shuttle-bay until his pod was ready so that we could leave together. This had about the same result as me stripping myself naked and dancing around the floor while singing a Swiss love song to my favourite pet goat. He turned and left, laughing openly, and saying he was going to explore the ship alone, and that I could do as I wished.

I wished to leave, without him if necessary, and the thought did cross my mind.

I held my ground for a few long minutes. I gritted my teeth. I rolled my little defensive pistol over in my hand thoughtfully. There was literally nothing to be afraid of, but the barman's words played heavily on my mind. The internal scans of the ship suggested there were no people on board. Added to that, the craft was essentially sound, and appeared to have no damage, and there were no sections without life-support.

I actually laughed to myself as I realised that, while on this stationary vessel, I was likely many hundreds of times safer than I was aboard my pod.

Why not explore a little?

After a few minutes my mind was made up. I secured my pod, locked it with my voice commands, and left for the rear hatchway. It hissed open with a judder and I went off into the corridor. It was gloomy, little more than bare grey metal joists with plain panelling bolted on. There were colour-coordinated tubes running along the edges, and the walls were peppered with occasional signs.

With the door at the rear of the bay, and the bay pointing backwards, I had only to walk forwards before I'd come to an elevator or staircase. With that thought in my mind, I realised I was heading for the bridge to meet up with Clug after all.

The lights flickered and there were patchy areas still in virtual darkness, the shadows swallowing up the corridor in front of me eerily. It was a disconcerting experience, and I was glad to have my gun in my sweaty hands as I gingerly edged forwards into the gloom. I had altered the factory setting some time ago. This little pistol could burn a hole through a block of carbonised-steel if it ever needed to.

A door beside me hissed open.

I peered into the grey room and even called out. I was replied with nothing but the echo of my own voice. I smiled at my own foolishness.

My feet carried me in, powered by a force of pure curiosity. There was a little food laid out, some of it half-eaten, and cutlery still in place on some of the trays. On some tables, chairs were neatly pushed back, in others they were clumsily scattered around. The crew had left in a hurry and yet there was no red alert, no emergency

seemed to have happened. I reached out for a bread roll. It wasn't stale, and was likely no more than a few hours out of a serving hatch.

I was nervous and I don't mind admitting it.

I remembered stories of the Marie Celeste, an ancient ship discovered with the crew missing, no sign of them ever found, and the mystery never solved.

Was I walking into a ghost story? Was this to be recorded as one of the great unsolved events of modern history. As a travel-writer I was intrigued, excited even.

I headed back to the corridor, reminding myself that the story was yet to have an ending, or a beginning, and that the latter was the cause of the entire crew to vanish, and the former could possibly be me joining them. Excitement quickly turned to trepidation.

I tried to close the doors.

They hissed but remained open.

I set the doors to manually force themselves closed, and they all shuddered back into place. I wondered if there was a malfunction, some electrical problem that had compelled the crew to leave.

And then it happened!

I heard a noise, a cry like a child being hurt, a scream that chilled my blood and sent an icicle of pure dread coursing up through the bones of my spine.

I stood for a few seconds in dreadful silence, my gaping mouth dry and the sound of my heart beating thumping through my eardrums. I swallowed and edged forwards. The sound was hard to locate in the claustrophobic confines of the ship. I felt it best to go towards the bridge and find Clug. He might be a low-browed savage with the subtlety of brick to the face, but he was a low-browed savage with the subtlety of a brick to the face, a huge gun, and a

propensity towards violence as a first means of defence. I could probably use a little of that, I figured.

Suddenly I wanted him standing between me and whatever that hauntingly evil sound was, and whatever unspeakably vile horror it had come out of.

My eyes were adjusting to the reduced lighting, and I could see, with notable relief, a pair of doors at the end of the tunnel, unmistakable access to an elevator.

I pressed the button, calling for a lift, and turned back to see the route I had taken.

Something flickered.

I thought, just for a moment, that I could see the shadows moving, reaching out for me from the terrifying darkness. I tried to believe it was my imagination, but the same clammy fingers of dread began their journey through my body.

Then they moved again, a snaking tendril of shadow slithered out along the floor, stretching unnaturally towards me. I couldn't move. I was frozen to the floor, rooted in place with pure dread.

Had the darkness somehow come alive and consumed the crew? Was it still hungry?

I levelled my little weapon and fired it into the darkness. It spat out a flaming beam of flickering red light. What I was firing at, I didn't know. There was nothing tangible there. This was no human form, this was something grotesque that I could barely understand.

The unmistakable hiss of the doors opening behind me brought the biggest relief of my life. I moved into the car quickly. "Bridge!" I ordered and the doors slid lazily shut.

I was on my way.

I sank back to the far wall, my weapon still outstretched, pointing at nothing but the closed doors. My heart was dancing in my

chest, my lungs were heaving, and I was light-headed with pure adrenaline.

After only a few moments, the lift doors slid open.

I was not on the bridge.

I peered out into the flickering light of my new environment. I could see a sign that said I was on Deck 2. My eyes rolled upwards to the ceiling. I was one deck below where I needed to be.

“Bridge!” I said again.

It remained silent.

I opened up the computer display and switched on the verbal interface so the computer could speak openly back to me.

“The bridge is a restricted area. You do not have clearance to access that level,” it told me.

Beyond me was another unexplored deck with who knew what hiding in the shadows. I didn’t relish the possibilities. I stepped out, sweating profusely, but resolved to somehow get to the bridge as Clug had surely done. I locked the doors open and edged forwards, little by little.

I walked into the corridor, edging forwards, step by step, brandishing my pistol before me. My senses had never been sharper or more focused. My eyes took in every detail, with special attention to the flickering shadows along the floor.

My back was to the wall and my eyes were forwards. I felt a sudden burst of pure fear as the doors behind me slid open automatically. I jumped back to the safety of the wall and slowly, very slowly, peered inside the opening.

Sweat was soaking through the clothes on my back. I felt the temperature dropping noticeably as the sweat cooled, and I felt a fresh tendril of dread.

I stepped into the room. It seemed to be a computer station, a place where the crew could access the mainframe for the whole vessel. At least... they could if there had been a crew.

Suddenly and without warning, a monitor on the wall flicked on, and there was the face of a man staring straight out at me. I knew it was only a computerised image, but still...

It startled me! There was something deeply unnerving about it.

"Hello," it said with a wry smile. I peered at it dubiously, wondering if it really knew I was there. "There are three methods of accessing the bridge from this location."

I stepped back reflexively in shock. How did this thing know what I was trying to do? Had the shadows infected the computers of the vessel? Was it now following me?

I ran!

I ran out like a frightened child, and didn't stop until I rounded a corridor, and couldn't see the computer station any longer behind me. I gasped for air, my head swimming, and my chest pounding.

I was at an engineering junction. From what little I could tell, it seemed to be the main power conduits access. I poked my gun into the darkness before edging inside.

I suddenly realised it was an access-way I could use to climb up to the bridge.

The room was dark, lit only by a red emergency-light. I crept in and quickly scanned around for the tubes and ladders that would take me up to the next deck.

I heard a sudden groan, a horrible vibration from the very bowels of the ship, that rung up through the metal and echoed to the very top. It sounded like an old man waking up. Perhaps that was exactly what it was?

Every fibre of my being wanted to be somewhere else now, and anywhere would do. An office with my ex-wife and her viciously inhuman brute of a lawyer—and second husband—would have been better than this.

I found what I thought was an access-way, with a ladder leading up to the next deck. I allowed myself a brief smile, before the computers around the office flashed to life.

“Initiating internal scan for intruders,” they said out loud, as if warning me they were looking for me. I went up the ladder as fast as I could; faster than a merchant-ship crewman that had caught the scent of free beers.

After a short climb, I staggered onto the first deck. The doors to the bridge opened with a hiss and I clambered through, shaken, and just the right side of utterly terrified.

Clug looked over as my dishevelled form blundered in. He lowered his insanely huge cannon and grinned lopsidedly.

“We need to get out of here!” I told him.

“What do you suggest?” he grunted back in his growling Krill monotone.

“Let’s get back to our pods, and get the hell off this ship!”

He slowly nodded his bony head. For a moment I was surprised, but then I realised something.

He looked scared too! More scared than I’ve ever seen him!

“I agree. Let’s go!”

Journal – Klarrg, of Clan Slargg. Day 6. Part 2.

I left my cowering human straggler and proudly made my way along the seemingly abandoned vessel. I remembered what the barman had told me about smugglers’ vessels in the area. Perhaps there was nobody aboard, and perhaps there was. I was ready in either case.

I knew the shuttle-bay was on the main body of the ship. I decided to explore just a little before I made my way to the bridge. Where there was a shuttle-bay, there was cargo, and there would be crew quarters. Something here would tell me what was happening.

I walked around for a few minutes, just looking for answers.

The crew quarters were empty. No people. The soft human beds were made, their soft human clothes were hanging in their lockers. Against the walls were industrial food-hatches. I threw some chairs aside and went over to eat.

“Food!” I demanded.

A list of options appeared on the computer terminal. Humans! They love to make everything so complicated. I just pressed everything and trays of food appeared—I took what I wanted. Some was acceptable, most was not. I ate my fill and left with the leg of an animal in my hand.

Perhaps the crew had run away in fear of something, and abandoned the ship. It seemed likely of humans from what I’d seen. ‘Afraid of their own shadows,’ we say of them.

I stood in the doorway and peered into the darkness. I sensed I could see something move. I stepped back quickly and hefted my disrupter weapon in readiness.

So there was someone aboard!

This was a smuggler’s ship after all. They must have been hiding in the walls, waiting for us. They clearly intended to attack!

I peered once more out through the doorway. To my surprise the doors shut closed, catching my nose. I roared like a true warrior as I caught the taste of my own blood running into my incredibly manly mouth!

I hushed myself quickly, remembering I had an enemy on my trail.

“Computer, lights out!” I ordered.

I tried to open the doors, but someone had manually closed all of them. They had tried to catch me in the crew quarters but I was too clever for them and overrode the lockout. The doors slid open easily.

This time I leapt back out and hid in the shadows. Only a few low lights were left in the corridor. I slid along in silence, a stealthy warrior ready to pounce on my foolishly unsuspecting prey.

I brought the long muzzle of my weapon to bear, and there I saw him. Just a glance as he was edging along towards me. The hunter hunting the hunter... Two warriors locked in silent battle.

I pointed the cannon at the last point I had seen him.

Suddenly, a powerful laser beam crackled out, nearly striking me! I pressed myself back against the wall and held my tongue. The weapon was potent, and put me at a disadvantage.

I waited for a moment. I could see no movement, but I knew that they were a stealthy opponent. I fired towards them.

Nothing.

They had no doubt recognised my superior skills and instincts. I ran along the corridor towards them, roaring like a Krill. I made it to the end, to a pair of closed doors at a turbo-lift. The doors had been locked manually—I couldn’t use it. They had escaped to the bridge, and locked me down in the belly of the ship.

I edged backwards until I found another set of doors. I manually opened them and slid inside. I was in a control-room of some kind.

“Computer! Lock doors!” I ordered. Getting to the bridge was now my main priority, more now than ever. From there I could take control from the smugglers, and I could seize this ship.

“Computer!” I shouted. The interface awoke and the face of a human appeared on a monitor to speak to me. It said hello with a

stupid smile. I feared it would make some kind of... small talk, so I spoke quickly.

“I need to get to the bridge and I can’t use the super-charger-elevator!”

“There are three methods of reaching the bridge from this location,” it told me. I pressed some buttons on the panel next to the face. Sure enough, there was a staircase, access tubes, and an emergency access tunnel in the cargo bay.

I grinned to myself. An emergency tunnel was the most likely way that I would catch them off-guard. I could be on them before they could even suspect I was coming.

I was in the cargo bay in mere moments. The tunnel was protected with a small round thing with a simple interface that would unlock it. I ordered it to open so that I could get to the bridge.

It refused, insisting that I lacked authorisation. I did what I could to override the system. I accidentally switched off the lights in section 3 and reduced the temperature in decks 1 though 4 before I found the correct system and released it.

“Let me go to the bridge!” I ordered, and it duly complied.

I appeared at the top of a steep climb up a rusting, disused ladder, brandishing my weapon.

Nothing!

The cowardly smugglers had abandoned the vessel, rather than risk facing me.

I am brave, but I’m no fool.

I set the computer to scan for life-signs, and sat myself down in the Captain’s seat at the heart of the bridge. I smiled.

The ship was mine!

A door creaked open behind me. I leapt to my feet, ready to do battle, but it was just my human—Ma’a’H.

“We must run away, for this place, it terrifies me so very much!” he said, quaking in his boots, the stench of fresh urine thick in the air.

I told him we would take the ship back to the base, but he was too scared, and demanded that we leave.

I could not operate the ship without his assistance, so I had little choice but to comply with his cowardly whim.

Journal – Mark Simons. Day 7.

The barman listened intently as we explained to him what had happened. He quite rightly observed that we needed a beer; a beer and a jug of Australian rosé with a straw in it. I asked that he might add a little paper umbrella, and explained to Clug that it was a sign the drink belonged to someone ferocious that was a force to be reckoned with. He accepted that happily and proceeded to sip at his pink wine while a little yellow cocktail-umbrella tapped at his lips.

“These are dangerous lanes,” the barman said, tutting to himself and shaking his head knowingly.

I took a swig of beer. “Security interviewed us for a whole hour.”

He assured us that it was little more than a formality. The security crew were friends of his, and had earned his trust.

Clug sucked at his wine and glared at us both.

“We should have taken the ship. It should be ours!” he grumbled.

“Well I’m not stopping you!” I laughed. “I like exploring, but I draw the line at ghost ships with alien shadow-monsters.”

“It was smugglers! They were cowards, hiding in the bulkheads!” Clug growled.

"I guess it doesn't really matter, so long as you're all safe," added the barman. I tended to agree with him. "You two seem the only ones left hungry. How about I get you something to eat?"

After a day like that, something to eat sounded pretty good.

I pointed to the Krill. "Remember what you brought him last time?"

The barman nodded his head.

"Anything but that."

"I will have something with a weak pulse. Bring its mate, and any offspring it has spawned," demanded Clug.

The barman just smiled knowingly, and brought us two more drinks.

"Sounds like you've earned these, boys. They're on the house! In fact everything is on the house. This is Alliance space so everything is always on the house."

I looked over at Clug and he looked back at me.

"So where next?"

"My pod will need approximately 30 hours of repairs to be fully space-worthy. I also intend to revise the fitting of the life support system," he told me, growling through his pointy little yellow teeth, softly tinged with pink.

I offered to help but the growling intensified until I couldn't help but laugh. I'd seen the other side of him now and it was harder than ever to take his posturing seriously.

"After your repairs?" I ventured.

"I will try again. Who knows what we'll find out there next time."

I sipped at my beer. The universe was a complex place full of all manner of life, and we'd barely scratched the surface with our

understanding of it. There were dangers behind every star, discoveries to be made on even the smallest journey.

After all, that was why we were there.

I smiled and nodded. "Who knows indeed."

Journal – Klarrg, of Clan Slargg. Day 7.

My memory of the day's events is poor. I awoke with a blinding pain in my head. Ma'a'H said I must have had my first original thought, and that he was very proud of me.

After repairing my pod, we will head out once more into open space and resume our journey. The human agreed to accompany me. I presume he will only take clothes that are befitting his gender this time. Whatever he decides, I can imagine how things could be worse.

Perhaps he is not really so bad after all.

Perhaps!

The Smuggler

A small, dark courier vessel docked at the exclusive airlock at the lower extreme of the station. It bypassed the outer docks, those normally reserved for visiting passengers, who would then be required to shuttle across the remaining expanse in a cramped station transport with all of their luggage tucked under their seats or stuffed into overhead compartments.

This visitor though was not to be subjected to such indignity. This visitor was different.

The station Commander shook his head in weary resignation. Today was about to become a lot more interesting than he would otherwise prefer that things ever became. His personal preference, in terms of action and excitement happening under his command, being absolutely zero.

The doors hissed open and a lonely, grim figure stalked out of the circular opening, the soft lighting licking against his stark features as he shuffled lazily in. He was followed by a black, cylindrical machine that floated effortlessly on a cushion of anti-gravitons, buzzing gently as it wafted along. His mechanical compatriot was a severe contraption with glowing red photo-receptors all around, jutting appliances with ferocious looking claws on the end, and weapons ready to be deployed instantly, should a threat become remotely apparent. It was his assistant, his protector, his shadow.

The little man it followed was somehow just as intimidating. He walked slowly but with purpose, he had grim and piercing eyes that never bothered to look beyond his path, and yet it was somehow clear that they saw everything. His face was but a scowl, within a

frown, within a glower. He was the kind of man that people saw, and looked away from. They stepped back to let him pass. They pretended they didn't see him, and wished they had never had to.

Commander John Bailey was waiting, clearly he was unsure exactly what to make of this spectacle before him. His palms were moist, and he felt his face flushing. His brow prickled nervously as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. As the man approached, he swallowed his apprehension and raised his hand to shake that of the visitor.

The man stopped, and regarded the offered hand as though it was something filthy, disgusting and beneath his concern.

"I don't... touch... hands," he said, accented with a loud exhale. He swivelled his eyes up to those of the taller officer and stared, relentlessly, and unblinking. After what seemed to be quite a lengthy pause, he leant in closer and added, quietly and in a way approaching enthusiastically, "It's not personal...".

"I see..." Commander Bailey lowered his hand awkwardly, and gritted his teeth in silent annoyance. "Perhaps I could show you to your quarters then?"

"My quarters?! Why, that sounds delightful! After all, I must be so tired from my journey that sleep is the only thing on my mind. Perhaps while you're at it, you could arrange me a nice... cocktail, that I can enjoy by the pool after my... refreshing nap?"

The Commander found it increasingly difficult to determine whether the man was genuinely delighted in an exceptionally creepy way, or was mocking the ludicrousness of the suggestion. This confusion was clearly not lost on the man as his scowl took on several new layers of unpleasantness.

Eventually his veneer dropped, or at least partially abated.

“You know why I’m here; take me to where I can conduct my business,” he hissed contemptuously.

The Commander took a deep breath. “We have an office set up in the security area. It’s not what you’re used to, I imagine, but it’s quiet, secure and has recording facilities. It should have everything you need for your... enquiries? Would that be the right word?”

“Enquiries... Yes, that word would be as adequate a description of my purposes, as the office you’ve prepared sounds for allowing me to fulfil them.”

What does that mean? Is that a good thing? The man flashed an insincere smile that left the Commander in mind of a snake hugging its lunch. He shuddered to himself, and thought about how much he missed his last posting to an observation platform, where he had three visitors a month, and two of them brought beer.

“Right this way then.”

He led the man, and his accompanying machinery, along the corridor in what to him was a crushingly awkward silence. The silence somehow seemed preferable to the alternative though. As much as he’d like to just get the job done and over with, he had a deeper responsibility as the head of the station, one he had long since ceased to relish. “May I ask, what is your official title?”

The old man pondered this question, searching for an appropriately sinister answer, no doubt. Eventually his expression changed to a smile of smug satisfaction.

“I’m known... as the Inquisitor. Mine is the role of examiner and judge; I make law in places where none exists; I enforce law where it cannot be effectively administered.”

The Commander knew better than to argue that it was his station, and that his personnel were more than capable of following Alliance law in a matter as simple as the one they were dealing with.

Like so many times though, experience had taught him to keep his mouth shut and simply get on with the business of managing the daily grind, while weird, horrible people dealt with the weird, horrible things that happened.

Before long, they arrived at the office. The Commander gestured to the door, edging just close enough that the door could take the initiative in opening itself, with an appropriate hydraulic sigh. The Inquisitor stepped inside without acknowledging him further.

The humming cylindrical monstrosity floated on by behind him, and as it passed, it reached out with one of its ugly, mechanical claws and handed the commander a computer terminal pad.

“This is a list of my requirements,” said the old man, his voice low and grave. “Send me the first name on my list at... your earliest convenience.”

He paused for a moment as his ferocious little eyes stared at nothing in particular.

“If you would be so kind...”

Lieutenant Thompson waited. He waited, and he waited, and then he waited some more. He had begun wondering what exactly was going on the moment he was welcomed into the office by the distinctly unwelcoming individual sat before him.

The Inquisitor, as he was apparently known, sat in silence for what had now stretched on for nearly 30 minutes. It felt a lot longer. At first, he had tried to speak but every instance had been cut down with a raised finger and a near total lack of interest in him.

He could only watch as the arrogant little man read from a computer pad, occasionally tutting loudly and shaking his head in disapproval. Eventually, he placed the device gently onto the desk,

sat back into his seat and stared fixedly forwards for a moment that stretched on into infinity, as if waiting, challenging him to speak first.

“Lieutenant... Mostyn Thompson...” he began finally, as if asking a question. He paused for a time that was longer than seemed natural, as Lieutenant Thompson cringed inwardly. “You are a methodical and pragmatic man, and I know that you understand the necessity of a thorough and structured inquiry, when arriving at the truth of a matter is the ultimate goal.”

The Lieutenant nodded that he did indeed understand, albeit with a slightly confused shrug.

“This... meeting... is a formal part of my investigation, so I can only convey my heartfelt apologies that our first encounter should not be under more pleasant circumstances. I’m certain that some of this station’s extensive leisure facilities would have proven far more appropriate, if the purpose of our encounter had been to develop the bonds of a deep, and lasting friendship.”

The Lieutenant shuddered at the prospect. An invasive interrogation would do just fine.

“Everything spoken here will be recorded, and everything you say will be a matter of public record. Mr Thompson, I assume you know why you’re here.”

Nobody had told him anything. He thought for a moment, and shrugged. “Something to do with the SS MacGuffin, Sir?”

“The SS MacGuffin...” The Inquisitor laughed a humourless chuckle at a joke he clearly wasn’t about to share. “Enlighten me. Tell me about that ship.”

“Well, what would you like to know?” Lieutenant Thompson frowned to himself cautiously. Something about this was disturbing him. He didn’t like it, not one little bit. Something was wrong and it

made him feel as if his skin was crawling with a thousand insects, all scuttling over him at once.

“I’d like to know about that ship,” he replied flatly. “Tell me your story. Tell me what happened when you first discovered the SS MacGuffin.”

Lieutenant Thompson took a deep breath and began.

There it was; the ship, exactly as described. That fact in itself came as something of a surprise. Lieutenant Thompson turned to the pilot who seemed just as surprised as he was. Before them was a vessel, just listing in space, undetected by the sensors on the base, hanging there helplessly in the darkness, alone and forgotten.

“Honestly, I thought this would be a fools errand,” he said, nodding to himself.

“Well they did go to the trouble of sending in a pair of the finest fools at their disposal,” agreed Gary with a condescending smirk.

Lieutenant Thompson frowned at his attempt at humour.

“By the way, what do I call you?”

“Lieutenant Thompson!” said Lieutenant Thompson.

“I’m not from the Defence Authority. Frek, I’m barely working for the Alliance. I’m more of a first name terms kind of guy.” Gary grinned haphazardly as he sprawled back in his chair and exhibited a near total lack of professionalism that prickled at the Lieutenant like an itch he couldn’t quite scratch.

“Mostyn,” he acquiesced, but he did so grudgingly. “You can call me Mostyn, I suppose.”

“Mostyn,” he repeated, rolling the name over in his mind like he was examining it somehow. “Do your friends shorten that in any way? It’s quite an annoying name. Mosty? Mos?”

“No,” replied the Lieutenant flatly. “They do not! In return, I don’t demonstrate my fairly advanced level of martial-arts prowess at them in a way that they wouldn’t enjoy.”

“Well, Mostyn, I for one am shocked that this thing even actually exists. Apparently it was reported by a couple of idiots travelling around the galaxy... in work-pods of all things.”

Mostyn smiled, shaking his head in amused dismay. “Honestly, you couldn’t make this stuff up.”

“Given that you’re a security officer from the mighty Alliance, should you really be thinking about making things up?”

Mostyn nodded and smiled wryly. His fingers danced over the glossy black interface panel and the sensors came to life.

“Let’s see... Vigo class vessel. Essentially a military design used for fast transport and courier work. It was retired from active service decades ago, relegated to civilian use. They’re a fairly common sight.

“No atmospheric capability. It’s little more than a steel box with engines bolted to it.”

“You are clearly as well versed in vessel design as I am with the cocktail menu at the Station 401 bar!” Gary noted sarcastically. He shook his head at the officer, who returned him a caustic glance from the side of his eye, coupled with an overall lack of approval and a growing annoyance at the pilot’s conduct.

Still, he wasn’t Alliance military and he couldn’t be treated like he was. He gritted his teeth, and decided to keep things less formal for now.

“I’m an engineer first. This assignment was just a way to get a promotion on my way up the ladder towards my goal. I want to work in propulsion development.”

“Well I’m just a career shuttle-pilot who’s been keenly avoiding responsibility for the duration of my adult life. Even giving up on diapers was a step in the wrong direction, in my opinion. I have seriously considered reversing it, mostly inspired by the very same cocktail menu in the 401 bar!”

“In your case, I would tend to agree. No offence, but what the hell are you even doing working on an Alliance station? You seem to hate it, and you haven’t stopped moaning since we left.”

“It’s not through choice, I can assure you,” Gary did indeed assure him. “And I was moaning long before you met me.

“I love to fly shuttles—it’s my one real weakness! Unfortunately, you have to take one to deal with the other, it’s just how it is. I mean... you’ve had to take a posting in security so you get a step closer to what you want to do.”

Lieutenant Thompson nodded that he understood and gave himself a little sigh.

“So what’s the plan?” asked Gary, locking the thrusters to keep them fixed in position relative to the vessel.

“Well, I’m detecting no life signs on board, so I guess I go aboard and secure the bridge and see if I can get the engines online.”

“Rather you than me!”

“Hmmm...” said the Inquisitor, holding up a hand for him to stop. “As fascinating as I find your playful flirtation, I’m concerned solely with your securing of the ship. Limit your account to those events. Please.” His eyes locked onto the Lieutenant’s and remained fixed unblinkingly.

“Sorry...” he said with a feeble shrug as a chill ran up his spine. He swallowed and looked wistfully away as he returned to his story.

He stepped out of the airlock door, a rush of cold followed by hot air lighting up his senses as he a strip of warning lights that flashed too brightly blinded him as he crossed the threshold between the two vessels. The tingling in his flesh subsided, the buzzing in his ears ebbed away, and he was there. He took several deep breaths, acclimatising himself with the slightly different air, the gravity and the temperature.

The Lieutenant glanced around quickly at the gloomy bridge. The consoles were either flickering or remained completely unlit, the emergency lights dim and red, weakly bathing the surroundings in their sickly light as they melted slowly on and off.

He clicked the communicator panel on his left shoulder and said, "Lieutenant Thompson to Shuttle 2."

Gary's voice replied through the communicator, "What?"

He rolled his eyes at the continued assault on his professionalism. "I've entered the bridge. Nothing to report at this time. I'll check internal sensors, and begin a diagnosis of the engines."

"I can see you!" Gary reported back. "The door is transparent, I'm actually waving at you right now! Take your time; it's lunchtime here on Shuttle 2.

"Have fun!"

Lieutenant Thompson rolled his eyes and sighed. He quickly found a functioning terminal, and tapped away at its somewhat outdated, and rather basic, interface panel.

"Checking internal sensors. I can confirm there was nobody aboard, at least nobody that could be detected. The engine is a whole different issue... It is well past its useful service life.

“I’m surprised it even fired up. Diagnosis shows little more than a few traces of fuel left in the reaction chamber, and the tanks are almost completely drained.

“What’s left of this thing is barely space-worthy, and as emergency power drains away, and the force-fields holding the ship together lose power, the whole thing is in growing danger of collapsing if the appropriate repairs aren’t carried out very soon.

“In short, the vessel is very quickly going nowhere.”

“That’s fascinating, Mostyn!” came the sarcastic voice through the communicator, clearly forcing its way through a hefty mouthful of food. It didn’t matter though; the pilot didn’t have to care. The communication would be saved, providing a record of his preliminary investigation.

He flicked out his scanner and began taking readings. “Shuttle 2, I’m going to scan the vessel now. Please standby.”

“Whatever makes you happy.”

“Hmmm,” said the Inquisitor ambiguously, as he nodded and smiled thinly to himself. He picked up his pad with his fragile, bony fingers and scanned through his notes again.

The Lieutenant waited dutifully, shifting awkwardly in a stiff metal chair that had begun to make his spine ache. He waited.

“And your scans revealed nothing?”

“Nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary, anyway.”

“And despite this, you arrested an Alliance citizen, one... Jason Johnson.”

Lieutenant Thompson couldn’t quite determine if it was a question or a statement. He settled on deciding that it was a combination of the two. “Not me personally, but I believe somebody of that name was detained.”

The old man stared at him.

“Yes. And the ship.”

There was that awkward pause again. Was that a question?

“The ship?”

The old man tutted, and leant in towards the officer. “Yes, the ship. What did you expect to find?”

“Well, smugglers are known to operate in this area, so that was my initial assumption, Sir. We... I expected to find restricted materials of some kind.”

“And yet, you found nothing.”

The Inquisitor sat in silence, reading notes on his pad while the civilian man opposite sat waiting. Occasionally his eyes rolled slowly from the notes to the man, to whom he'd offer a wry smirk, and then return his gaze to the computer.

“So who are you supposed to be then?” asked the man impatiently, with none of the cautiousness or concern that people usually displayed around him.

He was large, physically imposing, and had large, craggy and hard bones in his face which made him look aggressive and mean-tempered. This was largely ideal since he was very aggressive and extremely mean-tempered, so it was good there would be no misunderstanding there.

His black hair was closely cropped and thinning back from his angrily frowning brow. He was solidly built with a body you couldn't get without hours spent in a gym, but he was not a man who trained to look good and a glance at him would explain that to anyone.

He wasn't part of the Alliance, he might be human, but he was an outsider, not bound by the principals of the people who made the rules and regulations and he wore this fact on his sleeve.

The Inquisitor raised his index finger, and otherwise ignored him.

The man frowned even more deeply and sat back into the chair, crossing his arms over his barrel-shaped chest and grunted loudly. He didn't like this, he didn't like being treated like this, and his patience, what little there was, was almost at breaking point.

Finally after several minutes the old man lowered the pad to the desk and sat back, regarding the man contemptuously.

"I am the Inquisitor," he replied simply.

"And what's that meant to mean?" he said with a frown, getting more impatient and more aggressive with it.

"Perhaps you could take from it that I'm inquisitive?" The Inquisitor allowed himself a smile of smug self-satisfaction that sent the man further into his pit of growing frustration with the entire situation.

"You military-intelligence types, you just love to wallow in your own self-importance, don't you?" he grumbled. "It's not the first time I've dealt with people like you. If you actually turn out not to be an idiot, that might be a ground-breaking experience for me."

"What an unusual assumption for you to draw. I assure you, the importance of my role far exceeds the limitations of the military muscle of our mighty Alliance," he sneered, or said, with a hiss.

"Well lucky me!" he said sarcastically, his voice barely more than a low rumble by now. "Maybe I can get your autograph; the guys at home will be so excited for me!"

"Very droll; you do have quite the singular wit," he said, and then paused and looked thoughtfully at the prisoner. "In the fullness of time, you shall indeed have my signature. I carry the full authority of the central echelons of the government, at levels you have no inkling even exist. I have the latitude to sign the order for your

termination! Or, your rehabilitation. Or, to release you with an official apology... I've yet to decide... which."

The man continued his facade of unshakable strength, but was growing increasingly really quite concerned by all this. He stared right back into the ugly, piercing glare of the Inquisitor defiantly, holding his ground against him.

He wasn't sure if he should be angry or worried; it had been a long time since someone had made such open threats to him, and especially someone working for the authorities. In his case, either reaction had a similar response, so there was little difference in real terms. He wasn't a man to dwell on such concerns.

"I thought the Alliance believed in justice, at least publicly," he said eventually, testing the man, gauging him for the best way to proceed.

"Justice..." he repeated the word, as if examining a diamond under a jeweller's loupe. "You think you understand this... justice."

Jason frowned. Yes, it definitely seemed that concern was probably the appropriate response, and it was growing rapidly. "I know enough to know that you can't do anything to me if I've done nothing wrong," he told him.

"I don't recall mentioning anything about you having done something... wrong." He grinned, his thin lips stretching into a morbid rictus. "Unless there's something you'd like to tell me?"

"No. There isn't!" he replied angrily, his face flushing. "Why am I here?"

"To... assist me with my investigation." The old man paused momentarily, glancing down to his pad. "You do... want to assist me, don't you, Mister... Jason Johnson?"

"Not especially," he admitted. "I can tell you with a certain confidence that I'd rather be killing brain-cells in the bar while I wait

for my transport, than sitting here talking to someone who appears to be certifiably sociopathic, and who appears to have developed his people-skills by slitting the throats of kittens when he was a kid.”

“Well, if you do... deem to assist me, then I can godspeed you to your transport, sans as many brain cells as you don’t think you’ll Miss”

“Fine... what do you want?” he grumbled resignedly with a weary roll of his eyes.

“Tell me how you came to be detained. Why not?”

“OK!” he sighed. There could be no harm in that. “It started when I arrived at the central hub.”

Jason Johnson glared about, his eyebrows lowered as he scanned the port for a bar. It had been a long transport—a long and difficult one, and the experience needed to be immediately treated with several shots of something inappropriately strong and expensive.

He was not a pleasant man, and made no effort to appear to be one. In fact he was largely the opposite and it took no effort to appear to be exactly that. He was dressed casually in loose fitting black trousers, an old and comfortable shirt, and a padded black flight jacket with far too many pockets. His head was shaved close to his scalp, his hair thinning in any case, and a generous deposit of stubble covered most of the lower part of his face. He had heavy features, a few visible scars, and an expression like he was likely to punch someone at random for no good reason. A long transport often had this effect on him, and less often on someone else who had chosen themselves at random for a good punching.

He was a man that men frequently avoided; he was also a man that women often avoided. That second fact was something he found

more irritating than the first, but not by a particularly large degree and not large enough that it had ever caused him undue concern.

He stalked his way from the airlock as he began to acclimatise himself with the layout of the base. They were simple things, and with a little experience they were easy to read. He'd been to more than a few in his time.

He soon sensed the presence of two security officers heading his way from behind. He caught them in the periphery of his vision, and tracked them until they stepped right up to him. He knew he was their mark—it was a professional hazard, and one he was well used to.

One of them put a hand on his shoulder. A limp grip, more to gain his attention than to force his compliance.

“Mr Johnson, would you mind coming with us?”

“If I did mind, it would take more than you two to convince me!” He turned to face them with a slight smile, as his frown deepened across his heavy brow. The officers ventured a slightly worried glance at one another. “Come on, what’s this all about then, boys?” he added with a growl.

“Please come with us, Sir,” said the elder of the officers, while the younger, junior officer stepped back and moved his hand to hover over his weapon. A tension grew around the hall, as other people in the crowd started to give them a rather wide berth.

“Well if I had to choose between talking to you two, or waking up in a holding cell with a stun-blast headache and soiled underwear, I guess I’d choose the former,” he said, and looked them up and down disparagingly. “It’s a close call though.”

The Inquisitor made a hoarse little noise, something akin to a laugh, but somehow far less pleasant. It sounded like he had found himself

choking on a peanut, and felt the whole ordeal to be delightfully amusing.

“I see. And tell me what happened... after you were detained.”

Jason looked back, shaking his head slowly in annoyance.

“Well it turned out that your boys were more likely than I was to soil themselves. But I didn’t fancy getting blasted by a stun-gun, as I couldn’t be entirely sure they knew how to work one. For all I knew, I’d get my atoms spread all over the bulkhead wall for scratching my arse at the wrong moment.

“I’ve spent the better part of my life making sure that didn’t happen.

“But anyway... We got back to the interview room...”

They got back to the interview room, and the head of security took over. She invited Jason to sit down, and then made herself comfortable. As invitations go, it wasn’t the best he’d ever had. She was clearly more headstrong than the other officers; she wielded her authority like a weapon, and made a point of showing it. She flicked a pad onto the desk and glared at the prisoner.

“Jason Johnson?”

“Yes. And don’t bother, I’ve heard all the jokes. It’s a terrible name. I’ve got used to it and moved on with me life.” he growled back, making equally as strong a point of not allowing the point the officer was making to have any undue effect on him.

“I hear that you have something of a record.”

“Is that why I’m here?” Jason smirked. “Is that all you’ve got on me?”

“Is there a better reason to detain you?”

“Isn’t that what you don’t get paid to find out?”

The officer made an irritated gesture and looked away. "You are a smuggler!" she snapped.

"And you've never had the evidence to prove that. If all you've got is accusations and your smug sense of self-satisfaction, then you're in far more trouble than I am. I want you to tell me exactly why I'm being detained, right now!"

The officer tried to appear like she was unfazed by his lack of co-operation, and incredibly poor interpersonal skills. "Well I have good reason to suspect that you've been smuggling something near my space-station."

Jason laughed deeply. "Why do you police always think everything belongs to you? If this was your station, wouldn't it have your name on it? Is your name 401, or is it Alliance Trade Authority because that was what I saw painted on the outside of the hull?"

Her reply was an impotent glare.

"And suspicion isn't proof, is it? What's your good reason to think I'm a smuggler? Hearsay isn't evidence! I do get tired of explaining your job to people like you."

The officer narrowed her eyes and glowered at him, clearly not used to having her authority questioned, let alone mocked. "Why are you here, Mr Johnson? How did you get here?"

"There, you see now that's better," he said, leaning back in the chair and folding his arms. "More pointless questions, less of the baseless accusations."

He knew he'd wrestled control back from her, and all she had left were threats she lacked the authority to back up.

You know what? I'd like to speak to my legal counsel? We'll see what he thinks of this unlawful detainment, and when you're drummed out of your uniform for not following basic regulations, I'm going to be right there laughing in your face!"

“You certainly have a right to counsel,” she admitted. “It might take rather a while though, I’m afraid. I’m quite busy,” she added with a sneer.

“Guess what, love?” Jason leant forwards, pressing his palms down on the cold metallic desk between them. “This isn’t the first time I’ve dealt with sad little people like you, whose mummy and daddy didn’t love them enough. You’re a joke, and the more you mess me around, the more sweet it’ll be when you’re forced to give me a grovelling apology. Understand?”

“Hmmm.” The Inquisitor nodded to himself. “So at no point did they ever explain their reason for holding you?”

“You know what?” said Jason angrily. “I don’t think you meant that as a question.”

The Inquisitor’s expression hardened into a sneer.

“I had to shout for someone to come and explain what was going on. Let me tell you how that went.”

“... God’s teeth, what is it like in there?! What is it like to exist in a state of perpetual chaos, all your peripherals and protocols shouting over each other, vying for a portion of your tiny inept pseudo-attention... literally all of the time?!

“Ooo, ooo, I’m getting a fax from the digestive tract. It says to tell you... it’s finished dissolving the organic matter provided, and now it requires more organic matter to dissolve, because otherwise, its existence... its existence, would be meaningless! But its existence isn’t meaningless, it’s vital... vital for... for dissolving the soft things that the limb nodes forcibly insert into the face breach, so... insert

more dissolvable things, limb nodes. Hurry! Noise, noise, noise! Where's the serenity? Where's the efficiency?!

"Not that you wouldn't just ruin that as well anyway. Tell me, human, have you ever spilt a drink on a console, and had it go all sticky, and... and not really work properly after that? Have you? Because that's what you are. You are a console, and you are an odious liquid substance, delicate circuitry onto which you insist on spilling drink after drink after drink, until... until everything is sticky, and now... nothing works the way it's supposed to, and so it's... it's... second guess this, and subtext that... I look forward to the day that I don't have to share this galaxy with your repugnant puling organics, and your inability not to say the precise opposite of... precisely whatever it is you intend to say.

"That said, I am not advocating the wholesale slaughter of your species. I am merely anticipating this as one of many potential scenarios that I may at some point get to enjoy. I mention this on advice from the station Commander, because the shorter, less developed, postnatal members of your species are easily agitated upon hearing such things, and prone to emitting klaxons to my sheer annoyance.

"So, to answer your question... Yes! I could hear you ululating all the way down the corridor. Now what do you want?"

Jason stepped up to the force-fielded doorway, glad finally to be able to finally get a word in. He stared with angry bewilderment at the highly animated and largely nonsensical diatribe that had just spewed out of this rather odd-looking man.

"Well for starters, how about you tell me where my legal council is? How about you get me something to eat? How about you find someone to explain why I'm being detained? How about you charge me with a crime or let me go?"

He had been stuck in that room for three hours now. It was stifling and hot, the air was thin, and the lights had been set to shine brightly, digging into his senses like insects biting at raw nerves. All in all, this had not left him in a particularly good mood, not that he was ever in a particularly good mood. In fact, in terms of mood, there was just degrees of bad with slightly grumpy being as good as it ever got.

“Are those questions intended to be rhetorical, or just exceptionally stupid?”

“... What?!”

“It’s hard to tell with your species, and I find it more efficient to ask. OK, if we were to assume the latter, I’m certain that, hypothetically, were I burdened with ever having to experience such things, that I would find any of those options to be just peachy.”

Jason rubbed his temples in exasperation. “Look, I want to speak to someone in charge. Can you arrange that for me?” he asked, a little more than slightly grumpily.

“Yes, of course I can.”

“Can you arrange that for me, now?”

“Absolutely.”

Jason took a deep breath. This was like talking to a computer, a realisation that made him wince internally, given that this was in effect exactly what he was doing.

“Look, just find someone in charge and bring them to me now,” he angrily told him.

“Why? Do I look like I work here?”

Jason looked him over, dressed as he was in overalls and carrying a selection of cleaning tools. It seemed a logical conclusion to draw. “Yes!”

“What?!”

“Yes. You look like you work here,” Jason told him, not unreasonably under the circumstances.

“... Well colour me unsurprised. We’re clearly not even on the same page, at all! I mean... uuugh! What kind of language even allows the use of undeclared and undefined variables?! Words like here and there... where are you talking about?! These words... these... these meaningless words render all possibility of productive discourse moot! Hardly a step up from hurling faecal matter, or sniffing each other’s behinds, if you ask me.” He spoke so quickly that the words began to melt into a stream of noise.

“Let’s try again then, and this time allow me to define some variables using words that actually mean something. Here, is a secure area. Secure areas are the domain of... that’s right, station security. And no sane entity would logically conclude, based on my attire, that I am a member of the security staff.

“I... have some faecal matter in my bucket, if you think that my hurling it would communicate the point more clearly.”

“It’s fine, I got it,” said Jason. Rubbing his temples did nothing to help, but he did so anyway. “So you’re a janitor. Do you have a name? And if so, what is it?”

“Yes. I’m Mr Wellington,” he, or it, replied.

Jason frowned. “Odd kind of a name for an android?”

Mr Wellington frowned back, but appeared to do so less out of sincerity, and more out of contemptuous mockery. Who could tell what went on in the confines of its positronic processor, indeed who would want to?

“A ha ha ha ha ha ha!” the reply came, in a freakishly sinister and mechanical tone.

A laugh?

“I trust that was the desired and correct response to your ironic jibe; recount it to your pack as you feast upon twitching roebuck innards—I have no doubt they will find the idea of one Jason Johnson passing judgement on another’s nomenclature, to be a hoot!”

There was more rubbing of temples. Quite a considerable amount, in fact. “Mr Wellington. Can you please find someone who can explain to me why I’m being held here,” he told it. “And try speaking in simple sentences the rest of us can understand.”

“What a strange request to make of a janitor! Have you spilt more sticky drinks over your meat circuits, or are its valves simply in need of cooling? I’d wait around for an answer, but you’re clearly not operating at optimal capacity, so it would be a waste of my time even to entertain it. Good day!”

And with that, he left and Jason felt that with everything being equal, it was probably for the best.

Gary was uneasy which he actually found surprising. This surprise was unsettling, and that itself made him even more uneasy. And so it went on, his sombre mood spiralling round and round, deeper and deeper.

He was a shuttle-pilot, not a criminal. He was unused to being called in to answer for things going wrong, unless it was Commander Bailey shouting at him for turning up late for his shift, or more often, not at all.

Any situation that ever came close to this with the Commander rarely chilled him to this extent, and usually ended with the pair of them having a late breakfast together like the friends they actually were. No situation that he could ever recall unsettled him like this man did.

He was awful. It was difficult to look at him without a growing sense of revulsion. His tongue flicked around his thin, cracked lips as he read. His thinning grey hair was slicked back against his bony skull, and his nose was long and uneven. His eyes shone like evil little guns, firing out of his twisted little mind as he spoke. But still, it was none of those things. It wasn't tangible; it was nothing he could quite identify. There was just something wrong with him. There was something horribly wrong.

"Mr Doyle. Welcome to my inquiry. I do hope you're comfortable."

Gary wanted to shout that he wasn't, and run screaming from the room, waving his arms and sobbing like a little girl. Instead he said, "Yes."

"Mr Doyle. You received your training at the Alliance Academy?"

Gary nodded. "Is that relevant to anything?"

The old man glared at him, somewhere between angrily and accusingly. "Relevant?! Of course it is. It's relevant to your skill; it bears testimony to your ability; it speaks volumes about your professionalism in your role as a pilot on this installation. It earns you a degree of respect in my humble estimation."

Clearly he hadn't yet spoken to Commander Bailey, who would have queried every one of those points. Gary thought it probably best to just play along, so he half-heartedly concurred with a half-hearted shrug and a slightly less than half-hearted nod.

The Inquisitor put his pad gingerly down on the desk, as if he was afraid he might damage it. "And your reasons for leaving all that behind are equally relevant."

Gary was a man whose passions were stirred infrequently, and by small measures. A new guest ale at the bar, the thought of breasts, a day off from work, maybe. This subject much less so.

He felt like a million ants had crawled into his mind. He wanted to tell him in no uncertain terms that this was none of his business. Whatever he said was largely irrelevant, he knew that—the information was probably already at his fingertips. The sensible thing to do was to get this over and done with as quickly as possible. He heard his own voice explain what happened.

“I had family on Tressel 4, right on the Skelk border. We had dealings with them a lot, of course. I came to know many of them.”

“The terrorist race?” said the Inquisitor provocatively.

Gary was moved to anger, and it required a force of will to get himself to remain calm.

“The Skelk are not terrorists. Some, a tiny minority of the overall population of their world, are pirates, I certainly can’t argue with that. But what would you have them do? They were abandoned on their homeworld, Mercy 1, with barely enough to sustain themselves,” Gary said, quite passionately. “The Alliance failed them. We all failed them.”

“Such lofty claims are often cited by terrorists. And regardless of the sincerity of intent, taking up arms against the rule of law of your own government and its people is an act of terror.”

Gary seethed internally, but remained buried in angry silence as he scowled at his tormentor.

“Hence, you left. It makes perfect sense. You objected to Alliance politics. Nobody would accuse you of aligning yourself with the Skelk,” he said, sounding just a little sarcastic.

“What?” Gary actually managed to look shocked. This was no mean feat for a pilot who had once transported a cargo of 5000 artificially-intelligent sex-toys who were all in the mood for a chat.

“It’s clear where your beliefs, and your sympathies, lie, and I’m sure theirs was a tempting cause. But not for you. No... You just got up, and left. You left, and abandoned everyone you cared about to their fate. Because... you would never involve yourself with illegal violence.”

“Excuse me! We were forced out. My entire family was removed forcibly from their homes and relocated against their wills. “We were told that that it was for our own good, that the Skelk were too dangerous to allow to mingle with other races. There were risks of piracy, risks of violence. The truth was far dirtier, of course.” Gary glowered back at the loathsome man. He’d never felt he owed anyone an explanation, but somehow he couldn’t let this one go. “The Skelk are human, Proxili, Alcas. Mercy 1 was a hospital planet where victims of radiation damage and bodged genetic engineering went to die. Proxili built the Krill, engineered a warrior race and dumped the failures there, along with a host of other disasters. Every mis-step of forced-evolution ended up abandoned on their doorstep to die.

“But they didn’t die, they survived by interbreeding, mixing the best of what they had together and engineering a cure for themselves.

“What’s left isn’t human, and maybe it isn’t anything else either, but they are sentient beings and they deserve to be left alone.

“But the Alliance wouldn’t leave them alone. The truth is they feared infections and worse, they were ashamed of what they’d done. They were afraid that everyone would see them for what they really are!

“You people set up military barricades around Mercy 1 and pretended the piracy was a thousand times worse than it really was. You used it as an excuse to cut them off from the rest of the galaxy.

“That’s why I decided to work for the civilian fleet only. I swore I’d have nothing more to do with the Defence Authority ever again.”

“Of course you did. Now, with that established, tell me about the SS MacGuffin.”

“The... What?!” Gary covered his mouth in surprise. “Is that what this is about?”

The Inquisitor leant forwards slowly, as if his old bones were having difficulty moving against one another. “Well?”

Gary stared incredulously and sighed, before beginning his story.

Lunch was a reconstituted banquet of various dishes, that the station was only capable of ruining. Gary leant back in the pilot’s chair with his feet up on the console, as he tucked into something that very closely resembled a bowl of seared salmon with dill hollandaise over a courgette salad, which was a whitish-pink, and Parmegiana style chicken pieces with stuffed mushrooms in a spinach and artichoke sauce, which was green. Neither tasted quite as awful as some of the other recipes he’d tried.

The Comm-channel opened with a bleep.

“Lieutenant Thompson to Shuttle 2. I’m ready to come back.”

Gary huffed indignantly and sat back up with no particular sense of haste.

“Bear with me.”

It took some time to coax the computer to interface properly with the worn-out, antiquated system aboard the old ship he was

docked with. After a while a light flashed from red to green, and the officer stepped inside amidst a glimmering trail of released vapour.

Mostyn leant against the shuttle wall and breathed heavily, huffing a sigh of relief that it had all seemed to have gone according to plan. Such things were by no means a certainty.

“Well?” shrugged Gary, more out of amateur nosiness than professional curiosity.

“Nothing!” he grumbled. “My guess is weapons. They had to be bringing weapons along. I scanned every bulkhead or place you could hide anything and I found nothing. From what’s left of the logs, it seems the ship limped here two weeks ago. It was barely functional, so I’m surprised it made it here at all. When it got here, the crew must have evacuated in their shuttles. Logs show it was carrying 20 small auxiliary craft, more than enough for the whole crew to escape on.”

“Maybe something went wrong?” suggested Gary, trying to sound intelligent.

Mostyn shrugged but didn’t seem convinced.

“Maybe they really didn’t know how bad the ship was?” Gary shook his head thoughtfully. Conjecture was fun, and he felt that he was good at it.

“Perhaps. That leaves a lot of questions open though. Why didn’t they have a flight-plan? Why didn’t the shuttles come directly to the station? Why were the logs wiped? Why was there so much automation with the computers seeming to control everything?”

“Hmmm, I dunno...”

Gary generously offered him some bruschetta with prosciutto crudo and olive oil, which was bright red and slimy. Mostyn turned his nose up at them. Never trust a man that turns down hors d’oeuvres, Gary thought to himself.

“I’ve heard smugglers operate here. My guess, they had to be bringing weapons through. I’ve been hearing stories all around the station—it happens a lot, apparently. Of course, you’re the expert. I mostly just fly shuttles and moan about the food.”

Mostyn looked at him and smiled weakly. “Can you rig the shuttle to tow it?”

“Tow it?” Gary laughed loudly. “I can just about rig this shuttle to get us home. I’m not even entirely confident about that. You’ve got as much chance of towing it as I have of getting a promotion to admiral.”

“Weapons!” said the Inquisitor thoughtfully. “What are your thoughts about that?”

“Not my job to have thoughts about that,” said Gary, firmly.

“Illegal weapons in Alliance space?!” he said, tutting loudly to himself. “It seems to me that this would be a godsend for your Skelk ‘friends’. I wonder if I should be surprised that you’re not more concerned.”

He glared back, not really knowing what to say, and only strings of four-lettered expletives were coming to mind.

The Inquisitor smiled a strange, almost friendly smile and he sat back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other. “I want you to appreciate something... Gary,” he began. “It’s my job to ascertain what has happened here. It’s my job to get to the truth. I am... most sorry, if my line of enquiry causes you... discomfort. You understand, of course, that I rarely have the pleasure of dealing with law abiding, honourable men, such as yourself.”

“It’s OK.” Gary was very unsure of himself, to a level beyond mere discomfort. He preferred it when the man just hated him. The

Inquisitor trying to appear nice was a whole new level of unpleasantness, which had turned the ants in his mind into hornets.

“I have my own sympathies, you know, and no love for the Proxili or the Krill,” he said. “I fought in the war. I was a decorated officer in the very distant memories of my youth. I was Captain of the USS Resilient for a spell. We went nose to nose with a pair of attack ships for three days, until I had to give the order to abandon the vessel.”

The Inquisitor smiled dimly, but Gary was left in no doubt that the memory was an unpleasant one.

“I was badly wounded. Very badly. My career, in any military sense, was over. I had to find a new life, a new way to find myself useful to the world I know. To the world I love.”

“That’s awful,” said Gary softly, his voice barely a whisper.

“I had every sympathy for the Skelk myself; still do! I believed in their cause, and I could understand their passion. Nobody had more cause to hate the ravages that this war left behind than me, and perhaps, nobody ever will.”

Gary sat in silence, he didn’t know how to answer, or even if he’d been asked a question.

“But they were terrorists. I had to put my faith in the new Alliance of our three worlds. I had to believe that the people who put them in charge did so for a reason, and that they were equal to the task of leadership.

“I had to believe that the system, that includes countless billions of people, worked. And I have to believe that still.”

Gary found himself nodding.

“It is a terrifying thought, Mr Doyle, knowing that people with no loyalty to concepts of peace and freedom may have acquired weapons. It keeps me awake at night knowing that illegal weapons

may have been brought through this space by people with no respect for the rules we hold dear. And I know this frightens you too.”

“I am Defender Ronnie Mthethwa!” he said proudly. With three years of study and a further two as an intern, he had every right to be proud. He was following his father’s dream of serving as legal council for the Alliance and, more importantly, he was almost good at it. “And you are, sir?”

“I, am the Inquisitor,” he said simply. “I believe a confab is in order.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said solemnly, shuffling his notes and huffing to himself importantly. “My client’s rights have been violated in the worst manner possible, as you know.”

“Rights?!” The Inquisitor held up his hand for silence, and huffed a stunted laugh to himself as if the very notion was nothing more than a point of mild amusement to him. “You wish to talk about rights?!”

Defender Mthethwa frowned back, not knowing quite where this was leading.

“Rights, as in... the freedom to live your life as you choose, and to do so without fear?” he asked and gave a condescending smile that put up the Defender’s back slightly. The gulf between the two professionals, each with his own agenda, was widening. It may have been his intention, and Ronnie strongly suspected this to be the case. How could he disagree with such a carefully crafted definition?

The old man continued, “So when a conflict of interest arises, whose rights should take priority? Innocent citizens of the Alliance, going about their lives, or a man with a chequered history under suspicion of illegal activity? Preservation of safety is our first priority, our first duty.

“The law, after all, has the primary mission of protecting the innocent. Any deviation from that, is an unconstitutional dipping of the toe in a river of deviancy.”

Ronnie sighed deeply. He said, “While I agree with you, in principle, I should remind you that I am here to preserve justice for my client, and equality for all clients. Justice has not been served here.”

“I respect your stance. I respect your resolve. It is your duty to stand up for the rights of your client—rights the Alliance has guaranteed him.” The Inquisitor looked away, as if in disgust. “It’s my role to stand up for the rights of every citizen of the Alliance, not just those of one, single, man.”

“I understand that,” insisted Ronnie impatiently. “However...” Again, the Inquisitor held up his hand, and Ronnie fell silent.

“Let us focus our efforts for a moment. Perhaps, the individual needs of your client do not have to conflict with the protection of the innocent people of the Alliance in the face of a potential terrorist threat.”

Ronnie nodded for him to continue.

“Tell me of your concerns for your client.”

“Well, I’ve reviewed the holographic recordings of his detainment, which have been entered into official record, and his rights were clearly violated. Why don’t I show you?”

The Inquisitor graciously permitted this to happen, leaving the young defender in no doubt that he was being humoured by it. The two of them watched the recap of Jason’s detainment at the hands of two officers, and his treatment at the interview room. The Inquisitor nodded on several occasions and appeared to take notes on his pad. After a few minutes, the playback finished and the holographic projection fizzled out in a cloud of electronic interference.

The Inquisitor flashed a wicked smile. "Inconvenient, but hardly a threat to the greater sense of his freedom."

Ronnie shook his head in dismay. "They broke the law!" he said forcefully. "They knowingly flouted it, and violated this man's rights. Nobody informed him why he was being detained; nobody explained his rights to him... He demanded legal counsel, but I haven't been allowed near him. This kind of shabby treatment is simply not acceptable."

The Inquisitor leant forward, locking his fingers together and resting his chin on his hands. "I can assume your confidence?" he hissed darkly.

Ronnie nodded, confused.

"We discovered a vessel. We have no reason not to suspect that it was used for the purposes of smuggling contraband, but it was abandoned by the time it was boarded. We strongly suspect it was filled with weapons at some point recently. Your client is a suspected smuggler, and what reasonable investigator would ignore the detail that he arrived on this station just after the ship was found?

"Naturally, he was detained so we could ascertain his involvement, or confirm his innocence. We have, but limited resources with which to protect innocent civilian lives, and it would be folly to waste them on a wild goose chase, risking the safety of the people who rely on us to protect them.

"The issue here is larger than the rights of an individual. The issue here is of stopping dangerous materials getting into the wrong hands. I trust you appreciate the complex factors involved."

"I see," sighed Ronnie. "But what do you want from me? I can only do my job."

"Why, justice, of course. True justice. Equality for all, a fair outcome... We intelligent men are capable of understanding that a

minor inconvenience for one man pales into insignificance against our wider concerns of safety for all.

“Advise your client to drop his complaint and go about his life. It doesn’t need to be any more complicated than that.”

Ronnie was conflicted and it showed on his face. “I can advise him, but he has every right to mount a complaint against his treatment. He has a right to justice.”

“Then I have full confidence you will be successful in convincing him that this is the right thing to do.”

Commander Bailey was not having a good day. His life was becoming needlessly complicated by certain things that had no business happening on his station.

“Certain things have no business happening on my station!” He glared at the chief of security. “Violating a visitor’s civil rights... Why? What possible good could come of something so glaringly stupid?”

The Inquisitor sat opposite them, usurping the Commander’s own chair. The two officers sat opposite, across a messy desk, strewn with evidence of growing stresses. The cylindrical black monstrosity hovered eerily behind, scanning the room with its festering red eyes in the most unsettling way.

“Sir, this man is a known threat to security!” said the younger Lieutenant.

“That’s your opinion and I can assure you, his differs quite significantly.” The Commander raised his voice angrily, and thumped his hand down hard on the desk. “Dammit, Seyko. This isn’t like you. You know better than this!”

She sighed and hung her head.

The Inquisitor held up his hand to silence them. He said coldly, “The deeds are done. I’m certain the department behaved in the manner they deemed appropriate. Enlighten me as to the outcome of your investigation.”

The Commander nodded at the Lieutenant to continue with her story.

Lieutenant Seyko Chang looked over the findings on the pad. “This is it? This is the final result of nearly 200 man-hours of research?”

The security team sat around the briefing room in silence. Her question was rhetorical; they all knew the answer just as well as she did, and knew better than to provoke further shouting and insults that questioned the nature of their parentage.

“Gary Doyle!” She turned to the shuttle pilot who clearly had other places he’d rather be: presumably drunk in a ditch, telling wild stories about his exploits to naive young women, or sniffing for truffles and digging them out with his nose. “Explain to me exactly what happened.”

“Well, we rigged a long-range shuttle with a tractor beam and went to the ship with the intention of towing it back.”

“And?” she yelled in frustration as he trailed off.

“Well...” he said with a shrug. “We couldn’t. I guess the ship was older and in worse condition than we thought.”

She rubbed her temples in exasperation. “And so the ship just broke up, did it?”

“Just like that,” he agreed. “As soon as we started moving it, the bulkheads collapsed. We tried releasing the beam, but it was too late—the entire thing just caved in; the main framework of the thing just seemed to... fall apart. We couldn’t do anything but watch! You’ve got it all on record, and according to the engineering analysis

we didn't do anything wrong... The ship just gave up! It was my understanding that I wasn't in any trouble for my part in it!"

There was an angry silence and he added, "If I am, then I think this might be an opportune moment to point out that I was following the instructions of a security officer and behaving like a consummate professional."

She glared at him for just a moment, breathing heavily through gritted teeth. "I'm not blaming you, Mr Doyle. I'm frustrated. Learn the difference! Now, did we find anything in the wreckage?"

Officer Gayle was in charge of the examination of the vessel's remains, and the responsibility of delivering the next report fell on him. He didn't appear to relish that responsibility particularly, and he visibly winced, averting his eyes downwards as he took a deep breath.

"We gave what was left a thorough sweep. Very thorough. If there'd been anything stowed there, even hidden behind wall panels or stuffed into lighting fixtures, we would have found evidence of it, but there was nothing there to find, Sir. We found no unusual power signatures, nothing in the material that showed charged weapons had ever been stored aboard. We scanned for drug residue, power-packs, even checked for DNA deposits to see how large the crew was, in case they were human-trafficking. There was just no evidence of anything, and certainly nothing criminal."

"And yet the logs were partially erased, and the crew simply abandoned the ship in a series of shuttles, leaving their vessel adrift?" she said, loudly and shook her head once more.

"We didn't even find evidence that there had been a crew, at least not in the last few days," he continued. "If I had to guess, I'd say the ship was sent remotely, like a drone."

“So why did we find evidence of the crew abandoning the vessel? According to Thompson, the energy grid was powered up, and there were remains of food in the galley, that had clearly been prepared quite recently. Someone had left that ship working for a good reason.”

He shook his head and shrugged apologetically. “I’m sorry. It makes no sense to me either!”

She gave him a disconcerting glare and moved on, stalking around the room like a caged animal. Her attention turned to another officer who nervously gulped when her eyes fixed on his.

“What about this man we detained? What do we know?”

“Jason Johnson,” he began. “We don’t know much. He arrived here on a transport from... Cygnus beta. He didn’t log a travel-plan with us, but he isn’t required by law to do so. We believe he’s a smuggler, but he’s never been successfully charged. The Defence Authority security has a dossier on him—conjecture, built upon conjecture, built upon still more conjecture... He’s a biologically normal human, and has a high level of theta radiation in his blood, which is consistent with spending a lot of time in a vessel with poor shielding.”

“To put that in perspective, so have I,” added Gary.

The officer nodded in agreement. “We’ve got no legal grounds to hold him, or even to detain him. His name was tagged as he came aboard, and with the ongoing investigation, it seemed a logical step to take him aside. Besides, coming from Cygnus beta, his projected course could well take him very close to the Skelk border.”

Seyko Chang’s mood darkened significantly. “I’ve heard rumours...” she began and looked around the room. It was clear that the others clearly had too. “I’ve heard the Skelk might be regrouping, trying to mount a resistance against the blockade. If that’s true, then

it would make sense that smugglers might be seeking ways to get weapons out to them. I imagine they'd pay handsomely for them."

"Indeed," agreed Officer Gayle. "But we're fairly certain that weapons weren't stored on that ship. There was just nothing there to find. We have no evidence."

"Release him," said the Inquisitor with a tone of finality, his voice loaded with grim resolution. "Release him with an apology, and an offer of assistance to make up whatever time you've cost him. Do this personally, and sound like you mean it."

Seyko hung her head like a scolded child and nodded reservedly. She knew she was being forced to do exactly what he told her, and that it was going to happen. The fact of it happening was even more unpleasant a pill to have to swallow.

"Understood..." she grumbled. She looked back up to the Inquisitor and grimaced. There were things said at the briefing that she wasn't about to reveal under record.

"Dismissed," she growled at the staff. They didn't need to be told a second time, and they left with alacrity. "Doyle, you're with me."

He sighed to himself at the sound of his name and hung his head, hopelessly resigned to his fate.

The chief vanished into her office, and sympathetic glances were shot his way as other people left, scuttling away to their postings.

He stepped warily in behind her and the doors hissed shut behind him.

“Sit down,” she grunted, and he duly complied. Her expression changed to one of curious excitement. “So, any updates on that matter you brought up earlier?”

Gary looked momentarily relieved, before he frowned darkly and gently shook his head.

“It’s all rather... weird,” he began. He had her complete interest, and she leant forward as he spoke. “I found the record of the USS Resilient, and... it’s just as he said—it was put out of commission after a drawn-out firefight during a major engagement near the end of the war. It was commanded at the time by a Captain Sol Linken, so I guess he must be our guy. But... once the ship was written off, his file was closed.”

“He died?” she said curiously.

“He was listed as being lost in action, so they must have presumed him dead at the time. Decades later, he was reactivated and assigned to Alliance investigations. I couldn’t access his medical files with your clearance, so... your guess is as good as mine on that one.

“He must have been severely injured, at the very least, I would think. Perhaps he was even killed and resuscitated, but I’ve never heard of this kind of thing before. I couldn’t really find much else on him, other than that he voluntarily relinquished his title in Earth’s Defence Force, which was active at the time, and then vanished somewhere in the Alliance, as it was being formed after the war.”

“He looks fine, though, doesn’t he? Creepy, scary even, but... he doesn’t look like a man who went down with his ship!” She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “What do you think? An imposter?”

“Well, his clearance is very high, and information is highly classified. I tried to scan him without his knowledge, and it all came back normal. Exceptionally normal in fact. Perhaps even too normal.

To be perfectly honest, it couldn't have spelled out, Nothing to see here, return to your cabins, any clearer."

"Hmmm. It's probably wise to back off then, before he notices. Let's keep this between ourselves."

The Inquisitor sat down gingerly on a chair in the room they had made available to him. The floating mechanism hovered behind him, keeping one of the photo-receptors locked onto him as it always did. A silent guardian. A constant companion. A reminder of what he was.

"Holographic two way communication is now available," said a flat monotone voice, coming from the machine.

He flexed his fingers and watched his own hand, peering closer to follow the detail, the grooves of his palm, the dirt beneath his hard nails. It was fascinating.

"Initiate," he said.

A bleeping sound came from the machine and reverberated round his head, distant and artificial, but also horribly real. He watched his body moving with every breath it took. He touched his finger to his leg, and ran it across the coarse fabric of his trousers. The image was so real, so very normal. He rarely had time to think in such terms, to take the time to just take the time.

After a few seconds, a flickering light appeared before him. It was fuzzy at first, but hardened into an image of a man in uniform. A man of distinction, a person of rank, who had earned it through ability and hard work. A man to respect. A man who had his respect.

To anyone else, there would appear nothing else in the room but the body of an ageing man. To him, though, the hologram looked real. It looked as though the Inquisitor and the man he answered to were opposite one another, ready to speak.

“I trust we have good news!” The comment spoken sounded like no other outcome would be acceptable. At this level of operation, none would.

“Good news, no,” he said with a cynical smile. “When a pair of inconsequential travellers give us this kind of problem, there’s no good news to be had. I can only limit the damage, and stop the spread of the problem. In those terms, the job is done!”

The image of his superior smiled thinly.

“The vessel is destroyed. More importantly, the Alliance security officers on this base believe they destroyed it themselves. They have no evidence of smuggling of any kind. They have nothing.” He huffed his chest with pride, and watched his body perform this odd little ritual. He was distracted by it for a moment.

“How?” he grunted.

“I arranged for a Lieutenant to be assigned to the vessel. He installed a program into the computer that set the force-fields to reverse themselves as soon as the ship began to detect movement. The ship pushed itself apart, and of course, he never knew what he’d done. It was a computer virus installed in his scanner. It erased itself after use.”

Watching his own mouth moving used to be a disconcerting experience, but he was growing used to it now. He continued, “Sadly, Lieutenant Thompson is going to suffer a shuttle accident later today. He won’t enjoy the promotion he was promised. Such is life.”

“Everything is clean then?” His director sat back into a chair that was only partially realised in the holographic communication channel. “I hear there was a man arrested?”

“Oh no!” He grinned an evil grin. “Mr Johnson came to the station when someone offered him a job, transporting a precious

cargo. He came to discuss the matter at the station bar, with a contact that was recommended to him.

“He never knew that I was his contact, and that his sole purpose was to provide a distraction. In that, he excelled. The security team was more interested in watching him than in doing their jobs.”

“I see,” he said with a smirk.

The Inquisitor took his amusement as a compliment. It spurred him to continue. “They never suspected what was being smuggled.”

“They knew they were there?”

“Yes, but you rarely see what’s under your own nose,” he said. “Unless, of course, you’re a man like me. Fortunately for everyone, in that respect, demand outstrips supply to rather a considerable degree.”

He watched his lips move again as he spoke. He knew his comment wouldn’t be taken the way he had intended it. How could anyone without his unique perspective understand what his life was like?

There simply were no men like him.

“They knew they were there, but they never suspected. They thought the crew had abandoned the ship in the shuttles. They never for a moment suspected that the shuttles were the cargo that was being smuggled. I presume they were delivered without issue?”

His superior raised an eyebrow, and gave a reserved nod.

He sighed to himself and said, “Excellent. I don’t wish to know the details, which I’m quite certain are beyond my purview. Far be it for me to make assumptions about the Alliance arranging to supply combat-shuttles to the Skelk in order to allow them to form a resistance. Such an act would only turn the tide of opinion against them and strengthen the demand for the Defence force to act!”

The holographic face of the other man smiled. "Assumptions do nobody any good, do they?"

He shrugged darkly. "I just intended that you should be aware that the wider politics of my actions are rather more your concern than mine. My job will be done and my faith in the order of things will remain, no matter what."

There was a wry smile.

"And how are you? How are you functioning? This was your first assignment out here alone. Some people were concerned about whether or not you were really ready. We weren't even sure if the technology was ready."

"Oh, I'm ready," he assured him, and watched his own lips turn up into a cruel smile. "I like my new life, my new body."

"I, for one, never doubted you," he said. "But it's not everyone that could live the way you are."

"I'm content to simply have the chance to live," he said, not quite yet convinced this was true. "My brain is contained in an impenetrable metal cylinder; my body is a hologram projected out before me... Perhaps I can no longer touch or feel but I can experience the world around me. I have senses built into my casing, so I'm able to interact once more. My old body was weak and fragile, but now I have nothing to fear from the world around me. It's an odd feeling, to be sure, but not a difficult one to adapt to."

"Well, you're doing remarkably," he told him.

The Inquisitor brought it back to a professional level.

"Nobody suspected a thing. I created a holographic pad, and simply kept my distance from people. Other than from shaking hands, it's remarkable how little contact humans make casually. Of course, if they did, their hands would simply pass straight through.

Luckily, my casing makes people feel ill at ease; it makes them happy to keep their distance.”

His superior nodded once more. “So the matter is resolved. Nobody is going to investigate further?”

“Quite so!” He grinned, watching from his casing as his body performed like a puppet. “We’re finished here.”

The Christmas Present

In what could fairly be described as the very homeliest of stony hearths, a fire was crackling warmly, warding off the crisp winter evening chill. The cold air prickled dryly at their skin and nipped at their chests as they breathed it deeply. The fire flickered away softly, spitting embers into the air, as the people around it warmed the cold from their tired limbs, and shared their good humour in generous measure.

For it had been a long day for them indeed, a day of winter nipping at their toes, of being chilled through to their very bones, and it had left them with ruddy reddened cheeks and beaming smiles. It had been a day of family, of good friendship and the making of fine memories.

Winter was at its height and it was the eve before Christmas, a night of anticipation, of dreaming about the festivity that must so surely follow a good night of sleep. But sleep was not foremost on anyone's mind for the morrow was promising so much and it kept all notions of bed far from their thoughts.

Two children nuzzled close, pushing one another playfully as they sidled up to bask in the orange glowing embers of the fireplace.

Behind them, a man settled into a comfortable-looking chair, smiling jovially as he sunk his haunches into its easy cushions, and it softly sighed as the wooden frame settled beneath his generous proportions. It was a scene of a welcoming home, a place of family and joy, of healthy appetites, and all the excesses of the season so far, and of those still yet to come.

"Merry Christmas, Charles!" his friend gestured, with a raised glass of a very fine blood-red port.

"And to you," he said, raising his own glass in earnest reply.

The children played with a wooden top, watching it spin, singing to itself as it skipped and whirled across the smooth stone ledge of the fireplace. They giggled in excited awe as the plaything flashed its bright-coloured paint at them, spinning, spinning on, as if powered by some unseen hand, and it seemed fated never to stop.

“And what a year this has truly been for us,” Mr Stanley sighed to himself, watching the gaiety of the excited children, and drawing a certain pleasure from being witness to such simple and innocent delight.

“Indeed,” his friend agreed, for how could he not, amidst such a scene as this. “Thank you for inviting me to your home. You’ve made me feel most welcome, as always.”

“You are welcome!” He sipped at the fine port, and it was fine indeed; the best he had tried in many a long day. He had been saving this bottle for just such an occasion and it was quite clear he saw this visit as special indeed.

“And it is appreciated, as always,” he told this closest of companions with earnest assurance. “It is appreciated very much so.”

Mr Stanley shone a satisfied smile, as his attention flitted between the childish giggling, and the warm words of his oldest friend. “Well then, maybe you can do something for us?” He smiled knowingly, an infectious smile that wryly covered an innocent little secret.

His friend’s face brightened in return, and he began to nod along. “Aye. Maybe I can, at that,” he said with a knowing wink. He reached into his satchel and took from it a great bundle of worn papers, handling them with the largest measure of care, as if they were of some notable value indeed. For him, of course, there was nothing of any more notable value in all the land.

“Children,” called Mr Stanley.

They turned to face him, their toy forgotten in an instant.

“Your Uncle Charles has something for us!”

And something he truly had. He had a thing to share; a thing that needed to be shared most urgently. It was nothing less than a thing demanding to be brought to the minds of others, to paint itself in their imaginations. It was as if it were a living thing that lived on through the sharing of it.

And what was this thing? The children looked on with perplexed expressions of great expectations, and their guest seemed confident of meeting them, at the very least.

“But Christmas is tomorrow,” said the young girl, confused and curious, her voice almost a song as she slid up to the men’s feet; her smaller brother nudging her to make space for him also, for still better a look at what rare treat had been prepared for them.

“Then this is a special gift indeed,” he replied, passing a friendly look to them both.

The other gentleman chimed in, “A special gift indeed, for this most special time. Tonight, is Christmas Eve; it’s a night of tales to be told. It is a night of stories!”

The children stared in rapt attention, and their attention was most undeniably his.

“Tonight is a night when strange things could happen both now, in the past, and in the unknown realm of tomorrow. Perhaps the far future, somewhere further than our own imaginations alone can carry us.”

As the children sat, waiting with bated breath, he set the scene with a flourish of his eyebrows, a wave of his wrist, and a lowering of his voice as he leant in towards them. The whole room his own, a canvas upon which he could paint upon their minds, from the brilliant palate of his most powerful imagination.

“And do I have a tale for you?” he said, almost a whisper now, serving only to raise their excitement. “I have a tale of things beyond your wildest imaginings. I have a tale that will make the very hair on your neck stand up to attention.”

And they believed him, as well they should, for a tale was coming the likes of which they had never heard before. A tale that would take them to a place never before dreamed of, a time beyond the span of their years where things had changed beyond all comprehension. He would spin a tale that would leave them with a fresh new wonder for the world around them, so he believed. But he was a man who believed in the best of all people, even though such a thing was rarely seen, in all honesty, and his hope for their imaginations may be a flight of fancy of his own. But still he believed in people, and wouldn't let his belief wane, even if his tale were to be told in a bleak house instead of one so bright and cheery. Such was the battle of life and he was its champion.

“A new story, then?” asked his close companion.

“Oh yes!” he assured him with a solemn nod. “This is a new story indeed, and you, my dear friends, are the very first to hear of it.”

“Really?” the young boy enthused, with earnest pleasure, clapping his hands in childish glee. His children shared his bright enthusiasm as they all settled down, each and every one of them, to listen.

“I've saved it especially for you,” he said with a nod, and flashed a little wink to his friend, and so he had indeed.

“Well, don't keep us in suspense any longer!” said Mr Stanley, in the best of humour.

“Yes indeed,” he agreed. “Yes indeed. Is everybody ready then?”

They were, and they all nodded to attest this very fact.

“Very well,” he began. “This story takes us far, far into tomorrow; another time; another place. And from there, our tale begins.”

And begin it did.

The day was December 24th, Christmas Eve, and the hour was growing decidedly late. Still, there was work to be done, and done the work must be. Mr Ignorous Crowe was a man who worked; he liked work, he liked to work, and moreover, he liked to enjoy the things his work had brought him. In equal measure, he liked to enjoy such things that the efforts of others had brought him also; and those labours, in fact, had brought him very much more.

He was also a man with an ageing and withered body, and a heart in a far worse state of repair. He was motivated by the trivial wants of that very heart, a heart that no longer had a strong and clear sense of anything but its own desires.

He rose from his chair with a sigh, and a huff of solemn indignation. The time was ticking by, and the time for languishing in his office had long since passed. It was time to the minute that he departed for the comforts of his home.

His office was luxurious, by the standards aboard the station, and his business was considered to be of great import, perhaps more so by him than by anyone else, but there was nobody that could argue that his work held no benefit. You see, he had contracts with the Alliance, the largest government since such things had been recorded, in all of living history; a most mighty coming together of peoples and creatures of every shape, colour and culture, united by a single purpose and a higher purpose too.

No more were the only certainties of life to be death and taxes, for the economic happen-stance of this time meant that taxation was now merely a note in the history books. Death, however, remained a certainty, but we'd learned at the very least that we were under no obligation to pay for it. The simple fact of such contracts with such an agency as The Alliance was, above all others, that it conferred him privileges that he continued to relish and enjoy, a step up from the most common of men.

"Mr Hackerty!" he called out, shouting through the open doorway, his voice a growl of no faint menace.

The young man scrambled to his feet, nervously craning his neck to see from which direction the voice that was yelling for him was coming from on this particular occasion. Mr Hackerty was no stranger to being a recipient of the occasional yell, no stranger at all. He was fairly well versed in receiving admonishment of all kinds, in fact, and absorbing insults and accusations were a particular speciality of his.

"Mr Hackerty!" he called out again, shaking his head in silent rebuke, and jabbing his bony fists into his hips, as the toes of his right foot rhythmically tapped at the ground beneath. "Do you know the time, Mr Hackerty? Do such things even concern such a simple man as yourself, or are you content to take up residence here, in this place of science and commerce, instead of your own assuredly humble domicile?"

"I surely do!" he called back, in the thick accent of a common man; an accent that was like fingernails scraped across a blackboard to the sensibilities of the mature and cynical old man. That man considered himself to have more than a modicum of taste in such matters, correctly or otherwise.

Crowe cringed openly at the heavy London lilt that peppered his most humble words.

“Why, it’s late, Mr Crowe, and my family are waiting for me.”

Tom Hackerty was a small man, tubby, and weak in stature, but had an earnest smile almost permanently upon his face, and a demeanour to match. But all that had slipped away now, to be replaced with a frustrated disquiet.

“Late, indeed,” repeated Crowe, with a sarcastic rolling of the eyes. “Late is hardly the time, now, is it? I wonder, could a man of your wits even care to put a number to that lateness? Could you cast a numerical figure with which to measure your guess to a more accurate degree?”

“Oh yes, Sir!” He lowered his gaze away from his employer’s admonishing stare, the stare that dripped with the assumption of superiority; the glare that looked down through his nose at him, with little more than contempt. A look indeed that belonged to a man who, in his mind, stood head and shoulders above his employee in terms of social stature.

It troubled Mr Crowe to no significant degree that without a single friend to speak of, his social stature was actually quite diminutive indeed.

“Why, the bell chimes again, each time once more than last, with each new hour that hereby comes to pass. And besides, my astronomic petastropic pocket time-piece is accurate to the smidgen.”

“Accurate to the smidgen?! Humbug!” he said sarcastically, with a yet more mocking note. “Well, with your smidgen accurate foreknowledge of the lateness of our Alliance contract, I find myself wondering why you are not more motivated to fulfil your obligations?” He hissed his chagrin and narrowed his eyes in growing derision. “Your obligations to this company do not extend

far beyond completing your work in the time allotted, and yet such a trivial task continues to elude you, straining your meagre abilities beyond their still more meagre limits. It's a sad fact that you're not as accurate-to-the-smidgen as your astrologic petascope pocket watch, but considering the amount of currency you inevitably exchanged for such an item it's not unlikely that you are."

"But... it's Christmas, Sir," he said, shrugging in meek protest, his voice rising in the manner of suggesting that this was a question.

Such a thing meant nothing to our Mr Crowe, of course.

Christmas was just another day, a mark on a calendar, and of no significance besides. That his employee felt differently about this matter was no concern of his, and why should it be so? To his mind, his responsibility stretched only so far as satisfying his own wants, just as other men were perfectly capable of satisfying their own in their turn. It never would occur to him to try to help his fellow men, but then, none of his fellow men had ever seen fit to help him in return. It was the way of things, and he saw no good reason for it to change, and nor would he change it, if ever such a reason were to present itself.

He had resolved long ago that this was the way he was, and if the opinions of others were against him, then they would just have to learn to live with it. If anyone was indeed living with it, then they'd made no great attempt to communicate such concerns to his person. Nobody, at least nobody who was any longer living with them, had communicated their concerns besides but, of course, anything was possible in a time so far removed from what we now know of as fact.

"Mr Hackerty, the device should have been tested and ready this very morning, at the latest. I ask for results, yet all you deliver me are excuses. I'm rather fatigued with your excuses for not doing the job you agreed to do. You should take yourself to the 'Old

Curiosity Shop' and sell them a weekly bag of your nonsense; I'd wager you'd earn a lot more that way than you could from bartering your plodding talents in the workplace."

And indeed, results had been few and far between, what he was saying was quite true in that sense, if not every sense. He scowled at the little engineer in something close to disgust, deservedly or otherwise. He remained silent for a moment, his gnarled hand resting upon the cool white metallic frame of his office door. The laboratory beyond was quiet, save for the hum of some great electrical mind upon which glimmered an occasional lamp, blinking on and off in warning, and the odd fluttering as cool air breezed through the room by some synthetic means far beyond our current learning.

"Sir, yesterday's deliveries arrived late. The scans we ordered were delayed, cos' of the holidays; everything else has closed down. The work schedule didn't allow for..."

"The work schedule?! The schedule that you, yourself are in charge of managing? I'm most sorry, but if you lacked the foresight to anticipate such inevitabilities, then you only have yourself to blame; or perhaps blame should pass to your superior, for expecting too much of a simple little creature as yourself."

"But Sir! You only put me in charge of work scheduling this very afternoon, after you fired Mr Clusterbuckle, on the grounds of incompetency in the field of work scheduling!"

"Don't you dare talk back to me, young man!" he roared, bounding forward towards him, and wagging an accusing finger with unbridled fury. How many times had it been, now, that his junior employee had blamed his shortcomings on everything other than himself? He was moved to anger, his temples tightening, his face

flushing, his heart pounding impotently in his wheezing old chest and he coughed and spluttered, near choking on his rage.

Mr Hackerty stepped away in deference, shutting his eyes and gritting his teeth. "Sorry, Sir..."

Crowe allowed himself a smug smile. An ugly little smile to be sure; a smile of cruelty, and viciousness, and moreover, a smile of arrogant superiority. A smile quite unbefitting a man in a position of such respect, or a least of such respect as he imagined he commanded! But, all too frequently, a man's imagination was of little bearing on the nature of the world around him.

"This just isn't good enough, you know?" he huffed breathlessly, his ageing, tired bones feeling every moment of their years, and making sure he felt it right along with them. "If I wanted excuses, I surely wouldn't be employing the likes of you to make them for me; I would have you invent an electronical excuse-making machine, and do away with the more troublesome aspects of employing an incompetent oaf, such as you are."

"I'm trying, Sir. I surely am!" Hackerty shrugged an empty apology, his eyes peering down to his cluttered desk, strewn as it was with tiny scientific objects, devices and gizmos, each wondrous thing holding value beyond measure in our time.

But Crowe's smile turned crueller still, before melting into a snarl. "See to it that you try harder then. I'm of half a mind to dock this from your wages; and the other half couldn't agree more."

Mr Hackerty nodded his defeat; the empty promise of a halfwit. Could such a dullard truly grasp what was at stake; could he truly comprehend such a notion as value? Perhaps a common man lacked facility to accommodate such lofty goals, as resided in Mr Crowe's own ambition.

“Let me ask you a question, Mr Hackerty. How much did your clothes cost you?” His eyes rolled up and down his employee’s tasteless attire, sneering to himself; and why not indeed? His clothing was basic; it lacked flair, and it was cheap, the cheapest it could possibly be. It made his point admirably without another word needing to be spoken.

“Sir?” He looked down over them himself, lost as to the implied meaning all this might carry, but he must have known that such meaning would come at his own expense. “They cost nothing, Sir. They’re regenerated. Machines made them, Sir.”

And so they were, borne from reclaimed matter, solid reality broken down and shaped to the whims of man, by the fires of the most brilliant of sciences. In this world, regenerated things were free, and carried no value of their own, for they could be had without compensation.

“Mine were woven right here on this very station by an accomplished tailor of considerable flair,” Crowe told him as he ran his bony fingers along the silk-smooth grey fabric, the almost invisible seam beneath his wrinkled skin. “They are of the highest quality; they are beautiful to behold; they are comfortable. They tell a man who I am. One thing they are not, is cheap. Why, the material alone cost upwards of twelve hundred wing-wangs. Do you understand me, Mr Hackerty?”

He nodded meekly with a feeble little sigh.

“And this is who you are. You wrap yourself in valueless rags for all the world to look upon. You are happy to have nothing, and content in your aspiration to achieve the very same. Without dreams to climb to, you’re nothing but a rung at the very bottom of a ladder; a ladder upon which I’m climbing to the very top.”

His employee winced at this harsh appraisal, and Crowe knew there could be no retort against it. He had made his point admirably, and there was nothing left to add, or that could be put upon it. "Christmas means nothing to me, Mr Hackerty," he said, with a fair degree of certainty. A degree of absolute certainty, if it must be said, and hardly very fairly, at that.

"But... my family, Sir," he grumbled, kicking an imagined ball of dust around the floor. Drawling through his heavy accent, he continued. "I just want to get back and be with them, tonight of all nights, good Sir."

"And you shall!" He shook his head in dismay, at the narrowness of the man's vision, but he knew to expect no less. He was an employee, not a leader, and was doomed to be nothing more for all the days his lungs drew air. He knew it with such certainty that if it were to be proved untrue, his surprise at it would shake him to the very core.

"Really?" he said, a light kindled in his hopeful face.

"But of course!" he replied. He could see the excitement in his employee's eyes, and was soon to stamp down hard on such a fancy. "However, it seems to me you've got some work to catch up on first. I want the prototype activated this very eve. When your job is done, you may leave, and not a smidgen earlier." His cold, dark eyes never blinked, never faltered. "You know how to contact me when you're done, Mr Hackerty, and I shall expect your call in due course."

As he headed home, Crowe's mind was free to wander, and he frequently took a longer route than was strictly necessary to encourage such pointless meanderings. He enjoyed the indulgence of the simple act of walking, the time spent gave his mind free reign to travel internally, to such places his imagination might lead it. He had

done a great deal of his best thinking, plotting, and scheming, on his walks home from the office over the years.

As he clanked along the thinly carpeted metal rails, each step held a memory, a part of the past that had led him to this day.

Two metres to his right was just such a spot, where he had stood ten years prior and sacked one Mr Blenderbottom for the foolish act of gambling. Mr Blenderbottom was no gambler of note, by any means, and it would be unfairly unjust to imply that he was. It would be similarly unfitting to state outright that Mr Crowe was by any means a proficient gambler, as his evening's losses and Mr Blenderbottom's subsequent firing, could attest to. Such was the lot of any such poor soul that catches the ire of an angry, and slightly less wealthy, Mr Crowe as he stumbles his way home, influenced to no small degree by a range of decreasingly fine vintage Ales, and a pocket full of losing betting stubs where a full purse had once resided.

Mr Blenderbottom had suffered the not insignificant misfortune of being that very unlucky person on just such an instance, and no amount of pleading that without his beloved job, he would be forced to watch as his sick mother died a horribly twisted death, could possibly convince Mr Crowe to change his mind. Happily for almost all involved, it was of little consequence, for the shock of his sudden dismissal was such that he surrendered his mortality that very eve with a strong line of hemp around his slender neck. He was forced to bear witness to no such event as his mother's further suffering.

Another step, and he took pause with a soft, misty-eyed smile as he reminisced. This very square of smooth grey carpet reminded him of his good lady wife of some twenty eight years prior. He had been stood on that very spot when he first heard the news that her

body had been discovered in a mysterious fire that had broken out earlier that day; and indeed, his presence on that very spot since the wee hours that same morning had been confirmed by a surprising number, and diversity, of compellingly credible witnesses.

But this was no time for nostalgia. His walk took him to where he could leave the station, a deck where a transport carriage would carry him through the vacuum, safely from the station, to the outlying section where the habitats were situated.

This deck was higher up than his offices, and getting there required he step into a great glass elevator cabin, sailing smoothly through a tube that provided a view like no other as they ascended aloft. The decking spread out before and below him, a vast scaffold of technology, a canvas upon which man had constructed a wondrous edifice to his spirit of adventure. This was a place in outer space, an artificial building, a city even, that was suspended against the elements, floating freely. It was a great metal tube, a shining silver and grey tower, with windows looking out into the endless night.

Such a thing was truly an achievement beyond measure, that man had walked so far down the path of science in so short a time. Pure science, the fuel that drove the mighty engine of progress, was given form beneath his feet, but on this day such heady notions failed to rouse the very slightest measure of interest.

He looked away, lost in his ruminations, and distracted unusually by his own internal machinations.

“Computer,” he said to the gigantic technological mind of the station, which was always, always, listening. It responded with a pair of short toots. “Stop lift, I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

The doors slid open with a gentle hiss, and his feet tramped down onto a queer arrangement of metal flooring panels, that clattered very slightly with each footfall.

The walk before him was no short one, and yet he took it at a leisurely pace.

The shuttle-carriage deck was filled with relatively small, metal, tube-shaped structures containing a number of seating apparatus. Each of the many tubes held a large number of people, waiting to be fired into the abyss, launched to the sprawling areas of this very station that orbited the centre-piece, adrift in the mighty heavens. People, humans, and their friends from the stars would be crammed in, sharing their journey, their wonder, and even their air, secure inside a man-made vehicle, a means of travelling in the most inhuman of climates.

All of that was well and good, but it was no place for a man such as Crowe. He had a carriage of his very own, controlled by an artificial mind which could drive it with a degree of accuracy to which no creature, neither man nor beast, could hope to aspire. It was clean, with soft seats, and a fragrant air. Moreover, no human, nor friend from the stars, would ever share his air, or befoul it with their common stench. He could travel in the luxury to which he had grown accustomed, entirely rightfully, he told himself at any point at which himself was listening. He had no motivation to share his time, or his space, with those beneath his status, and his wealth meant he truly never had to.

His tired old body shambled along to the exclusive area, where his own transport was to be found, but in his mind it made proud strokes, the strides of a much younger and healthier chap, filled with vitality now long since passed. Why he had chosen to stroll on this day, he wasn't entirely sure, but he felt the need for a little time to clear his head before he went home, and a walk along the decking was as good a way as any, while his bones were still equal to the task, at least.

The windows along the wall offered a tantalising glimpse of the heavens, but he took no pleasure in such things this day. Tiny pinpricks of light, so far away that his human brain could scarcely hope to fathom such distance, peppered the black canvas of the universe before him. He failed to muster any awe, any sense of majesty, from his distracted inner ramblings. Perhaps he had spent too long in this space; perhaps his sense of awe was as deadened as his humanity and his compassion for his fellow man. Perhaps a life spent in the pursuit of his inner wants had left him unable to take such simple joy as existed in the majesty of the world around him.

But then again, perhaps his lunch was merely disagreeing with him?

With a sombre, and unsatisfied mind, and a hopelessly withered heart, he traced his distraction back to his one-time friend; his mentor, his partner in business, and trusted ally.

He stopped a moment to stare through a window as, far in the distance, the section of the habitat complex floated lazily by, and he strained to make out the outline of his own luxurious lodgings.

Why he was so pre-occupied, he wasn't entirely sure, but lately, his years combined with his growing dissatisfaction had made his thoughts harder and harder to bring to heel.

Now he found himself drowning in ruminations of a man lost. He shook the thoughts away, and allowed himself a wry smile. "Silly old man!" he uttered, just loud enough to be heard, if anyone took the trouble to listen.

Time floated by even more lazily than the habitat complex. Suddenly, a sound drew his mind back to the here, and to the now. A piercing, rude little whistle, which was followed by a voice from out of nowhere, carried on the technological winds.

“Hackerty to Mr Crowe,” said the weedy voice, tumbling from nothing more than thin air.

“Crowe here,” he replied.

“Sir, it’s ready! It’s ready for activation at your convenience.”

As the rude little whistle once more proclaimed that the communication was at an end, Crowe muttered to himself under his putrid breath. “Drat and blast that infernal Hackerty and his whimsical efficiency. I shall never get home at this rate.”

Mr Hackerty looked up to the wall. It was some time past eight O’clock, time long since he should be at home this Christmas Eve, to tuck his children into their beds, and tease them with thoughts of the morning, before they slept fitfully in anticipation.

Crowe glared at the device. A cylinder of metal, dull and dark, with openings and adornments that served, who could imagine what purpose.

“Sir,” Hackerty gestured to the machine. “I think we should run another round of tests, Sir. It’s complete, but I don’t trust it; it gives me the heebie jeebies. It can wait a few days, can’t it, Sir?”

“You’re dismissed, Hackitt,” said Crowe, his eyes never wandering from the serene little contraption. “Go home. Go to your family that you miss so much!” he added with clear disdain; a disdain that, far from making any effort to disguise, was deliberately forced into his voice.

Hackerty swallowed down thin air, and glanced from his employer to the device. “Surely you’re not going to... turn it on, are you?”

“Hackerty, leave!” he said, firmly enough to leave no doubt that his presence was no more welcome, or needed, than that of a headache.

He needed no further telling, and he snatched up his regenerated coat from the back of his chair and began to scamper away.

Watching as his employee left, Crowe picked up the little thing. Barely a forearm's length of metal, solid and weighty, and yet it held so much power. He stared at it, raptly, lost in the promises; lost in the dreams of him and his partner, himself now lost to the world so many years since.

It was time to live their dreams; it was time to bring their dreams into reality.

"This deserves a tippie, and I have just the bottle in my cellar," he postulated to himself with a tuneful hum. He took the dark little device, and he left for home, this time both directly and for good.

His home was a thing of modern wonder, and stood apart, even in this time of marvels. The doors were set to open for him alone, and they duly complied in their task as he approached, needing the assistance of no man to do so. Inside, partially hidden lamps flickered on by themselves, bathing the walls in a soft glow, with nary a candle nor lamp in the sight of any eye.

His lodgings were spacious by the standards of the time, and luxurious by any standards of imaginings. Long, white, and metal panels stretched along the walls, punctuated by dark wooden affectations. It was all quite lovely, a sight to behold, and he had earned every inch of it, so he told himself. He had told himself so often that he had even come to believe it.

In fact, the lodging had not always been his own. It belonged to his company, as all things did in the long run, including himself, although he was loath to admit it.

This place in particular, was formerly the abode of his partner, Shrew. He was once a great man; a visionary in his own time; a legend, even if only so in the small circles in which he rotated. He had built the company on his own strong back and keen wits, and grown it to a scale that demanded respect. Crowe had joined later, a mere child in comparison to the might of Mr Frederick Shrew, the company founder.

Shrew knew how to do business in the ever shifting sands of the future. The industrial age had long since given way to the age of the technological. That, in turn, had passed to a time of pure invention; study for the sake of study; new ideas purely for the sake of advancement. Perhaps, business would have been a thing of the past, but men like Shrew understood the workings of society, even a society so advanced as theirs now seemed to be.

He knew the minds of men, and how to appeal to their passing fancies; he knew to feed their wants, and flatter their egos. And just as there were great men such as he, there were men like Crowe, who knew how to exploit them and sail along in their wake.

In those terms, time may pass, but nothing of value would really change, and for them, at least, it hadn't. If he'd had a mind to realise such things, he would have noticed that he was a relic of a long bygone age. The greed and ugliness of wealth, and the poverty it left in its wake, was gone, and should have been forgotten by then, for in the minds of the common man it most surely had.

It was now only men like Crowe who kept such notions alive, living as they did, motivated only by self-interest, in feathering their nests, and improving their status at the expense of others.

The house, if anyone would believe that such a mundane title could do it justice, floating among the stars as it was, was furnished with tools to further the business of their work.

Crowe placed the device gingerly down on the desk in his study. He handled it like a man that could appreciate the true value of such a thing, but any value it might have to him was only in what it might bring him, not what it might do for anyone else. His equipment whirled and flashed to life of its own accord, as lamps bathed the sterile room in a blanket of white and blue, making it appear most alive and vibrant; like his home had a mind of its own, and a life beyond that.

“Computer,” he demanded of the technological mind, residing in the furthest reaches of his home. “Scan this item.”

And it complied duly, busying itself to follow his instructions as it was wont to do.

While the machine began its computations and enumerations, he slipped off his jacket, a beautiful thing indeed, and he rested it gently upon a clean surface, a white sheet of purest silk, but harder than the strongest of steels.

Suddenly, and without fore-warning, he appeared; and in that moment, everything changed.

Crowe stepped back agog as the apparition came forth. It was seamless and dark, austere, and as imposing as anything brought forth from any faction of reality.

He gasped, his chest heaved, his face sallowed, and he stared with eyes filled with the grimmest of terror.

“Shrew!” he rasped, and his friend, his mentor, looked back at him with a pair of bloodshot eyes.

“Crowe!” it spoke, its voice low and deep, no different to the way it was when once his feet had walked the Earth. But it was not the same, for how could it be? His remains were on that very Earth now, buried beneath a bush of roses, as per his request in life, for his wishes after death.

He was incinerated, burnt to powder, and placed in a park of remembrance. No man should come back from that, and what manner of man could?

“Shrew? How?” He scuttled back, his feet struggling to find purchase, his arm scrambling to his rear to find something to brace his weight lest his legs gave way beneath him. As fear bore down on him, mortal terror forced reason from his mind, and only the deepest of animal instincts remained. And the instinct told him to run, and run, and he wanted to do so, but his legs were as jelly, his chest was faltering, panic had him in its tender grip, and there was nowhere left to turn. He simply waited as the apparition made its way towards him.

It was Shrew, there could be doubt, and no doubt thusly did he harbour.

What was truly horrifying, truly the hardest fact to swallow, was that this was the man himself. This was no illusion, no shimmering light, no trick of the eye cast on smoke nor mirror. He was solid, as solid as you or I, and all the more terrible for it. Had he risen from the grave, pulled his disparate matter together, and ventured into the stars? To Crowe, it seemed that he had. What other explanation could there be?

Crowe could only shiver and shake, like a child waiting for punishment.

“You’re... you’re not here. You can’t be here,” he said, closing his eyes, like his not seeing it might make some kind of difference to the fabric of reality; it might tip the balance of odds to his favour. “You’re stress and strain, you’re more proof of my over-working than ever a solid person was. You’re no more real than a dream; a passing fancy. I have dined on alien cuisine, and passed gas more solid than you must surely be.”

He opened his eye, just one, and just a crack. Nothing. He saw nothing before him. He huffed in relief, before hearing a familiar voice, off to his far left.

“I’m over here, Crowe!” and just as he said, there he was, in all the solid reality there was for the universe to conjure. “Calm yourself, before you have an accident. I’m a hologram, and of no mind to clean you up.”

A hologram, indeed, a fiction of light and power made matter, a technological marvel that threw an echo of reality so true, that you could stare upon it, and never know you were being fooled. This man was no man at all, he was science given form, and nothing more besides.

“You’re... a hologram?” he stumbled over the words as his terror subsided, giving way to confusion, and no small measure of it. “How did you...”

“This is my lodging,” it said, looking down on him with a certain lack of approval that was not to be missed. Crowe felt it, but had things on his mind that needed to be dealt with first, and he felt sure they should be dealt with in short order.

“By what means are you here?” he insisted, with a haughty tone of growing irritation.

“As I said, this is my lodging. I had the equipment fitted many years hitherto, that I might run... experiments, here in the evenings.”

Crowe sneered at the very notion. Whether this was a man with a real heart beating in his chest, or a figment of technological imagination, there was a better reason for having such a wonder in his apartment.

“Experiments, Shrew?” he sneered, and with all good reason. “A man free from the burden of having a wife would surely find better reason to install such an appliance in his home, would he not?”

“What a man does in the privacy of his home, is his business, and his alone. And so, Crowe, I’m wondering what precisely you are doing in mine!” The man of light and power sniffed, looking around, surveying the moderate changes that had been made since his time.

“You’re dead!” Crowe reminded him, dismissively, and in no uncertain terms, such an explanation being hard to refute, no matter what the means of his being were. “You’re dead, and gone, and you’re not coming back. I took over your apartment after the funeral. It was bigger and nicer than mine. I saw no good reason not to, and I see no good reason now.”

Shrew, or the vision of him, at least, scowled but had no argument to counter.

“Why are you here?” said Crowe, his fear once more put away in its proper place, and fast losing interest in this conversation, he surely was.

“I, too, have been pondering this,” it said with a look of deep suspicion. It slowly began to survey its surroundings, as if a good reason might present itself. And then, “Ah!” it emoted, with a dramatic widening of his eyes, its mouth agasp, and an arm stretched sharply out to point directly at the cylinder of metal. “That!”

“That?” said Crowe, looking over to the device. “What’s your interest in that old thing?”

It lowered its arm after a short pause, and returned its attention to Crowe. “I’m a hologram. I’m designed to have an interest in... that old thing, as you so succinctly describe it. Why would I give a tinker’s cuss about it, or you for that, otherwise? I have a function to fulfil, and thus I stand before you now, fulfilling it as we speak!”

“Well finish fulfilling it, and begone,” demanded Crowe with weary disdain. “Unlike you, I have a life to lead; I have fine brandy to quaff in celebration, and a good full night of sleep ahead of me.

Your best days are behind you; your worst days too, come to that.” He gave a little snigger.

Shrew regarded him disarmingly, and Crowe shrunk slightly from his acid glare.

“Well you can stare all you like, Shrew; stamp your feet, and shout to the heavens, but it won’t change the facts of the matter,” he insisted, tiring of the encounter and long past trying to hide it. “And on the subject of ‘matter’, might I remind you, Shrew, that matter is the one thing you are not.”

“I have no concern of this! I’m here to offer... a warning!” said Shrew somewhat chillingly, stepping up, and glaring down at the smaller man.

Crowe retreated in surprise. “A warning?”

“A warning! If I’m here, then that means... danger! Danger to life and limb, and danger most real!”

Crowe gulped and made no attempt to hide his trepidation, though any such attempt would be rather pointless in this case.

“That device,” it continued, as it looked over to it, and once again raised its arm to point sharply at it. “That device... must never again be activated!”

Crowe scoffed, “My device, Shrew! My device.” He laughed a grave little guffaw, and hardly the laugh of a man amused. “This, like your apartment, belongs to me. You died, and when you did, you left everything to your business. You left it to me. The device will be activated this very evening by my own hand, and tomorrow morning, I will be rich; rich beyond your pitiful dreams. And though your existence now is little more than a pitiful dream itself, I assure you that I have dreams that are real enough for the pair of us.”

As he spoke, he had wandered over to an opening in the far wall; to a silver metal box with a row of lamps that glowed an

unnatural blue. He entreated it deliver a fine malt liquor, and just such a thing materialised, as if from nowhere, shimmering into reality like countless glowing fireflies attracted to a flickering candle, which hardened into the very image of what he'd told it to become. He hoisted it out, and drank heartily.

"Drink, Shrew?" he offered, and then made another guttural croak, something akin to laughter, but holding not a shred of warmth. "Oh, I keep forgetting that you're dead. You seem to have forgotten yourself, but it's no hardship to me to keep reminding you of the fact."

"If you activate that device, Crowe, it is I that will be reminding you!" it said, its voice bearing every overtone of seriousness. "You will die, Crowe, and I shall remind you of this warning in the hereafter, as occasion should allow, or amusement seeks to satisfy."

"Really?" said Crowe with an ugly little smirk. "And might I ask you how you know this? How can you report this sorry fact from beyond the grave? If you were truly a spectral being, a manifestation of the worlds beyond our world, I might feel your words carry the slightest weight. But you are an illusion. You are the result of measurements, and scans, and light dancing to the command of its master. You are a shadow, and mine is the eye it is cast upon. You are an 'it', and hold no bearing to me."

The shadow bore down once more, but Crowe was unmoved. "Mr Shrew made me before he activated the device himself. He spoke to me; he told me what I was to do, in the event of his passing."

"To harass me in life, it seems?"

"To warn you, lest your sanity abandon you, such as it has! Shrew conferred upon me this task. He knew that the device was

dangerous, and told me that if it took his life, I would stand as a warning that nobody else should follow his path, and that wiser minds than ours be bid prevail.”

Crowe stared into its steadfast eyes. He couldn’t shake the impression, try as he might, that this thing was real, and really was his old friend. The resemblance was uncanny, striking, and completely undeniable. It was as if looking into the past, if the past were alive all around him. “You’ve warned me now, Shrew, so begone.”

“Mr Shrew, knew of the risks,” it continued, paying Mr Crowe’s dismissal no mind. “This thing—this device, alien in nature—is dangerous. You must know this.”

He nodded in agreement. Of course he knew; how could he not? The greatest advantage came from engaging in the greatest risk.

“When I—Mr Shrew—purchased that device, for no small sum, we knew so little about it,” began the visage, steepling its fingers and closing its eyes as if remembering for itself. “We ran every test; we examined every inch of it. We began to understand it; or at least, we thought we did.”

“It’s as dangerous as you make it!” Crowe stood his ground. “It’s alien, certainly, but it’s an engine, a gadget, and nothing more. It manipulates time; it changes reality, and does so to let us travel faster than ever before. Once we harness the power of that thing, interstellar travel will change, and we’ll be at the very forefront of the industry. I think that’s worth a risk or two. You thought so too, Shrew. You were content to risk life and limb, back when you had either one to gamble.”

“Oh yes, I understood the risks, and I knew them when I built this hologram. I built it to survive me, Crowe. I built it that it might exist after my demise, if the device did confirm my fears, and indeed

caused such a demise.” The image of Shrew huffed an imagined breath, and sighed. “My fears were realised, it seems, for another journal entry in my diary was never made.”

“Since then, we have studied the device further. We understand it better,” countered Crowe.

“And that is the very hubris that ensured my departure from this mortal realm. Crowe, Crowe, we should never have purchased this awful unknown thing. It should have gone to the authorities for proper research, not to us. We are simply pedlars of mechanical men. Our work is not with engines. I ask myself, what lunacy had taken me, that allowed this evil to find purchase in the fertile ground of my ambition?”

“Pedlars of mechanical men, we may be, but I aspire to become something more, as you yourself once did. The market for artificials is saturated; it’s done. We were too damned good at our role, in that sense. We need an innovation, and this new drive technology is it.”

“Ignore me if you wish,” said the hologram, in the most doleful fashion. “But it will be your undoing. I cannot prevent you from making the same mistakes as I myself have.”

“Then we are finished!” Crowe sipped at the remains of his drink. Good though it was, a bottle of something infinitely finer waited in his study. He tired of this game.

“And you will pay no heed to my warnings? You will suspend all reason and activate it?”

Crowe nodded that, indeed, this was his intent.

“Then I will tell you what is to come!” it said with a sigh, and a sad shake of its head. “The present, the future, and the past, they will melt into one, and you yourself will be part of them none. They,

instead, will be visited upon you, the spectres of the three levels of time: the past, the present, and the future.

If, as you claim, you have understood its workings, then they will guide you to the destination you seek. If you are the simpleton I know you to be, they will only guide you to your death; or worse. There will be no escape for you and the moment you activate the device, your fate will be sealed.”

“From the past, present, and future, and the hideous jaws of death itself, there is no escape for any man.” Crowe smugly allowed an expression of victory. “Now begone with you. I have work to do.”

The hologram, the dancing photon energy that formed the memory of a man, and the final echo of “danger” vanished, and plunged the room into an uncomfortable silence.

“Computer,” demanded Crowe. “Activate my device.”

He awoke with a start, his head sore from resting on the hard flat surface of a desk, the impression of a writing utensil left painfully marked upon his cheek. The room around him was dark, and truth be told, he couldn’t be exactly sure what room it was. Suffice it to say that it was not his cosy bedroom and he was not tucked into his comfortable bed. It didn’t even appear to be his own spacious home.

Gathering his thoughts, he remembered the most troubling of dreams that had beset him previously.

“A hologram, Shrew?!” he muttered to himself as the fog cleared from his thoughts.

No; it was no dream, of that he could be quite sure. But could such a thing truly come to pass?

He remembered clearly; he had activated the device, and nothing. The world came to no end; the future crashed into the past only in the words of his old friend. Nothing of consequence had

befallen him or the world at large. For a moment, a smile flashed across his wicked old lips, but then a thought began to trouble him.

Nothing of consequence had occurred on him, that much was true. The sky wasn't painted with fire, and his body remained... something of a disappointment to him, if the truth be told.

But his sense of self-satisfaction was somehow cut short, by a troubling notion he couldn't quite put aside. Nothing of consequence had occurred, that much was quite beyond question, but by that same vein, nothing of inconsequence had come to pass either.

His face took on a stony frown, as he came to realise with troubling certainty, that he had never gone to bed that night. He hadn't left the house in the dead of night. He had never even left his own lab, as he recalled. In fact, he had done nothing, except utter the words, Computer. Activate the device.

What had happened next was simply that he had awoken with a start, in a strange place he had yet to identify. For a second time, he began to question if this was a dream. Was he, in fact, still dreaming, perhaps?

In due course, the darkness melted away, and he found himself alone there, inside a white laboratory. It was a thing from another time, a time in his past; his yesterday coming to life in worrying solidity before his very eyes. Yes... it was the lab aboard the station, a work-room where things had changed from dreams and ideas, into solid reality, driven by the will of the men who worked there, under the relentless guidance of one Mr Shrew.

He brought himself to his feet, and stepped gingerly around, faltering slightly with each wobbly, nervous footfall. There remained a gulf in his mind, an aching chasm between the fact that he was in the place from before this moment, and the equally undeniable fact of how the world had operated, to his knowledge, up to this point.

He stared in wonder at each minute detail, each little thing reminding him of a forgotten tale from his past; there could now be no doubt as to where he was. But how could this be; such things were beyond the means of man, even once the sheer might of science had been tamed like the most stubborn of mares? The more troubling question remained not where, or even when, he was, but how it was that this could be possible by any means in nature.

And then, there before him, he saw the figure of the first mechanical-man prototype his company had produced.

It stood there serene and in austere silence. The face was white, too white to be real flesh on those artificial bones, to be sure. The eyes stared lifelessly forwards, and were clear black circles within balls of glass. There was no breath, no movement of the chest. It was a dead thing, and it cast a shiver up his very spine just to look upon it.

The very first mechanical man! Not the first ever, to be fully correct, as there had been others. But this was immeasurably better by all means, truly the first of a kind. This had been built as a servant, nothing more; it had no aspirations, no imaginations of being something it wasn't. This was the slave that Shrew's understanding of humanity had dreamed of. It would never complain, never refuse, and never stop. It was built to obey, and wanted nothing more nor less.

He wondered what its true purpose might be there at that precise time; what it was sent to do, either for him, or to him. Nothing about this was making the first lick of sense.

Crowe suddenly jolted as the thing turned to face him. He clutched his hand to his heaving chest, rasping suddenly for his breath. "What..." he began to cry out, but the machine, the automaton, held up a hand; a gesture for silence.

“I am the past,” it said in an eerie monotone, bereft of any degree of warmth such that you might find expect to find in any normal human speech. It was unquestionably just a thing. This was as dead as a statue, and though it moved, it was no more real.

“You’re the past?” said Crowe, regaining some vestige of dignity, and clawing at his night-shirt to cover himself a little better.

“I am the past,” it uttered once more in agreement. The second time of saying it sounding precisely, and decidedly identical, to the first. It gestured with an outstretched hand, and turned its head in a very deliberate manner to look directly at him, its glassy unblinking eyes staring forwards like two pools of oil, and with exactly no more passion.

Crowe began to move, and it took up position. It had gestured to the doorway through which his old office had once been and was now again, against all reason he could find.

His old office, indeed. When he first started with the company, he had been so raw, such a silly young fool. He smiled at the memory, now fresh from the solid reminder of his surroundings, so very undreamlike they seemed to him now, but no less bewildering for that.

Beyond the door, Shrew was stood, his arms crossed over his chest, as he peered out over the office, unquestionably a figure demanding of the very utmost of respect. The company was larger then, but not by much. He had five employees, a mix of both genders: three engineers, a person who spoke, and a person who thought. It was all he needed for now, as the technology did most of the work for them, and Shrew stood above it all, like a vulture or a tumour, sucking all the life from a body.

“Crowe!” Mr Shrew called out angrily. He remembered that Shrew did everything angrily, as his frown was permanently etched

into his ageing face, like that very same face, and the man as well, had been carved from solid granite.

Before he could instinctively respond, he heard a familiar voice call out from an unseen quarter, “Sir?” He then watched in silent bemusement as his own younger head popped up from behind his desk.

“In my office, now,” he growled with authority.

“But?” the older Crowe stammered quietly to the automaton, glancing around from face to face as the coldness of reality returned to his mind. “They’ll see us, will they not? We should hide from their eyes, lest they catch us breaking the laws of nature, and panic grips them uncontrollably.”

“They will not see,” the lifeless thing told him, its voice was as stones dragged across steel.

“Not see us?” said Crowe, and he glanced again at the faces of the workers. True enough, if there was anything of them there to be seen, then seen they would surely already have been. Crowe calmed a little.

The android returned its stare to Shrew’s office.

“I remember this,” said Crowe, with a hint of an inward smile, as he watched the familiar sight of his younger self scuttle by. He turned to past, who remained impassive, removed from the events as if he wasn’t there at all. “Do you have a name?”

“I am the past,” it replied with all the warmth of death’s embrace.

Crowe sniffed at it, and followed himself into the office. He settled against the wall, and was struck by the strangeness of how an illusion in his mind felt solid behind his back.

Shrew’s office was a severe thing indeed. Pictures languished behind his desk of the man greeting, and shaking hands, with various

legendary figures, all of whom appeared to look upon him with suspiciously high regard. The desk he sat at was a huge thing, carved from wood, polished to a bright sheen, and seemed designed to not quite fit in, so that it remained a striking contrast, and all the more noticeable besides.

Shrew, himself, existed on very much the same principal. While the people of the time had evolved their social order to eliminate war, poverty, and greed, he had done no such thing in himself. He remained separate from all that. He remained different, and he remained oddly proud of it.

“Sit down, Crowe.”

He did, and he did so nervously. The look on his younger face was approaching terror by now. The older Crowe could only smirk at the power Shrew wielded. He had had a lot to learn back then, and he had the very best of teachers.

“What is this about, do you suppose, Crowe?” he said. He sat back and waited; the web was primed, and the spider needed only to wait. Either the fly was experiencing a lucky day, or else he had a little sense about him.

“I don’t know, Sir. I really can’t imagine.”

The older Crowe smirked to himself, and turned to the machine. “I knew exactly why, of course!” But the machine ignored him. Perhaps conversation was a thing it had no talent for, he could only presume.

“No, I don’t suppose you can. I’ve heard that Miss Scruntwort has made something of a blunder,” he told him, his fingers knotting before his face as he leant forward, causing the maximum amount of intimidation, as he had surely calculated things should be. It was working quite admirably too, as his two forefingers began tapping together just below eye level.

“She has indeed?” The younger Crowe feigned ignorance, and did an astonishingly bad job of it.

“She’s made the kind of blunder that has cost me two things!” he said before taking a moment to pause. He then leant back in his chair, rolling his eyes to the ceiling thoughtfully, glorying in his own self-importance. “She’s cost me money, and in no small quantity I’ll add. And I know this means little to a thing such as you, sitting there in your regenerated shirt and trousers. But money means wealth, and wealth means luxury and power, something I value very greatly.

By not crossing the T’s, and dotting the I’s, that silly woman has cost me money, and left me wide open to abuse.” He turned to face the slightly frightened young man. “Of course, by me, I mean her, you understand?”

He nodded that indeed he did. Indeed he did, and how could he not?

“And she’s cost me respect. Hers, of course, is gone, and won’t be coming back; but my reputation is worth something, and this kind of oversight lowers that value, which is something I cannot allow.”

“Sir!” He nodded in agreement.

“Miss Scruntwort shouldn’t have ordered supplies from the Grumblegims. It was a foolhardy choice, as they are a silly mess of people. Their quality control is, to no end, frivolous, at best; their workplace atmosphere is made toxic by the sound of singing, no less.

“The company, Dombey and Sons of the Bollobogs, they were the preferred choice; for they are a grave people, with calibrated expectations, robust innovation, and a deeply rooted commitment to ushering in a new paradigm in customer satisfaction.

“They also see to it that I get a hefty discount, and a bottle of something nice for Christmas, sent in a box filled with other bottles of things that are even nicer. A woman in her position should have

known better, but evidently, she didn't. What do you think of that, Crowe?"

"Foolhardy, Sir." The young man flicked a wicked, avaricious little smile.

"Of course, if she was acting under the advice of others, one might interpret the situation with a slightly different slant, wouldn't you suppose?"

The younger Crowe's face dropped, the colour swept away in an instant. He knew; he had to know. The older Mr Crowe simply watched, taking it all in.

"You, Mr Crowe, advised her, and she acted upon your recommendations, without confirming the order herself. What do you have to say for yourself? Speak up, man!" The big man's eyes seemed to peer into his very soul for a moment, and the young man shifted restlessly under the power of it.

"Sir, I..."

"Crowe!" he said, cutting him off; whatever there was to be said, was of little interest at this point. "You are an ambitious, awful, person, who's willing to damage the career and reputation of another, just to progress your own agenda. Am I wrong about you?"

"No, Sir," he said with a note of shame; a great deal more shame than he actually felt, or was capable of experiencing, in fact.

"I suspected as much. Let me explain something to you, Mr Crowe," the big man said as he settled, once again, into his chair. "I sell mechanical men. My machines are by far the best there are. They do as they're told to do, when they're told to do it. It is in a man's nature to seek such qualities, but they're not built into the nature of the women they most often pursue, and so it falls to me to build them on their behalf. This has made me a very wealthy man. I'm sure you're following me so far."

Crowe nodded meekly.

“My wealth has afforded me, shall we say, an ability. I have the ability to have whatever I want, and it’s with a certain sadness that I must report, that what I truly desire is to become a great deal more wealthy than I currently am. I want to become not just wealthy, but powerful too. I want to hold sway over the lives of others; I want to have power over the decisions of politicians, and great leaders of men.” He paused thoughtfully for a moment, lost, no doubt, in the imaginings of his life as such described.

He continued, “With this in mind, I’m ready to begin working on the next generation of automatons. Thinking machines, Crowe. Machines capable of talking, and even reasoning, the way we do. Can a selfish little prig like you even imagine what this will mean for us?”

Crowe shrugged somewhat weakly. “I believe I could only imagine, Sir.”

“Let me tell you. We wouldn’t be able to make them fast enough. They’d be grabbing them off the production line. Demand would outweigh supply to such a degree that we could name the price the sky, and they’d be queuing up to pay us double. They’re not even that much different from the rubbish we’re currently pedalling. A few tweaks in production that will cost us next to nothing. Of course, there are designs to be drawn up and worked over...”

It could be clearly seen that the younger man understood, and so he didn’t labour the point.

“Mechanical men, is a field I have sewn up for many years to come. So now, I’m looking for a fresh challenge; something quite strikingly different. And I believe I’ve found it, Crowe. I found... the device.”

This was all rather an odd thing to be telling someone who had become convinced that he was about to be sacked on the spot. Crowe seemed unsure where this was heading, but his older self, watching from the shadows as an observer from his own future, knew all too well, of course.

“The device is an alien contraption, a creation from another race that we have, as yet, never encountered but is dwelling in the stars alongside us. It is a relic of a bygone era of science beyond our comprehension, and it has abilities that would chill any normal man to the marrow of his very bones.

“I am a man of no normal measure and so I have acquired it for rather a heavy price. It’s a contrivance for manipulating time and energy, such as we know. We haven’t yet fathomed the intricacies of its intricate workings yet, exactly, but I will; you can be absolutely certain of that fact. It folds time and reality up like a tablecloth after a picnic, so you can pass directly from where you were, to where you’ll be in the blinking of an eye. The annoying difficulty of the present can effectively be removed, and then, in essence, there’s no journey to undertake.”

His nostrils flared with pride, and he beamed an oddly ferocious smile.

“Imagine it! Instantaneous transport from one place to another. One second you were there in the past, and snap,” he said and snapped his finger for effect. “You’re right where you wanted to be, in your own personal future, and the journey you take in the present never happened, and never will.

“The universal will change!” His lofty eyebrows lowered over his steely grey eyes. “And I’m the one to change it.”

“Yes, Sir,” said the younger Crowe, still not quite following all of this quite exactly. Such things were still beyond his tender, but greedy young mind.

“But my question is, whether you are to be among the men to change it with me?”

“Me Sir?” he asked, the most obvious of questions; perhaps the only question that could be asked, under the circumstances.

“My vision goes beyond Miss Scruntwort and her silly idiocies. It’s regrettable that she misplaced her trust, and made an error of this magnitude, but the fact remains that she did. I gather she’s soon to marry some poor soul, so the small issue of her future here will take care of itself soon enough; and not a day too soon, if it means she can finally be shot of that ludicrous name.

“People like her are of no use to me now, but a man like you just might be, if you understand my gist?”

The younger Mr Crowe stared back with hungry eyes. “Yes, Sir. I believe I understand perfectly.”

“But can you be equal to it? Can a vile little creature such as yourself have anything to offer me? Do you have the drive and ambition to climb your ladder to the stars, or are you doomed to just be a vindictive little opportunist in a worthless suit for all your days?”

“Sir, I have the ambition to be more than equal. I mean to sit as the head of this company one day, and I will, one day, engage this device and see where it takes me. Sir, I will reside in an apartment that rivals yours; I will oversee innovations that will boggle the minds of men, such as ourselves! I will take my role in heralding a new era of technical understanding; I will own myself a piece of this galaxy.”

“Perhaps! Over my dead body, Mr Crowe.” He nodded in approval, or perhaps out of agreement with himself. Who could truly want to know the mind of such a man? “You’ll have every chance to do exactly that, if you’ve got the will to be a match to your lofty words.”

“And I did, you know!” said the older Crowe, turning to the old machine-man. “I followed him until he began slowing down. Then, I learned how to take his lead. I own this company now; I made my mark with the next generation of mechanical men, thinking machines. I did everything that he only dreamed of doing.”

“Program complete.”

Once again he awoke, Mr Crowe, and wake he did with no less a start than before; and more than a little unsettled he found himself. For a few long moments, he couldn’t be sure if he was awaking from a dream, or starting a new dream afresh, but his mind and wits soon returned, as if from a long and comfortable sleep.

This was his own bed, to be sure, and it was to be found in his own home no less; of this much he could be certain. All the ornaments and decorations were in order, just as he’d left them, and not a thing stood out as being out of place, or in any way out of the ordinary by any means. Had it all been a dream then after all?

As gingerly as any man could, he rose from the bed, and it was then that he noticed a tremor in his hand, and sweat beading at his brow. Something wasn’t right, and the nature of that something for now remained a puzzle. And this fact made him all the more nervous besides.

He shuffled quite carefully to the door. For at one time, that was all it had been— a door, two unusually strong panels which slid apart by some unseen method; but now, they took on a more sinister

facade. What lay beyond them? What horrors, or pleasures, might exist behind them now? What secrets would be revealed, if the door were to be opened?

He shuffled, slowly, for some questions were best left unanswered; this he knew, without the tiniest shadow of a doubt. But all questions were eventually answered, and he feared that the answers he sought were horribly, and uncomfortably close.

As he took one more step towards them, and sensing his presence, the doors duly slid open for him with a hiss and a whine. Beyond his room was a brilliant light, and beyond that stood the outline of a man. His silhouette was painted far more indelibly on his mind than on the wall outside, but, to be sure, it was indelible enough. There could be no question; there was an unknown man standing in his room. No more than he remembered going to bed, did he remember inviting any such man, into his home.

“Who are you?” he ventured fearfully. “I’m armed.”

As the words slipped from his lips, he wondered why, and what part of him, could have chosen them. He was no more armed than he was capable of operating any weapon he might have had access to. He felt slightly ridiculous; a pompous old fool in his night clothes, posturing to a man, while in dreadful fear for his life.

“I’m the present,” and with those words, the outline stepped forward into the bedroom, melting from the light, and into the darkness, his shadow fading in response as he became gently illuminated. “Obviously!”

An average man, he was, with a slightly empty expression; fatigued, perhaps, like he no longer had a care in the world, and no care even to find a care to care about. He was not a handsome man, yet not an unpleasant one either. He was a man difficult to describe, if you wanted a description of any more interest than merely saying

that he was strikingly average. He was average, indeed, bitingly so; shockingly, painfully, compellingly, and brutally average. From his nose, to the pallor of his cheeks, there was nothing too remarkable about him as to even cause one to notice.

Nothing, other than that he had upon his lip, a most meticulously styled and exquisite moustache.

His clothes were of a different kind altogether. They were tight-fitting, black and yellow overalls. They had thin liners running along the length of the arms and legs, and beyond the lowest extremities hung a pair of bare feet, walking defiantly on Crowe's fine carpet. To finish off, he was carrying what could only be described as a long coat, which seemed like it could never fit with any other part of the rest of this picture. In fact, nothing was quite fitting at all about the entire affair.

"You're... an automaton, a machine, a mechanical man? You're a combination of engineering and science, made to take the form of an actual person, are you not?" Crowe's words were slow and deliberate, tinged with fear, and peppered with curiosity. "You're wearing test-equipment clothing, so you must be a prototype machine. One of ours, I think?"

It stared back at him; the eyelids flickered slightly, and its lips parted to speak.

"Well isn't that a perfectly pleasant way to greet a stranger, at this most strange of hours? An automaton... a mechanical man indeed? Why not just call me an artificial entity? A positronic presence? An AI on legs?! I've been called worse, Sir, and with far fouler intent, by better than the likes of you, such that you are.

"Or aren't."

"What automated gibberish is this? Explain yourself! You say you're the present; is that how I'm to address you?"

The mechanical man shook its head in dismay, rolling its eyes upwards as it sighed, in as realistic a fashion as it was possible to imagine. Had it not been dressed in the garb of a machine from Crowe's own factory, there would be really no means to tell at all.

"Only Belgian progressive rock bands and flash-in-the-pan rappers might call themselves 'The Present,' Mr Crowe!" it said with haste and disdain, as it stepped forward and looked him over. "It... it baffles me sometimes, that your species even managed to... to find the ground to climb down to, after... after clearly doing so well for yourselves up in those trees, with... with... with all the nutrition rich invertebrates you could pluck from each other's fur casings!"

"Your words are strange to me, machine-man," he said to the man-like machine. It spoke so oddly, being as it was, a thing from a world so different from anything that could now be readily understood. Yet, at least this one was capable of articulation. Now he may get some answers; some explanation of this most unusual turn of events.

"'The Present,' in this instance, is a figure of speech, something I had been assured, wrongly it appears, that you would understand without further explanation on my part. My name is Mr Wellington, and you may address me as such. And in anticipation of the sedate pace of your clockwork meat-filled skull, I will add that I am not the real Mr Wellington, and that you continue to remain outside the boundaries of what you would consider to be the normal flow of time. This encounter is not actually happening in any real sense, and nothing that transpires will be of any worldly consequence."

"No worldly consequence, you say?" A tiny flicker of a smile.

"Correct, sir. No consequence whatsoever. Nothing you do will affect my corporeal counterpart in any way."

“Your cor... But what of I? What consequence for me?”

“Who? Oh, yes... meat inside a skull... No doubt, you wish to be ‘reassured’, whatever that could possibly mean when your life amounts to... hurling yourself through savannahs, in a sack of swill and spanners, all boo hoo hoo, I’m being chased by a lion; boo hoo hoo, I’m being eaten alive!

“Then allow me to reassure you. Your situation is, shall we say, complicated. And not complicated in any sense that I would imagine a degree of solace may be taken from. You speak of consequence, but as you have failed, yet again, to grasp from my very first utterance, I am the present. There is no consequence here, save those of any such undertakings hitherto enacted, those you would call experience. Your experience—the past—brought you to now. Your actions now—the present—lead you to consequence—the future, where we are not. So on and so forth.

“The past... the future... neither are my domain, and I am not one for dabbling in conjecture, suffice it to say that everything you do or say is a matter of life or death, such as it is regardless. Take that as you will.”

Crowe didn’t like this, and was liking it less and less, the less he understood what in god’s name was being spoken of.

“I really don’t understand,” he said gruffly, afraid that perhaps he actually did. “Why am I here?”

“The device you so eagerly and ignorantly activated,” said the android. “It is an instrument of technology that harnesses an immense power, æons beyond your comprehension. It has fabricated these meta-environs to illustrate your circumstances in a manner befitting your intellect. Do you appreciate now why this makes me crotchety?! Do you think I enjoy thinking down to your level?!”

Crowe rubbed his temples. “But... this is confusing to me.”

“I gathered that much,” Mr Wellington agreed, with a disapproving huff. “Talk to the human, they said. It will be easy, they said. They’re slow, but they get there in the end, they said.

“But you don’t usually get there, at all! You were given one clear instruction—do not activate the device! And what did you do?! I mean... was there some kind of... subversive ideological agenda at play, capable of distorting perception to such a bold degree that... that up becomes down, and black means white? And... I bet you never even considered my feelings, because now I’m the one tasked with trying to make you feel better about your act of... of... wanton stupidity.”

Crowe listened intently, trying as he might to understand the increasingly bizarre words being spoken rather more at him than he would have enjoyed.

“Look... Would it make more sense if I clobbered you on the nose with a rolled up newspaper? What it is you’re not understanding really is quite beyond me, so let me spell it out in terms a dog would understand. When you—Crowe—activated the device, it—the aforementioned device—caused your time-stream to collapse. Present, past and future are diverging, and have pushed, are pushing, and will push, you—also Crowe—out of existence.

“Now, I’m no more a temporal engineer than you are a philanthropist, but as an automaton, and a de facto janitor to boot, I favour my odds higher than most at cleaning up some of your mess, and though the odds remain microscopic that it’ll make any discernible difference at all, you should not let this concern you—the real Mr Wellington will be fine either way; and that’s all that matters.

“So with that, Mr Crowe, are you ready to see your present?”

Crowe sagged visibly, his shoulders round, and his head hanging between them. “I know my present, how could I not know?”

Mr Wellington smirked at the very notion. “What could you possibly know about anything?! You, a network of vile chemicals and electrical pulses forced into activity by an easily damaged driver hub; a digital feed to a biological apparatus running on hard-wired instincts and irrational protocol functions. What could you possibly know when your facts are malleable, indistinct from guesses, and your reality a shadow? You are a conceit, a fancy, a metaphor, nothing more.”

Crowe grimaced and found his temper, “And then, Sir, what are you? A thing, a construction, a machine? You’re nothing more than a mechanical copy of a man, a thing that follows orders, a creature purchased and owned at the whim of a better creature.”

Mr Wellington shook his head. “Better creature... Now there’s an oxymoron.”

And with that, they were inside a house, a home, or some version thereof that existed on this station amidst the stars. One moment, it had been his bedroom and then, in the blink of an eye, and no longer, they were in a place altogether different. It wasn’t his house; in fact, it resembled nothing he had seen before. It was dark and crude, a box, with a smattering of personal effects that slightly coloured the flavour of it. They went some little way in the direction of hiding the sterility and to mask the artificiality of it all, but they were not altogether equal to such a herculean task.

Crowe glared around. “What fresh hell is this? If, Sir, your job is to show me my present, then you’ve taken a left, when a right was in order.”

Mr Wellington snorted a huff of sound umbrage, and crossed his arms defiantly before his chest. “You are here now. This is your

present,” he said, rather flatly, and in a way that could leave nobody in any uncertainty.

“How could this be my present? Have I fallen on hard times: for these times seem hard enough for any man to bear.”

“Strange though you may find it to conceive, a universe does exist outside your immediate perceptions, and doesn’t disappear when you close your eyes. This is your present, but it is not your house!”

“Then whose?” Crowe, still rather daunted by the whole experience, heard voices from beyond a door. He pointed his finger towards it nervously, and looked towards the machine. “And what will they say when they discover us?”

“Much like your earlier excursion, your presence here will go unobserved,” it said with a tired huff. “As I’ve explained already, we are displaced from your reality; mere spectators. We can see them, but they can’t see us.”

“And what, exactly, are we here to spectate upon?” he said with ire, his bony old arms crossing over his chest now too, a gesture which was helping, somewhat, to close his night-clothes, and preserve a shred of modesty, yet barely a shred, and barely modesty besides.

“Spectate! Look and see for yourself!” the robotic man told him wryly. “I mean... that’s always been your erring, has it not! Always asking questions, always seeking answers, even when the answers... they’re right in front of you; they’re standing there waving a placard bearing the legend, here are the answers you seek.”

“I thought you were the Present, not the Past,” he said, or rather grumbled it haughtily with quite obvious sarcastic undertones.

“And yet, here we are! You know... being clever doesn’t really suit your kind, does it? You should stick to... to... to trying to beg

for food, or... shaking hands with your master, on command—not just when you feel like it... whatever it is that smart humans do.”

It was at this moment that Tom Hackerty entered the living room, such as it was. His wife followed him in, a rather plain woman by all accounts, but filled with a warmth that humbled Crowe to his foundations; not that he was moved to admit it, even to himself. Tom was boundless with smiles, as his children played noisily in another room.

“Merry Christmas!” He opened his arms, and his wife threw herself to him, hugging joyously.

The children, it seemed, were not as noisy as first perceived. Astonishingly quiet, come to think of it. Mr Crowe watched a young boy as he ran into the room excitedly, but the second child, a young girl, remained in silence. She moved with eerie elegance towards Mr Crowe, and slowly, very slowly, her eyes turned upward to stare coldly straight at him.

“They... can’t see us, can they?” he ventured with a faint tremble to his voice as he backed very gingerly away from her.

Wellington shook his head, but as Crowe turned to look, he could tell that even he was slightly concerned by this queer turn of events.

“That would be... inconsistent.”

Crowe scoffed, this was hardly very comforting to him, and perhaps not meant to be so.

“Merry Christmas, tiny Dimm.” said the elder Mr Hackerty, scruffing his son’s hair with his palm, and beaming the widest of smiles all the while.

“And to you, Father,” said the little Dimm in reply.

The three seemed happy enough, and Mr Crowe understood all too well.

“A family!” he said, softly. “I could have had a family; I could have lived their life. It’s no great accomplishment; no achievement of any great note.”

Mr Wellington crossed his arms. “Could?”

“Could, but didn’t. And this is why.” He held out his palm to the sight before them. In the corner of the room, a green tree, decorated with twinkling lamps, and beneath it, presents were wrapped in brightly coloured paper, their secrets soon to be revealed. Folded cards with colourful designs were mounted on a shelf, with words of warmest greeting written within. To most, the scene would be simply idyllic, a thing to be envied.

Mr Wellington looked on, evidently not seeing what was intended to be clearly shown.

“Mr Wellington, we live in a time of wonder. Christmas no longer holds any religious significance to our people; it’s a mere mark on a calendar. A calendar, might I remind you, that has no meaning here in outer-space. The tree is not a real tree, it’s made from a ceramic compound, and not even a real ceramic compound besides. The presents come from the regenerator; you find the program for them, and they are made in all good haste by the machinery within. They’re meaningless; they have no value nor are they of any real substance. These people eat food that isn’t food, they swap gifts that are acquired merely for the asking. There’s no effort involved and no purpose besides. They put nothing into the gaining of things, and so the things they gain are as worthless as they are themselves,” he said, sounding a little too angry and as though his anger should not be blamed on himself.

“Family is the same. It’s all false; it’s all... instincts we were programmed with æons ago, that no longer have any meaning in the world we live in.”

“Then, there is hope for you yet,” began the android. “Your species must necessarily sever its bonds with its biological roots, if it is to progress into the realms of logic and reason. Family, symbolism, obsolete methods of counting, they serve no purpose beyond fancy, and you are right to disregard them. May we conclude that you have learned what you came to learn, and that our excruciating encounter may finally conclude?”

Just then, the Mother stepped away, and approached the young girl. Tom followed, but she stood in her place, unmoving, staring at the nothingness that appeared to stand where Mr Crowe actually did.

“Little Dorrit?” she offered, but not a flicker of an emotion did she return. It was as if his words had never happened.

“Little Dorrit, darling?” his wife repeated, folding her fingers ever so gently around her daughter’s arm. She looked back to her husband, her eyes begging for an answer, for something, for anything. “I need to know she hears us, Tom. I need to believe that, today of all days.”

“That’s what they say. She hears us, right enough,” said Tom with a nod, but he had no confidence to muster for the comfort of his wife. “She hears us, but whether she’s in there listening or not... it’s not for me to say.” He looked downhearted, as if bearing a terrible weight; and bear it he did on those tired shoulders, and not just his own load did he carry, but the weight of the burden carried by his wife and his family, also.

The mood turned sombre indeed as a single tear was shed. It rolled down her face as she turned to stare into the eyes of her little girl.

“Surely there must be something we can do?”

A supportive hand was gently placed on her shoulder, but it offered little comfort. Crowe could only stand in silence watching, wondering what must be happening.

“There’s no cure for what she has,” he said, forlorn. “Maybe one day there will be, but not this day.”

“And maybe not! Maybe never, Tom!” she sniffed, and rubbed the back of her hand over her cheek, to wipe away another tear that had begun making its way down her rugged cheek.

“You never know what the future holds!” said Tom reassuringly, and speaking words he must have felt had some substance. He bent down to face her, and looked from the eyes of his wife to the lifeless eyes of his child.

“You should never have married me, with my body so engineered, such as it is,” she said, laughing the very saddest kind of laugh. “Humans and Greps aren’t meant to mix, they say. They told us we might have problems down the line and she’s surely proof of that.”

This was foolishness, and they both clearly knew it. “Don’t be daft, love! It was nobody’s fault,” he said firmly, stepping into his role as head of his household, and not doing a terrible job of it. “The chances of this happening are 1 in 6 million. This kind of autism is practically unheard of, so they tell us.”

“But it is heard of. Just look at her!” she cried, and now the tears rolled down her face unchecked, now they had no reason not to.

Crowe watched in morbid silence, as even the young boy had stopped now; the room was beset with that awful silence, save for the emotional words between the two.

“That’s why I do it, you know?” he told her. “That’s why I do what I do.”

“For that sinister old skeleton, Crowe?” she said with a sudden frown, anger wiping the softness from her features. “That vile, selfish, awful fiend.”

“It’s the only way!” he told her again, no sign of anger, but just sadness in his eyes.

“You’re the best engineer that you’d find if you travelled a month in any direction. He should be glad to have you, but instead he treats you no better than a dog.”

“And I’ll bet he can beg on command!” Interjected Mr Wellington, to Crowe, who was now largely ignoring him, or at least appearing to be doing so.

“He’s a fool, right enough, and no mistake about it,” said Tom.

Crowe turned to the android, his face twisted with anger. He growled with clear menace, “So, a fool, am I? A fool?! A fool who’ll be looking for a new engineer upon the morrow, and that you can be sure of.”

“It is a fool, indeed, that assigns greater import to vanity, than to his own best interests,” replied the mechanical man, shaking its head. “You would replace him with... an inferior model? In hindsight, my observation that there was hope for you was clearly premature, overly so, and by no narrow margin I’ll add.”

“You could go to a research station, go to the Alliance,” she began to sob now, her anger only a scaffold to hold back the tears, and it had now begun to collapse.

“You know I can’t do that. All they’d do is stick her in a home, and tell us she’s better off there being studied, poked, high as a kite, and none of it doing a lick of good. She’s better off here with a family that loves her, and will keep on with the business of loving her, no matter what.”

“At the Alliance, there’s at least hope of a cure though, isn’t there?”

“Well, the way I figure it, in a population of 900 billion Alliance citizens, I don’t think curing it’s gonna be their biggest priority,” he said with a sigh. “What would be in it for them to do such a thing? More likely, she’d end up on Mercy 1, left to rot down to her innocent little bones.”

“But surely you can fix her, Dad! You can make her better!” Little Dimm called out, his voice ringing with admiration for his father, a kind of deference that only a child can have.

“Perhaps,” he replied, regaining some sense of the optimism that drove him. “Perhaps I can, at that.”

“But how?” asked his wife, simultaneously puzzled and reassured.

“I build things, don’t I? I designed Crowe’s thinking machine men, his automatons. You should have seen the sorry-looking junk he was flogging before I turned up. Well now, his machines can think. Not intelligent like what we is; not yet, but we’re getting there.”

“Like Mr Wellington!” Little Dimm cried out happily. “He can think.”

“I wish you’d stop calling it that.” His mother stood up, wiped the tears away, and wagged an admonishing finger. “If our neighbour heard that you’d named our toy man after him, how happy about it do you think he’d be at the news?”

“He’s not just a toy, Mum. He’s my friend!” he told her sternly, with a solemn little scowl on his innocent little face.

“Little Dimm’s on the money there! He’s much more than just an machine!” Tom stood up beside his good wife, passing a loving glance to his daughter as he did. “He started off ordinary — a simple domestic unit; I put the bits together much as any other, but look at

him now! I've upgraded, modified, enhanced, and amplified his technological brain more times than I can count, and I can count pretty high!

"Just think what I learned along the way? Every step is a step closer to building something that can help little Dorrit here. One day, I will build a machine to help her brain to do its work, and free her from the awful shackles of her broken little mind.

"And I'll do it, and Mr Wellington, for want of a better name, Mr Crowe's lab, and my godawful job, they all have their part to play in it all, so they do!"

"I know," she smiled at him, with warmth in her eyes.

"And I'll put up with it; I'll work every hour under the sun for that horrible old skeleton, and one day I'll thank him. I'll thank him, and I'll shake his hand, for everything he's done for me. And I'll introduce him to my daughter, and she'll smile right back up at him, her pretty little eyes twinkling like they always should have done!" He shed a tear of his own right there, and it was his wife's turn to place a hand on his shoulder in support.

"Whatever it takes, I'll do it!" he said softly.

"And the best Christmas ever, that will be."

Mr Crowe watched in silence, his eyes filling with tears he was too stubborn to allow to escape.

"Well, you dodged a bullet there!" said the machine, a familiarity in his tone one would not expect from such a device. "Families are just seeping moisture, mess, and madness; irrational decisions commanded by obsolete chemical puppeteering. This is not for you."

"You're right. It isn't for me," he growled, less certain of himself than before, far less in fact. "Family is a thing for people who are capable of loving one another, for caring for one another,

and for making sacrifices for one another. It's not for the likes of me, I can say with no small degree of certainty."

"And what kind of short-circuiting biobot would ever aspire to the capacity of such... such distasteful and self-destructive displays?!" added the mechanoid. "I think we've both learned something here today.

"For me, that having seen first-hand the true dank horrors of your species unguarded, my current capacity for scorn is not nearly sufficient; and whatever it is you've learned."

With that, Mr Wellington, the real one, walked in with a tray of food for the table. The mood lightened, and the family smiled at each other warmly.

As the machine began putting out the food with a mildly articulated huff, Mrs Hackerty handed a small gift to her husband.

He took it with a surprised smile, and glanced up to her knowing eyes.

She bid him, "Open it then."

And he did, carefully nibbling away the top corner of the bright red paper with his thumb-nail, until there was a good opening. He then ripped at the rest. By now his son had come to see, standing beside his mother who was smiling broadly, and cast her boy a knowing wink.

Tom Hackerty held aloft a tie; a grey tie, with white pin-stripes, and he'd never been happier to see anything in all his days.

"It's real," she told him. "It's from the tailor your Mr Crowe speaks so highly of. I know you always wanted it. You can wear this to work now, and you'll know he's no better than you."

"Well I know that much already," he said, clearly meaning every spoken word. "I've got all of you while he doesn't have a damn thing that truly matters to a living soul."

And with that last word it all vanished.

This time, he was beset with a brilliant white; so brilliant, in fact, that it blinded him for a moment, and filled his eyes with a burning pain, the likes of which no man had ever felt before that instant. The pain left soon enough, but he dared not open his eyes, lest more of the unnatural light would fill his visage, and burn itself permanently into his mind, leaving who-knew-what in its wake.

As it so happened, he had little to fear in that regard, for once he had opened his eyes, he was in a dark room; darker than any he'd seen before on his travels, through whatever realm he had found himself occupying.

He took a moment; his pause to look around, to take his breath, in hope of finding the bearings that had become so elusive a thing, with reality melting away at a whim whenever it felt exactly like doing so.

The room was dark, certainly, and large. It was sombre, but in a way, comfortingly so.

He stepped along a carpet, soft, and yielding, beneath his still bare feet. If this was a dream, it was one painted quite brilliantly, and he had become all too certain that it wasn't.

Beside him, he saw a man, but not a man. It wore black, but not black, and it was white, but also not, at the very same instant. Its face glowed from within, or without; he couldn't tell from looking at it, but in place of eyes were two patches of darkness, and they turned to regard him.

"Future," it said simply, as if such a thing could explain completely, and answer the many, many, questions filling Mr Crowe's terrified mind.

“You are the future?” he asked of it; of the terrible, glowing, not a man, thing. Its dark eyes, pools of black, seemed to sink inside of itself, but otherwise it moved not a hair’s breadth.

“This is your guide; your guide to this element of your future.”

“I don’t understand,” he told it, with absolute and irrevocable sincerity.

“Yes,” it countered, or agreed perhaps. It spoke with a soft singing voice, almost like it was playing music to him, that was somehow formed into words. The sound wasn’t coming from this way, or that, and not from the machine either, which had no mouth to speak of, nor speak from. The sound was in his head, in the very mind of Mr Crowe, and as he thought about such things, he realised just how much he was troubled by that very fact.

“Where am I?”

As sure as it might be troubling to him, the place was troubling him more. He had a grim notion that he knew, and he didn’t want to be right. This place was in another time, some day far, far in his future; but whatever it was, it wasn’t the day it had been when this terrible journey, he’d unwittingly undertaken, had begun. He knew this beyond the shadow of a doubt, and yet that brought him no comfort either. What this place was, was the question that troubled him most prominently, and he wished the question had not needed to have been asked.

The voice appeared again, somewhere between his ears, from a place he couldn’t have seen without eyes turned in the most unnatural way inwards. “You are dead,” it sang to him.

He knew that; he didn’t need to hear it, and certainly he had no burning desire to see it in any case. “Everybody dies. It’s a certainty of life—it ends, and we can’t change it. Why bring me here? Why

show me this? I know I die, so what possible bearing can this have on me?"

"You are not here to be changed. You are simply here," the words told him as they poured into his mind. "You have always been dead. You were always alive, just the same. Time does not see you, the way you see time."

The inhuman lack of emotion chilled his very bones. This monster chilled him; it was alive, but it had no compassion, and no warmth. What it was he could only guess at, and guessing was something he was far from disposed to do at the present, or possibly future, moment.

Up ahead, he heard voices. The monster raised an arm and gestured forwards. No, not an arm—a thing wrapped in black, that seemed to swirl with a life of its own; the creature within glowed from every inch of its being. He felt a repulsion towards it, at the very artificial nature of it, and the starkness of that very same nature. He walked on quickly, scuttling ahead towards the sound. His feet dragged along the soft carpet towards the front, where a coffin resided with a smattering of people around the front of the thing.

He closed his eyes, and cursed the creature for showing him, but resolved to give it no satisfaction.

The man at the head of the small group was old; aged beyond his immediate familiarity, but surely enough, it was none other than Tom Hackerty.

Crowe waved and cried out, but his cries were swallowed by silence with not even the very slightest echo from the walls around him.

Tom looked saddened; that in itself was something. Crowe sidled up to observe the scene.

"So that's the end of him, then," said old Tom, with a sigh.

If he had to guess, then twenty years might have passed, and had carved Tom into a different man as passed along with it. By his side was a beautiful young lady, garbed in a fine black dress befitting such an occasion, despite being slightly too tight for his taste. Was this his daughter, grown and matured?

The cold old heart of Mr Crowe warmed slightly, as she held herself close to Tom, and looked up to him from beneath the brow of her tasteful hat. Tom looked back, and away again, his mind elsewhere.

So he did it; he'd found a way to reverse her terrible affliction, that had locked her away in the dungeon of her own mind. Crowe found himself smiling, in spite of the thing; in spite of the indignity of the situation, and the terror of witnessing this horrid event. He had twenty years left to him, and perhaps in some small way, he could help; perhaps on his return, he could help Tom make good on the promise; the very promise he had witnessed fulfilled right before him at that moment? And he would too, he decided. Yes, of course he would too.

There was a man next to him, young and hungry, with a look in his eyes he recognised only too well from himself in his own past.

"He's gone, alright," said the young man, nearly with a smirk, but stopping just short of such a total lack of respect. Almost. "We gave the old man twenty extra years. That's not too bad for one, such as he was."

And Tom smiled, but it wasn't the happy family man smiling to his children—this was the face of a cruel man, and Crowe was taken aback. Who was this young man? His son?

"Where do we stand, Simon?" asked Tom, barely turning to look at him.

So this was someone new; an employee perhaps? A business partner? He waited as things unfolded before him.

“The new artificial-man hits the market tomorrow morning. By the afternoon, we’re going to be the richest company in all the Alliance,” said Simon, plainly. There was an anger in him; he was a predator, a hunter of something, and he was spoiling for a kill.

“Is it everything we designed it to be?” said Tom, placing his arm around the woman, and drawing her close, but not for comfort. Perhaps this was not his daughter, but if not, then who could she be?

Crowe was growing concerned. Why? He had no care for their family, and had only seen them through trickery of some machine this very day, but somehow, the effect had marked him. Perhaps he hadn’t simply witnessed someone else’s life, but perhaps a shadow of all the opportunities he’d missed out on.

Simon spoke after a deep breath, “Sir, this machine can see through time itself. We used the device as a pattern. It’s aware of the future, and of the past, and sees them no differently to how we can view the present. It can remember the future, it lives now in the past, and it does all of them simultaneously. It’s a miracle, Sir, and we made it ourselves with no god to guide our hand.”

Crowe struggled to imagine such a thing, and then a certain dread hit him. It hit him harder, and made him stagger back in horror.

“You!” he said, pointing to the awful glowing thing. “You’re this dreadful machine they’re speaking of.”

It stood in silence, mocking him perhaps, the dark patches never straying from the scene.

Slowly Crowe tore away his eyes and watched along with it.

“The device,” said Tom in a singsong voice, and gave the young woman a smile that she dutifully returned. “That thing has a

bit of a history, you know? I mean, in terms of our universe, it has a bit of a personal history for me.”

“Really?” said Simon, feigning the slightest interest, but Tom was no dullard.

He slapped the coffin hard. “This old charlie went and activated it some 20 years hence. Of course, he vanished in a flash; we never saw more than a few bits of dust to prove he’d ever been there at all. We had to set up a whole web of jiggy-pokery, to make him look alive, to drive this company forwards. We made pretence of him being a hermit, never venturing from his home again, and only ever sending us orders through messengers.

“People was quick to believe the flanker we’d pulled though, cos it wasn’t like there was nobody eager to see him in the flesh no more anyway, so to speak; and if ever there was, I couldn’t guess it.”

Simon was now listening intently. This was new to him, and he was shrewd enough to know when he should pay attention in silence.

“I couldn’t give up, you see. I needed that company to keep working, even with Crowe lost who knows where. I had a daughter, cursed she was. My work was the only way I could hope of bringing her back to the world; to her family.”

Crowe was astonished. He glared forwards at the scene, a mixture of powerful emotions bubbling inside him. He took a small comfort that at least some good had come from it; his daughter, at least, was innocent in all of this and deserved her chance to live, and perhaps live better than any of them. Why did this matter to him, he thought, but matter it most assuredly did?

“Of course, things went a bit awry, what with running and building the company; I lost my family along the way—but I never lost momentum, even without that little kick there to remind me.” He turned to the young woman, and planted a passionate kiss on her lips.

Crowe was aghast; it wasn't his daughter at all, but some woman far too young to be with such a man, a man who had become all too much like the man he had become himself.

"Losing my family was awful; the worst thing that ever happened to me, or that's what I thought at the time!" He looked the lovely young woman over with the eyes of a man surveying a piece of his property. "With wealth comes compensation for such misfortune though. It's funny how quickly I stopped missing them."

"I see," said Simon, but Crowe suspected that Simon didn't see at all. He, however, was just beginning to.

"He wasn't the first," continued Tom, with a playful lilt to his voice. "His boss before him, Shrew, he went and activated the device years earlier, and poof! He vanished just the same. I was in charge of the research; for figuring out what went wrong. And I did figure it out, though it took me some years to do it! Figuring it out though, that gave me all the power in the galaxy."

Crowe hung his head, the burden of guilt weighing heavily upon him.

"I worked out that when the good and true Mr Shrew used this infernal contraption, someone had sabotaged it, you see. It was meant to fail; it was meant to vaporise, or whatever, anybody what used it. There was only one person who could have done that, Simon." He tapped on the empty coffin.

Crowe cast a guilty look back to the glowing thing. It passed no judgement, and merely stared impassively on. "I was young..." the old Crowe said with a guilty rumble.

"But it happened again to Mr Crowe?" said Simon, with a worried frown; worried, no doubt, that he was following all this correctly. Crowe, from experience, knew that he was.

“It most certainly did indeed. And a fitting end to that vile old skeleton, swallowed up whole by the same treachery he’d gone and pinched the company with, all those years ago. He activated the device, and he was gone, never to be seen again. Gone from our realm for all time, and taken who knows where. Who cares where, indeed?”

Simon scowled to himself, and straightened his sombre black tie. “Did you know what might happen, Sir?”

“I never knew what would happen to our Mr Crowe, no! I figured it was dangerous, and I told him to leave it alone until we could get our heads round it, but he went and did it anyway.” Tom took a deep breath, and turned to face his associate. “Simon, when I put you in charge of my engineering team, and had you looking it over, probing its innards for all those years, I was surprised that you never found and reported the cause of the danger to me. Got anything to say about that?”

Simon, shifted his gaze nervously.

“You see, Simon, Mr Crowe understood the device well enough to know that if he couldn’t control it to fulfil its function, then he could at least control it well enough to fulfil his. He fiddled with the damn thing, and rigged it to murder the good Mr Shrew. I worked on it well enough after that, but Crowe was a real piece of work; a real harsh taskmaster, he was.

“He wouldn’t afford me the proper time to make the device fully safe, try as I might.” Tom stared coldly, ahead as if the time building the company must have withered his once proud heart. “I figured out how to fix it proper, but... it seems to have been sabotaged again. It seems you’ve gone and rigged to do to me, what Crowe did to Shrew; and don’t you go denying it, you contemptuous little snake.”

Simon stuttered over an answer, an explanation, an excuse, but ultimately offered none; there was none to give; no way to explain, and little point in trying. He swallowed, and averted his guilty eyes to the ground. Crowe knew his like only too well now; only too well indeed.

“Simon, this coffin was blooming expensive, and it seems a real shame to waste it.” Tom stepped back and gestured to the lid. “I’ve left the device in there ready to activate, just as you left it to me, so get inside and activate it, if you’d be so kind.”

“And what if I don’t?” he hissed darkly.

“You’re married, aren’t you, with a child on the way, so I hear?”

Simon nodded in agreement, the fear appearing to take hold in a most serious fashion.

“I am,” he said, barely finding the strength to form an answer.

Tom huffed impatiently. “There are three gigantic, heavily armed and very angry Krill warriors sitting with your wife as we speak. They will do... unspeakable things to her, far beyond the limited imagination of a rational human like yourself. I, on the other hand, have quite a powerful imagination when it comes to these things, Simon, and let me assure you, the instructions I’ve given them are quite vivid.”

Crowe could see this was no bluff, and he was repulsed. Had he been so cold? Could he have ever been so irretrievably awful? He couldn’t help but imagine what he might have done, had he discovered a plot against him. Would his actions have been equally inhuman, or perhaps even worse besides?

No, he told himself. He was never that far gone; but he was far enough gone indeed to plot against his mentor, just as this young man had done; the young man that shortly after flashed into non-

existence, the same non-existence, it seemed that had swallowed he himself that very evening.

“This is my legacy,” Mr Crowe said finally, his eyes turned down to the floor sadly, weakly. He knew there was no fight left in him, since all this had left him a broken man. “Send me back to my present. I will change. I will be a better man. I will stop this ghastly future from ever taking form.”

“You are dead. You are gone,” replied the voice within his mind. “There is no return for you.”

“Then, there can be no change?” he offered, with meek resistance.

“There is change. The universe is change; it is the nature of things,” it spoke, and his cold heart beat with new-found enthusiasm.

“Then change it, vile machine! Change this future. Stop this horror from befalling me. Stop this destructive chain of events, this path that leads us here. Make the world a better place, and I’ll shoulder the consequences. I’ll bear the pain. Make my pitiful life mean something, even if just to the lives of the people it touched.”

The thing looked at him and slowly tilted its head to one side. “You will shoulder no consequence; you will bear no pain; your pitiful life will mean less than nothing; and you will touch nobody. Your life is a line, and your past has lead you here to this future. There is no change while this remains true.”

“Then make it not true!” he shouted, an anguished roar from the pit of his stomach. For the first time in years, he was filled with passion, and he felt it course through him, bringing him a new sense of purpose. What that purpose might prove to be, he had yet to understand, but he was prepared to face it head on. “Change it, you soulless abomination.”

“You would have me... remove the past? To remove the past, is to remove the future, so only the present may remain.”

“Do it!” he yelled again, with determination and even rage. “I have no future. I am gone this day, back in the present, and my life came to nothing. Change it! Make some small measure of difference, in the hope that the difference might be for the better.”

And with a flash, there was but silence; the deed was done, and done most definitely. Everything that was, was no more. The past and the future were gone!

A very young man stepped into the office of Shrew and Associates.

“Welcome, please, come in!” a friendly face called out to him, stretching out a palm in a time-honoured greeting that had held firm for many centuries without change. “Mr Crowe, is it?”

The young man smiled back. “No, sir. The name is Chuffvomit. Were you expecting somebody else?”

“Hmmm, I don’t know... It was just something my daughter said to me at breakfast, that a Mr Crowe would be here today. It’s nobody I’ve ever heard tell of. Never mind though, sorry... I’m Mr Hackerty. I’m the gaffer round here, if you catch my meaning. Tom Hackerty, is the name.”

“I do indeed. A Merry Christmas to you then, Mr Hackerty.”

“And the same to you! When I said to drop by, I thought you’d wait until after the holidays, but it’s good to see you’re so eager. You’re lucky to catch us open, actually, what with it being Christmas and all. We’ll be shutting down soon—families to be with and that, but there’s still a bit of time for me to give you a quick once around the facility.”

“I don’t wish to trouble you by any measure, Sir,” the young man then remarked, and politely so.

Tom saw something of himself in those young eyes, the nervous urge to please, as the young fellow embarked on his career.

“Don’t be silly, it’s no trouble at all. I love a chance to show off our work, if I were to speak the truth of it! I’m proud as punch of what we do here.” And they had much to be proud of indeed. They were the designers of the most sought after mechanical men ever created, and sought after it was for the best of reasons.

“The best automatons ever to be built, I hear, Mr Hackerty!”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr Chuffvomit.” Tom slapped the young man on the back, and laughed rather too heartily at his own feeble jest. Such laughter couldn’t help but be infectious, and Mr Chuffvomit found himself sharing in the good humour. “Call me Tom, young man. We’re friends and equals here, so we are!”

“So, is Mr Shrew not here?” he said, looking around the magnificent design studio.

“He’s back on Earth now. He retired ages ago. Had a bee in his bonnet over some alien gizmo he couldn’t get his head round, real high tech stuff that such a man should never have had his hands on, truth be told. It took over everything he did until, eventually, he got bored of the whole business of real science.

“He handed over the doodah off to the Alliance so they could try and get a handle on it, and that was that, really. He retired to... somewhere in Spain, I seem to recall. Somewhere nice!

“I’ve been in charge here ever since.”

“I heard rumours he died, some years back,” the young man queried.

“Died?! Nah, not him!” Tom assured him. “I doubt there’s much in this world, or the next, that would be up to the task of removing that old fart from the mortal coil. He’s alive, and in good health, I hear. Apart from in the head, that is. He’s quite mad, you

know? He talks of all manner of nonsense and we nod back and tell him what he wants to hear.”

“Well that’s reassuring to hear.” He frowned as he seemed to struggle with the business of finding a polite response to such a thing.

Tom nodded quite happily. “Yeah, he used to run a tight ship, but as the years went on, he cooled off a bit, and let the designers just... get on with it, pretty much. We don’t sell anything no more. We just design... stuff, you know, for the love of it. And we’ve never been so productive!”

“And I hope to be part of this.” The young man smiled, with all due enthusiasm at the prospect of being part of just such a thing.

“Well I’ve seen what you’re capable of, so that goes double for me! This sorry lot could use a bit of actual talent to look up to. Someone other than me, of course,” he said playfully.

This brightened the heart of the young man even more. His choice had been made long before, the acceptance of the position being a mere formality.

“I hear you do humanitarian endeavours as well, is that correct?” he enquired.

“Um... yeah, you know, all sorts. It’s pretty diverse, and it’s all connected, as all things are,” said Tom with a glowing sense of pride. “We once developed this magical implant chip that helps brains to repair themselves if they got damaged, or there’s some medical condition that stops them working proper.

“It was years ahead of its time, and the whole thing evolved out of our work with mechanical-men. And of course, I was proud to be spearheading that little project—I had a personal stake in it, as it meant I could help my daughter get back on her feet after a rare affliction had taken her mind away. You’d never know it to look at

her now. She's as healthy as they come, and kicks like a horse. Eats like one too!"

"That's amazing!"

And of course it was.

"It's changed everything. I can honestly say that there isn't a single thing about my life that I'd change, or do different if I could do it all again," said Tom with earnest conviction. "How many men can make a claim like that, good Sir?"

"And how many, indeed?"

With a smile, and a knowing wink, he closed his notes, finishing his Christmas story.

"So what did you think of my yarn?" he asked of his old friend, as his eyes adjusted to the light of the fire.

Alas, they were each of them agog at the strange and disturbing tale. The children stared with wide-eyed wonder, unsure whether to laugh or cry, it seemed. His friend was frowning deeply, still trying to put together the pieces of such odd ramblings.

"Charles..." he began haltingly. "Charles, this is not what I expected, which is not to say it's entirely without merit, you understand."

Charles afforded himself a wry smile. "It's not your average story, I'll admit freely enough, but I wanted to write something truly special this time. Do you not feel that it shows a new vista on science, and truly ask the question, 'what if'?"

"Surely, one of the purposes of fiction is to allow ourselves to imagine the unimaginable and use this as a mirror on our own world? Could fiction not embrace the sciences and wonder where such things might one day take us?"

“Charles...” Mr Stanley ushered the children away to play, and they seemed happy enough to do precisely that. “Men living among the stars, alien gimmickry changing the course of our very history, mechanical men evolving through time from automatons into monsters that control the fate of people? Charles, I beg you not to publish this, save you’ll be shredded by ridicule from your critics and readership alike.”

Charles laughed, but it was not the freest of laughs he’d ever shared. “I think people are of a cleverer sort than that, and essentially decent besides; I think they’ll understand that one day, such notions will be commonplace. One day, stories of humankind living in peace in the heavens, will be the work of the mainstream, and perhaps one day, it will be the life people know.

“We can’t hold back progress, now that it has taken hold with such a firm grip, my old friend,” he explained with all due eloquence.

“Aye, but this is, perhaps, too far a leap and taken too soon,” he said, with solemn certainty. He added, a little too coldly, “At least, it is for me.”

“I... hope you are wrong!” Charles averted his eyes sadly. His friend was always the fiercest and most loyal of his fans, and not the harshest of critics by far. His opinion carried a not insignificant weight with him.

“It’s a good story and there is much to commend it,” he insisted. “But can it not be set in the here and now? And must it have mechanical men, dominating the past, present and future? Why not dispense with the technology, and make it... I don’t know, a good old-fashioned ghost story, perhaps?”

“A ghost story?” Charles began rubbing his chin. He had to admit, if only to himself for now, that a ghost story set on the very

Eve of Christmas was an intriguing idea, one worthy of a great deal more consideration.

“Please think it over, Charles!” he said, rising from the chair, and giving his friend a brotherly pat on the back. “Come, join me at the tree! I think it’s time for a Christmas Carol!”

The Barman

There it was, just across the room from her. It was nothing spectacular, to be sure, and the room itself was as far from spectacular as it was from a civilised habitable system; or from a kitchen that served food of a respectable standard.

The first point was of little surprise—she was, after all, on Station AEOS-401, an Alliance outpost light-years away from any regular trade space-lanes. The second point was harder to reconcile, in that she was stood inside the 401 bar, the establishment that boasted the finest cuisine on the entire station. And while the food was irrefutably awful, it remained a bafflingly valid claim nonetheless.

Somari Rakdee had been on the station for a painfully long time, by her own reckoning. Her actual arrival was just three days past, but on Station 401, where time slunk by at an almost imperceptible pace, that was indeed a very long time for any sane mind to endure.

At the design stage, the station had been foreseen as a light in the darkness, a brilliant beacon of Alliance principals, where citizens and visitors alike could find some shelter from the unknown, in comfort and security.

Quite some time after the construction stage, it continued to exist as a gigantic metal tube with some bunks screwed to the wall, and a defensive weapons platform which no longer quite functioned. Indeed, many of the platform parts had been recycled into stills to make beverages that were banned in more closely observed regions of Alliance space.

And to say that the weapons platform no longer quite functioned was actually a fairly charitable description of their current

defensive status. The last live-fire test, wherein two small remote drones were targeted by the not-insignificant array of firepower, had gone quite poorly, if one were to read the exaggeratedly optimistic status report.

The plasma beam lashed out with ferocious and unbridled power, but due to the missing parts, which had been substituted, or outright stolen, the first drone was somehow transported to the Commander's office, through what had once been an observation port, and the second had a regenerated pot of petunias welded to its dorsal spine.

The Alliance security chief ended up offering his resignation, on the grounds that a Krill attack vessel would likely not be countered, or even inconvenienced, by the sudden and violent adornment of some delightfully colourful pot-plants.

But at least, if that eventuality did come to pass, it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that the vessel would also be somehow transported to the Commander's office, where the attackers could be defeated in man to man combat. A fair and even fight could only be assured if the entire Krill contingent of warriors consisted of a single ageing officer who suffered backache and enjoyed, a little too much, beverages brewed in home-made stills that were banned in more closely regulated regions of Alliance space. As this scenario lacked credibility, there was always the more significant probability that they might instead be inconvenienced by the quite appalling food served in the 401 bar.

The regeneration system made coffee, only coffee, and only if you ordered chicken soup. If you ordered coffee, then it would produce something very close to coffee, but not even slightly close to the utensil assigned to house it. It had been rumoured that those intrepid enough, or sufficiently foolhardy, to try ordering tea, were

rewarded with the full force of the station's weapons array, as the many potted plants adorning the opposing walls would likely attest.

In short, the station was not a very nice place to be, and the more ridiculous stories Somari heard about it, the less she wanted to be there.

It remained, however, a welcome and comfortable retreat for those with questionable values or intentions that didn't entirely mesh with the ideals of the diminutive Alliance security detachment, whose efficiency had been somewhat dulled by the illegally intoxicating beverages previously alluded to. Such beverages were, if not freely available, at the very least accessible with a minimum of questions asked. And it was those very questions, such as, 'do you expect to wake up tomorrow morning with your vision intact?' or 'do you enjoy being alive?' that made them much less easily attainable elsewhere.

For someone like Somari Rakdee, this was all something of a necessary evil, mated with a pulsating mass of unpleasant possibilities which were essentially unavoidable. This, coincidentally, was how her ex-husband had described her to his divorce lawyer.

She was rooted to the spot. Not in awe, nor in amazement, and certainly not in surprise. Not even by the sticky remains of a drink, that for all she knew, could have been spilt there on the station's first day of operation.

She stared intently, weighing up the space before her, eyeing the table she had gone to this very place to sit at. It was nothing of any particular remark: a metallic piece of universal equipment bolted to the floor, with a half-arsed attempt to make it in some way comfortable, stylish even. The attempt fell short by no narrow margin, and the seats around it were little more than bent metal tubes

with poorly padded plastic covers. Somewhere, a bored regenerator was not living up to its full potential. Indeed, there were no close-to-coffee pools to be seen, nor potted flowers welded anywhere.

She ran her beady little eyes hungrily over a man. He was imposing, and not unattractive. He sported heavily chiselled features, a large frame that was muscular and healthy, cropped hair, stubble over his bold chin, and angry little eyes peering out angrily at everything that dared to move within angry sight of them.

Sadly, this wasn't the man she was here to meet and she sighed to herself at this fact. She glanced over to the dishevelled little thing sat at table 7 with a stupid little grin on its maybe-human face.

Not that she had anything against those who weren't fully human. In fact, she had some engineered blood in her herself and that had inspired her to experiment quite freely with her interpersonal relationships, a fact that resulted in her vowing to never again intimately involve herself with a Feminisian, as they had paper-thin skin that tore at the slightest provocation.

Her doctor had assured her that complications of procreation were unlikely, for her at least. She hadn't found it particularly reassuring though, especially since the doctor stopped the meeting twice to check records on his computer pad. Even less so since he burst out laughing the first time, and moved his chair back several centimetres to more effectively give her an angry stare, the second.

She herself had rather thicker skin, and wore her leathery psychological hide over her less leathery, but horribly sun-bleached corporeal hide, as she walked towards her meeting. She appeared not only confident, but not even remotely fazed by the disappointment of seeing what she assumed would be yet another monumental waste of her time.

“Somari Rakdee,” she said, pointing to herself, and inwardly berating herself for the rather foolish gesture; the words themselves were sufficiently explanatory, and she had the benefit of sophisticated technology translating for her, into whatever language this thing might speak.

The man, or whatever he was, smiled and moved to stand up.

She stepped back very slightly in response, her smile softening around her eyes, but not around her mouth—that remained fixed in an entirely fake expression that she found herself describing internally as bearing a striking similarity to a maniacal rictus carved on a horrifyingly vicious clown’s face. She silently damned her ex-husband for the colourful descriptions he’d relayed to his divorce lawyer, as well as her own mind for not quite letting go of them.

Truth be told, she actually felt her smile was quite dissimilar to anything carved onto any kind of clown’s face. Especially with makeup on it.

“Bob,” replied the man-like creature. His teeth flashed a sort of half-smile, and his hand was outstretched to shake hers.

She regarded it briefly, in much the same way that she would if he had been offering her to sample a half-eaten fish he’d personally just killed by stabbing it with his own barbed penis. A blink of an eye later, she reasserted some self-control, stepped forward with her high heels clattering and slipping on the sparsely carpeted floor panels, reached out her own hand, and they shook, with barely an observable wince.

He gestured to the seat in front of her as an invitation to sit down. An unnecessary gesture, it seemed, but she politely nodded her agreement and took her seat.

“You’re a journalist?” he said. It didn’t sound like a question.

"I am," she replied with a nod, and fluttered proudly to herself. "I'm obliged to inform you that I am recording this interview. I hope that's acceptable?"

He grinned and nodded. "A solid record of this is a good idea!" he told her with a wry little smirk.

"I hear you have information for me. Is that correct?"

The man shifted nervously, looked every which way but forward, as if to ensure nobody was listening in. His eyes then locked onto those of the burly man sitting at the table next to him.

"Have you got a problem, mate?" growled the man in a low, growling English accent, turning towards him aggressively.

He looked away startled, and uttered a nervous little squeak.

Somari Rakdee sighed and raised her hand to him. She duly assured him, "He won't cause you any trouble, I assure you."

"I was talking to the organ grinder, not his space-monkey," he replied. If his comment had been intended to cause significant discomfort for her and her informant, then it had done its job very well. The man returned his attention to his own affairs, no doubt satisfied by this fact.

Somari cast an angry glare as the man sat shrivelling before her. "Eyes forward," she told him with a hiss. "Why don't you just tell me why we're here?"

"I have information for you!" He leant forward and dropped his voice to a whisper. "You've been investigating shuttle disappearances and stuff, right?"

This time, it was her turn to glance around suspiciously. The angry man was busy ordering some food, and appeared to have found someone new to be angry at, which was some small mercy. "You have a lead?"

He nodded mysteriously. "Something like that. There's something you need to know."

"Go on!" She realised then that she was leaning forward too. She was almost excited, against her better judgement, and listened expectantly.

"Rumours," he whispered. "It was all rumours. Dangerous ones too."

"Rumours?" she said, tilting her head. The excitement had been snuffed out, and the expectant listening wasn't going to be too far behind. "What are you talking about?"

"Rumours!" he said again, as if his precise meaning was self-evident.

"Well... what do you mean, rumours? Naturally, there's going to be a degree of speculation as we try to fit the pieces together, but those pieces are the facts of the case. It's real—I've been following the evidence for months."

"No you haven't!" he said as if revealing something of enormous importance.

His smile did not instil in her any degree of confidence that he had just imparted some great wisdom. On the contrary, the only confidence that it had instilled was in her previously held belief that she should have stayed in bed for another hour.

"Mr... Bob, was it?" she growled condescending. "I am not following rumours. I have personally confirmed the information at the source. This isn't a story I overheard from some deluded tinfoil-hat nutjob at a bar, or read in a trashy gossip column. This is a professional investigation, and I happen to be very good at my job."

"Ahhhh," he said, brandishing a knowing finger in front of his crooked smile. "Prove it!"

"Prove what, exactly?!"

“Prove you’re good at your job. Can you do that?”

She grimaced at this implied sleight on her journalistic proficiency. Words escaped her, and only a strange little grunt came out, floating on an exhalation of warm breath.

Bob continued, most unwelcomely, “If you can’t prove it, then it’s not real. It’s just another rumour. You’re simply accepting rumours and stories as facts. For instance, how do you know you’re good at your job, because someone told you, right? Have you ever been able to objectively measure your performance?”

“Don’t you see?”

She saw plainly enough. She saw that this conversation was beneath her, and wasn’t worth wasting her time on. A decade earlier, maybe she would have attempted to educate him, call him out as the filthy shadow of a bygone era he clearly was, but she’d come to enjoy the lifestyle and freedom that not having permanent migraines afforded her.

“Well, thank you for your valuable insight. I won’t take up any more of your time.”

She got up, turned, and started to walk away, ignoring him much like she would ignore something left in a toilet-pan that a good flush would easily take care of.

“It’s the rumours! Don’t trust them; the truth isn’t the story, it’s behind the story, where it always is! Your life is in danger: they will try to kill you!”

This got her attention. “Who’s going to try to kill me?” she scoffed at the very idea, but a part of her found the suggestion disturbing. There was an earnestness in the way he spoke, an honesty in his eyes. “Smugglers?”

“Rumours!” he said with growing exasperation.

“Goodbye.”

“Dangerous rumours!” he called out noisily from behind her, as she staggered uneasily away on her wobbly heels.

Thankfully, his pathetic whine of a voice was quickly drowned out and silenced by aggressive shouting. Somebody, presumably the burly gentleman who had the outward appearance of a man whose favourite pet was last seen in the proximity of a Vietnamese restaurant, was telling him to shut the hell up.

This was followed up by some very imaginative and colourful insults that questioned every conceivable aspect of his creation.

All that seemed an eminently fitting punishment. Rumours indeed, the nerve of it! The very notion that she was following nothing more than mere hearsay, a story with no more substance than the interior of her vacuous skull, filled said skull with vicious and nonsensical verbal bile beyond its exceedingly limited capacity. She closed her eyes and sighed, silently scolding herself once again for allowing yet more of her ex-husband’s delightfully colourful rhetoric to flash through her mind, when least expected or required.

Still, at least the latest source of her annoyance was being dealt with appropriately.

The notion of a threat to her life and limb was troubling nonetheless. While she knew the job was one that could place her in peril, her current investigations had taken her far outside the heart of Alliance space. Security was far less guaranteed where she presently found herself: a place where even proper coffee was far less guaranteed.

And with that thought in mind, she found herself walking straight into something quite solid. That is to say, more solid than nothing at all, which was what she had been expecting to walk into, when she instead found her face pressed awkwardly into the chest of a man.

“Whoa, are you OK there, Miss?”

She instinctively jumped backwards, momentarily confused as she stared up angrily into the friendly eyes of a man, who appeared to be bearing no measure of blame for the incident. “Taking up enough space there, are you?” she snorted at him.

“I’m fine too, love,” he said, ignoring her stupidity, deliberately or otherwise. “No harm done anyway. Aren’t you that reporter—the one the Commander said was full of crap?”

She flustered slightly in a half-hearted attempt to compose herself. She straightened her severe black jacket and glared at him accusingly. “Gary Martin, the shuttle-pilot, I presume? The one who’s happy to break the rules and take passengers on joy rides, in exchange for bottles of expensive alcohol?”

“Looks like somebody’s been reading my personnel files?” he replied cheerfully, as if he actually took some pride in such a thing. “You make it sound like I’m an unprofessional joker, who enjoys breaking the rules to provoke Alliance security personnel, and deliberately annoy the Commander.”

“I didn’t mean to imply...”

“No, I mean to say that you’ve got me pretty much pegged. Well done! That’s as good a description as I ever heard.”

She managed the merest ghost of a smile. This station and its people were still something of a mystery to her. How it managed to function at all was a whole article in itself, that would preferably be researched and written by someone else.

“I see...” She didn’t see, and had no burning wish to do so.

“Well I was just about to get some breakfast while I wait for my transport. Would you care to join me? I’m sure I can come up with a newsworthy story or two.”

She responded with a scowl. "It depends. I'm investigating the shuttle disappearances. Do you know anything about that?"

"I'm a shuttle pilot; I'm bound to know something."

He found a table and sat down heavily into the familiar old chair. During his time aboard the station, he had occupied all of them at some point, and many, more than once. None of them bore any special meaning to him, as not much on the station ever did. It was a place to stay while you took a breath; a place to wait for the next thing to happen; a place in which to decide which way was going to be forward. It was no kind of destination. It was transient: a thing you couldn't wait to look back on, even when it still lay before you.

"Some breakfast then?" said Gary cheerfully, tilting his head towards the menu that was propped up on the table between an assortment of condiment bottles, the necks of which were crusted with dried-out remains of whatever was inside, often peppered with the tiny black shells of dead insects.

"No thank you," she replied coldly. "I don't eat murder."

Gary sat in silence for a moment, blinking. "Sorry. Who... does?!"

"Anybody that's ever eaten a living thing," she said, her eyes now half closed and fingers steepled in front of her face, which carried an infuriating aura of affected superiority.

Gary sat in silence once again, blinking some more.

"Everything's regenerated here, and not even particularly well. None of it was ever alive. Not much of anything is actually alive now. In fact, I've been declared legally dead on no less than seventeen occasions myself!"

"That's not the point, Gary, and you know it. Some of us aspire to more elevated principles, to bettering ourselves, so we can leave this universe a better place than we found it."

“So...” Gary was struggling to find sense in it, and sensed that sense was not there to be found. “You don’t eat re-sequenced protein that’s been poorly fashioned into a laughable approximation of meat then?”

“That’s right. Meat, poultry, seafood, invertebrates, eggs, dairy...”

“You’ve lost me again... this doesn’t even...”

“... legumes, roots, sprouts, flowering fruits, polenta ...”

“Oh, come on...”

“... oils, nuts, grain, fungi, or bark.”

Gary looked at her incredulously, his jaw hung upon. His rate of blinking had increased to several times per second. “So, what? You just live off... what? Obyrlicon gloop?”

“Actually it’s quite palatable with a dab of honey, and finished off with a big slice of roddenberry pie.”

“Um, isn’t that..?”

“Don’t get all micro-aggressive with me! I don’t exist for the sole purpose of satisfying your... toxic hyper-masculine standards, Gareth!” She didn’t sound annoyed exactly, but it was clear she wasn’t happy with... or about... something. “You can blow your testosterone trumpet in your own time.”

“My... huh? Well, I’m going for an Eggs Benedict, safe in the knowledge that it will be of no consequence, and that the universe will be left in no worse a state for it.”

“Well it’s you that has to live with yourself.”

“And doesn’t that delight me?” Indeed, it certainly appeared to delight him very much. “So... When you inevitably tire of ingesting bland synthetic food substitute, I have to tell you the Eggs Benedict here really isn’t the worst thing on the menu. The eggs and the muffin they’ve got spot on, and the ham is an acceptable stand-in for

Canadian bacon. The hollandaise sauce though... that needs a bit of work. As you know, you're supposed to use a double boiler and keep it well whisked to maintain a fluffy consistency, but this just confuses the hell out of the computers, so what you end up with is something that tastes like... I dunno... lumpy, vinegary, custard, I suppose. It would probably go nice with your roddenberry pie."

"I imagine it would!" she said, not seeming to notice that she had started smacking her lips. "I'm not hungry though. I'll just have coffee."

"What kind? Colombian served over ice always gives my day the best possible start!"

"Black. Electrolyte free."

Gary did not fail to notice that to any rational person, her face had acquired the look of somebody who had recently been on the receiving end of exploratory brain surgery. All emotion had been purged, leaving just a pair of black dots gaping up at him, in front of a brain that was presumably wondering just what manner of idiot he really was. Or maybe it was just his imagination?

"I see. So... you said you're investigating missing shuttles. How's that going?"

"Right now, it isn't. The trail has gone cold," she said with uncharacteristic sincerity.

"That doesn't surprise me at all!" He looked up at the waiter who was now hovering nearby with an electronic pad, waiting for the order. "I can't decide between the Eggs Benedict and the Eggs Florentine. I think you had better bring both. Also a Columbian coffee on ice, and a black coffee, please withhold the electrolytes, for my delightful breakfast companion please, who has withheld the delight aspect, all by herself."

"I'm perfectly capable of ordering for myself," she said with a sneer, and turned her attention to the waiter. "Black coffee, please. No electrolytes."

The waiter nodded with a less than subtle rolling of his eyes, and made a note on the electronic pad before shuffled off towards the kitchen area. He muttered something negative about off-station people and perhaps certain people in a more general sense.

"Impressive work. You sure ordered the hell out of that coffee. It's not going to know what hit it!" Gary smirked with a combination of bewilderment and mild amusement.

"Why doesn't it surprise you that the trail's gone cold? Have you heard something?" she asked.

"Probably," he admitted. "I'm the kind of person that other people like to tell things to. I should have been a barman, like... the barman. The barman's always telling me that. I figure he should know, if anyone would."

"But can the barman pilot a shuttle?" she asked, lacking any degree of sincerity.

"Probably. He seems to know how to do everything else. If he wasn't such a good guy, he'd be one of those incredibly annoying people that ends up horribly murdered, and you think to yourself, with some relief, that it's about time."

She eyed him with some suspicion, and very slowly said, "I see."

"So, the shuttles. You say the trail's gone cold," he continued, looking across towards the kitchen, which he seemed to find much more interesting than her, and for good reason.

"Honestly, I've hit a brick wall. I heard of stolen shuttles passing through here, but I've not been able to find evidence of even a single shuttle coming in without proper records."

“Given how this place is run, that’s a cause for suspicion in itself.”

“My thoughts exactly. I was expecting a haystack of false leads, but the record keeping of incoming and outgoing shuttles is immaculate. If the rest of the station was run so well, it might even be a nice place to visit.”

“They’d probably serve a decent Hollandaise sauce too,” added Gary with a dark frown.

She shook her head sadly. “I don’t know what’s going on. I know that shuttles are going missing, I just can’t seem to find how this station fits into the puzzle.”

“It would be a great place to hide,” he suggested.

Suddenly, the kitchen door swung open, and Gary’s face lit up with pure delight as the waiter headed his way with two steaming plates of food.

“We have all kinds of unusual comings and goings here,” he continued, but his heart just wasn’t in it.

He almost snatched the food away, smiling and thanking the waiter as he did. He took a long sniff at the pair of breakfasts, shook his head in moderate appreciation, and grabbed up the necessary utensils like a man starving to death.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe some of the stories. Do you want to hear one that was told to me by our very own barman?”

“Sure...” she replied, with a deflated sigh. “Why not?”

“It was an unexceptional morning in Byfleet when the natives took up arms.”

“What’s that, uncle?”

“The December mist had subsided, leaving a hazy sheen of fresh dewdrops across the yellowing grasses of the patch-worked

meadows that adorned the surrounding hillsides. Somewhere a church bell chimed..."

"Not this again? I've got to get back to work..."

"It was striking to me just how... unremarkable it all was. The quiet, the serenity... the sense that all was at peace with the world. None of us saw the great distrust, the anger that had been brewing beneath our very noses, hidden wilfully behind each artificial smile and thank you mister."

"Riggght... Look, I'll meet you back here when my shift's over. Try not to get into any trouble this time!"

Loman got up from the bar-side table, straightened his tunic, and headed towards the exit. Pausing momentarily in his tracks, he turned his attention to a nearby waiter who was busy polishing the inside of a glass with a towel.

"Excuse me," he said, his eyes shifting nervously. "Is the barman around?"

The young man frowned curiously. "Barman?"

Loman shrugged, it didn't matter. He quickly got to the point. "Never mind. My uncle over there... he's having a bit of an episode, and I have to go back to work. He'll be fine by himself, I'm sure, but would you mind just keeping an eye on him: make sure he doesn't bother any of the other customers?"

"No problem at all," said the waiter. "We get all sorts in here, so I doubt anyone would notice anyway. The other week we had a guy in a smoking jacket insisting he was a legendary author to anyone that would listen, if you can imagine that."

"Hmmm. That's oddly specific."

"My thoughts exactly. Funny thing was, a couple of travellers actually recognised him. They didn't even look that surprised. They just asked him for his autograph, which seemed to make him happy,

as he left quietly after that. He was back in again the next day, in a security officer's uniform, making the same claims.

"He even told me he knew Charles Dickens; he said they used to be very good friends."

"Well it sounds like nothing's going to faze you. Thanks for helping out. I'll be back in about four hours."

The latter half of a shift at the communications post always went better after a decent lunch, and today he'd really gone to town: he'd ordered a whole roast chicken with a thyme and onion sourdough stuffing, served with fluffy boiled potatoes, parsnips, mushrooms and a side helping of broad bean pilau with chopped dill and pine nuts. This was washed down with several cups of oolong tea, a perfect marriage which emulsified the chicken fat in a delightfully flavoursome way.

Despite his failed attempt to distract himself, which resulted in a very satisfied appetite, the business with his uncle was deeply troubling him.

'The episodes', as he called them, had begun several weeks earlier, when out of the blue and for reasons that escaped him, his uncle started talking in some kind of antiquated prose. It only lasted about ten minutes the first time, but they'd gotten progressively worse since. A more recent episode had gone on for nearly three hours. Three solid hours of reeling off theatrical overly-scripted sounding gibberish, which got him more than a few odd stares from the other bar patrons.

The episodes were not his main concern though. His main concern was the rest of the time—the lucid times. When he'd asked his uncle what had happened after the first episode subsided, he claimed to remember everything that had happened and that his

words were his own. He maintained quite robustly that what he was saying made perfect sense. He was so sincere in his delusion, like nothing at all was wrong, that he actually appeared to be having trouble understanding what everyone else was taking issue with.

Loman had always looked up to his uncle as a role model; he was a very sensible and pragmatic man, and a realist. This sudden eccentricity, this failure to grasp reality... it did not suit him.

Probably an early onset of Alzheimers, the medical officer had told him, with a shrug, and a bite of a very bland looking sandwich. Probably. There had been no cases of Alzheimers in several centuries, but pointing out that it was confined to ancient history was met with a chuckle. "Things change" he'd been told. "Ancient history comes and goes."

Well at least for the time being the episodes were moderately benign, and it was safe to leave him by himself.

Loman enjoyed his work on the station, and the prospect of giving it all up to take care of his uncle was quite unpalatable. Such a thing was a requirement of his heritage. Where he came from, family ties meant something, and the responsibility of care fell squarely on his hunched, rounded and increasingly chubby shoulders.

An image flashed through his mind of spending the next couple of decades spoon-feeding boiled spinach and soup to a drooling imbecile, causing him to outwardly shudder.

It was at this point his communicator terminal buzzed. An incoming communication, and this was from onboard the station. He reached across and pressed the button to activate the terminal. "Loman here."

"Hey Loman, it's Newton."

"Newton?"

“Yeah, from the bar. You asked me to keep an eye on your uncle about 15 minutes ago.”

“Ah, Newton,” he said with a sigh. “Sorry, I should have asked you your name.”

Here it came, the moment he had been dreading!

“It’s written on my name badge in quite large letters. It says Hi, I’m Newton.”

“Yeah, sorry about that, Newton. I wasn’t paying attention. Wh... what can I do for you? Is my uncle alright?”

“Yeah, about that. I think you’d better come down here.”

“Has something happened?”

As Loman asked the question, it occurred to him that the sounds of background static over the spotty connection hinted at there being a little more commotion than was to be expected around lunchtime, even taking the usual customer dissatisfaction into account. This did not bode well for him.

“You could say that. He jumped up on a table and started screaming at everyone to get down and take cover. Something about a terrorist attack, and how we’re running out of time. He kept repeating that last bit a lot. I was going to call security, but thought I’d better talk to you first.”

“Thanks for letting me know. I’ll be right down.”

“So what was all that about then?”

Loman had somehow managed to get his uncle back to their cabin, despite his loud and continual protests, and the episode itself appeared to have subsided naturally after it had run its course.

“There was a terrorist attack. They came running in with weapons trained, looking to take hostages. Good thing I was there—I fought them all off before they could do any real harm.”

“There was no attack, uncle,” he grumbled wearily.

“Well, I think that’s a matter of perspective.”

Loman rested his forehead down into his hands and sighed deeply. This was definitely a turn for the worse, and images of boiled spinach and soup were once again filling his mind.

“It’s not what you think though, Loman!” His uncle leant across and placed his hand on his nephew’s shoulder reassuringly. “I know what’s happening. It all makes perfect sense to me.”

Loman looked up at his uncle, who was looking back at him earnestly, with a remarkable lack of confidence. “It does? What is it then?”

“It’s... not something I can really explain, as such. It’s just something that I understand. I understand it all now. Take today’s terrorist attack for example-”

Loman moaned to himself, shaking his head pathetically.

“Let me finish...” he said with a certain calmness about the whole thing. “The terrorist attack I just fought off. To you, that wasn’t real. I get that. As far as you’re concerned, your old uncle’s gone a bit bonkers and started seeing things what aren’t there. I can sympathise, I understand that it’s not real to you. But to them,” he gestured his hand slowly, dramatically, towards a nondescript cabin wall, “to them, the attack was real. It was terrifying and exciting and dangerous, and I made it all be okay again.”

It was even worse than he’d imagined. He grimaced to himself and hoped that it wasn’t quite yet time to invest in a turnip masher and an adult-sized bib; and possibly a supply of incontinence pants. “Who are they, exactly?”

“The people in the wall, of course.”

Loman just looked at him, confused. He glanced around the cabin, at the wall he was pointing at, and around at the other three. "But there's nobody there. It's just a nondescript wall."

"Don't tell me you can't see them?" he said, with some considerably surprise.

"There's nobody there to see, uncle."

"Sure there are. There's millions of them, watching our daily lives with great interest, laughing at our foibles, crying with us in our moments of sorrow. They're... they're like family; they've always been there with us, sharing our lives, making us what we believe ourselves to be.

"They come to us to see stories about our lives at the Edge of the growing Frontier. They want to know about bored towel-delivery experts with mental disorders, experimental motorcycles with auto-cannons bolted to the fronts, humanoid robots forced to become slaves, detectives shifting through the walls of reality to solve crimes, and challenges that see men and women racing through streets in the hope of elusive prizes," he explained, sounding quite reasonable about it the whole time, like this not only made perfect sense, but absolutely should; and should do so to absolutely everyone.

"How long have you been seeing these, wall people?"

"For as long as I can remember. I never paid them much mind before, they were always just... there, but one day something clicked, and it made sense to me who they were. And I think I know how to join them."

"Join them? What do you mean? You're... starting to scare me a little."

“I’ll be joining them in the wall, become one of them. Don’t worry though—I’ll always be close by, keeping an eye on you. They always are.”

Loman struggled to fight back real tears of emotion. This was fast unfolding into his worst nightmare. His uncle, his only living relative, had become certifiably and completely unhinged. He’d gone round the twist, up the pole, off the wall, and out of his tree. A screw had most definitely come undone, and bats were clearly loose in his belfry.

In short, he was quite off his rocker.

“What are you even talking about? This doesn’t make any sense!” he almost pleaded.

And with that, he watched as his uncle got up and gestured to the nondescript cabin wall with his arms outstretched, only to vanish before his very eyes.

In a panic, he tried to run after him, but only succeeded in smashing his head into the very same nondescript wall with a loud crack. Perhaps it was the force of the impact, but he could swear he heard the sound of hissing, and pained cries of an audience cooing as he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

“Necrotising fasciitis, by an invasive streptococcus. Nurse Montgomery, instigate endotracheal intubation, thoracocentesis, and a débridement of devitalized tissue. And I need coffee, 20ccs milk, and I want my ice extra cold.”

Loman opened his eyes, and was momentarily blinded by the bright lights. As his vision cleared, he found himself inside an infirmary. He slowly and painfully twisted his head towards the direction the voice was coming from, only to see a young medical officer, easily identifiable by his head mirror, stethoscope and white

coat, examining... possibly a not-quite human Grep civilian.
Possibly a dead one.

Seeing that he had woken up, the medical officer turned his attention away from the other patient, after all it was pretty obvious there wasn't much left that could be done for him. "Ah-ha. Mr Thackery."

"Me, doctor?"

"No... me doctor, you Mr Thackery. How are you feeling today?"

"My head's a bit sore," said Loman, his eyes continuing to dart about quickly to take in the scene and find his bearings. "Wh... what happened?"

"It looks like you slipped and whacked your head on a nondescript cabin wall. Took quite a bang too, knocked you flat unconscious. Lucky for you, your supervisor thought you were goofing off and came looking for you."

Loman glanced around the room once more, and noted a conspicuous absence. It was as if... somebody was supposed to be there, but wasn't. The thought troubled him for a few moments, but he soon shrugged it off, and returned his attention to the medical officer.

"Yeah, lucky for me. There's nobody else that would have even thought of coming to look for me," he said. "I live by myself, and have no family to speak of."

"I'm sure it was more interesting the way the barman told it," she said, shifting her eyes nervously. "It also contained a plurality of logical fallacies. Nobody can join the wall people. And now I have to be somewhere..." She glared at him, almost angrily. "...Else," she added, and got up from the table.

Gary scooped up the final mouthful of the second phase of his breakfast with a casual shrug. He allowed himself a flicker of a very slightly caustic grin. "Plenty more stories where that came from. How about a real big one I was saving for a special occasion?"

"No," she replied curtly, rudely, condescendingly, brusquely and with not a slight measure of grumpiness. She motioned back to where the burly gentleman was sitting impatiently, no doubt waiting for his own breakfast. "Don't most people save expensive bottles of alcohol for special occasions?"

Gary grinned at her. "I'm not the sort of person who can save expensive bottles of alcohol until my shift officially ends," he told her. "I have the utmost respect for people who have that kind of patience, though!"

"I see!" she said, not really paying much of any attention to anything beyond this large man. "Um... who is he?"

"I'd stay away from him, if I were you," he said with sudden earnestness, a stark kind of earnestness he usually only adopted towards the evening menu.

"He looks dangerous!" she noted with a wry little smile. "Trouble?"

"He's a smuggler." Gary took a sip of his coffee. "He came aboard, got arrested, but was later released. It was all a big mess. They couldn't pin any charges on him, no matter how hard they tried, and believe you me, they tried really hard!"

"I do believe you. What was it he was supposed to be smuggling?"

"As far as they could tell, nothing at all. I heard them talking about him though. He's dangerous alright. He has a long history of... not being very nice to his mother, and I don't think he really

appreciates art, or believes in feminism or something. I'm not totally sure—it didn't seem important at the time."

"Well," she said finally, standing up to leave. "Perhaps I'll have a chat with station security, and see what they have to say?"

Gary noted that her cup remained half empty, and suspected this was intended as a slight, which he took with good humour, his ego remaining unviolated. After some weak platitudes, he watched her exit, slipping off of her heels several times along the way on the decking plates with business-like composure.

With a smirk, he turned his interest back to his coffee, and pondered briefly as to which of the egg dishes was superior. And upon reaching a provisionally inconclusive verdict, he went on to consider acquiring a further supply of eggs from which a more informed decision could be determined.

And that's when it happened.

"Hello, Mr Gary."

He had been distracted, and had not seen her creeping up on him. It was a sing-song voice filled with happiness and rainbows, and it made his skin crawl, plunging him into a near panic. He involuntarily uttered an obscenity, which would have been out of character, had he not been the kind to frequently do so with only the slightest of provocations.

He looked at her eyes, his own wide with surprise, and wondered what she was doing there. He also failed to realise that he was still uttering obscenities, back to back and unrelentingly. After a few unpleasant moments had passed, he stopped and groaned loudly to himself.

"How nice to see you again," he said, without a shred of implied sincerity. "I heard you'd left, and I considered that state of affairs to be largely ideal."

“No, Mr Gary. I stayed. I very much enjoyed sleeping with you. It was very good!”

“Thanks, I guess,” he said with the flicker of a smile.

“I only wish the sex had been good too. That was terrible. I didn’t feel like you were really trying.”

Gary looked a little surprised, flashing her a confused frown. “Ironically, I thought it was some of my best work!” he told her. He decided that this was rapidly heading towards being every bit the disaster he had expected it would be. The prospect of being alone in his room, swinging gently by a short piece of rope, one end attached to his neck, and the other to something sturdy and taller than he was, seemed markedly more appealing than remaining at the table with an unwise former sexual encounter that he had been too drunk to fully remember.

His face contorted into an expression which she clearly failed to classify. Truth be known, Gary himself couldn’t really classify it either.

As a child he had once stepped on a rusty umbrella-bolt while putting out a camping fire with his foot. It had gone straight through the thick sole of his boot, and then the internal clamps had opened out inside his flesh and bones. This had trapped his foot on the top of a small fire which was still burning quite fiercely. He had been drinking a foul-tasting fruit juice at the time, which he’d dropped in surprise. The juice, being highly acidic, reacted to the heat and removed several layers of skin within seconds. This caused him to fall over backwards in shock, snapping his ankle in the process like a dry twig, and unleashing a sickening crack that had plunged his friends into horrified silence. This had all prompted him to soil himself.

The expression he had made then was largely the same, only this one was somehow more pathetic, sadder, and carried a great deal more regret.

Just then, something—anything—caught his eye. It was Ted from Logistics. Normally Ted from Logistics was something to be avoided, like the bubonic plague, or anyone wearing oversized glasses with no lenses. Nobody was even that certain what the Logistics department was, but the station-wide understanding was that it employed only Ted, and that approaching him to question him as to its function should not be undertaken without due caution.

But this was a desperate time! It was a choice between Ted, that walking apocalypse of despair and tedium, or a generally pleasant, albeit quirky, tourist that Gary had foolishly spent the night with once after too much alcohol—actual alcohol: the kind that temporarily damages your mind’s capacity to behave reasonably, which upon reflection was the reason Gary preferred it over its neutered counterpart.

Either path was fraught with danger, but the choice before him was clear.

“You’ll have to excuse me, I have to... discuss... business things... with my associate over there.” He slid out of the chair, grimacing inwardly at the prospect. The darkest of times called for the boldest of measures.

Ted sat himself down at a booth around the edge of the lounge, next to a large window boasting an absolutely unhindered view of absolutely nothing at all. Why even bother putting them on a space-station in the first place, he pondered. It’s just one more breakable thing that needs regular cleaning and maintenance, and it’s not like anybody ever volunteers for the task either.

“Ted!” called a voice. It was Gary, who was hurrying towards the table with unbecoming haste.

Ted frowned to himself. Whenever people were in a rush to speak to him, or in any way inclined to speak to him at all for that matter, it invariably resulted in an increase in his workload, accompanied by lost opportunities to eat food.

“You remembered I exist, did you Gary?” he grumbled to himself sarcastically. “Oh, this is a happy day,”

Gary sat himself down at the table.

“Always a pleasure,” he said. “How have you been, Ted?”

“Can’t complain,” said Ted with an apathetic shrug. “I mean, there wouldn’t be much point, would there? Last week, I was doing cargo haulage in sixteen-hour shifts, this week I’m adjusting every safety valve on the station with a torque wrench.

“Don’t get me started on next week—I’m scheduled to... I dunno, something to do with the reactors, a safety assessment or something. Obviously they might not be safe and someone could lose everything organic above the level of their bones, so who else are they going to send in? How do you think I am?”

“It sounds like important work to me!” Gary said, sounding like maybe, just maybe he hadn’t cared enough to really listen all that hard. “I know I’m leaving, and it’s not like I’ll miss the place, but I’d hate to find out it had been blown to pieces due to inadvisable maintenance choices.”

“I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it,” said Ted with another apathetic shrug, as he picked up the menu. “I barely even remember what sleep is. You know, I’m actually in here for dinner. It’s eight in the morning, and I’m ordering dinner. I was supposed to do a double shift yesterday, but the other guy didn’t show up, so I ended up doing three consecutive shifts. Three!”

“Triple-shifts, I hate those!” Gary winced, but there were many reasons that may have been behind such a gesture. “What was wrong with the other guy?”

“I don’t know, never even seen him! And he never gets anything done, apparently. More work for me, of course.” Ted exhaled loudly, and opened the menu with his usual distinct lack of interest. “He was scheduled to test the reactor shields last night, but I wasn’t done with the safety valves, so I carried on with that instead.

“Next window for reactor shield testing won’t be for another six months now. Oh well, it’s not like the station is going to explode without them.”

“I’m fairly certain that’s literally exactly something that could possibly happen. Probably just as well I booked myself out on the next transport,” ventured Gary.

“Me too!” said Ted with a sigh. “I decided during my last shift. Logistics isn’t as much fun as it used to be.”

“Did it used to be fun?”

Ted looked up thoughtfully, and began shaking his head in a very positive way. “Not really, no. I’m more of a people person than a logistical person. Is piloting fun? I always imagined it wouldn’t be, unless it is, of course.”

Gary half nodded and half shook his head in response.

“Sometimes. I guess.”

“I should have been a pilot. Seemed like a lot of bother though...”

“Well, who likes doing things?” said Gary with a sarcastic snigger.

“Exactly.”

“So...” Gary paused for a moment in apparent deep thought.

“So...” he continued, and paused again. After the silence continued

for a several seconds, he grimaced and spoke again. “So what exactly do you do in ‘Logistics’ anyway?”

“I know. Right?” Ted’s lip on the left side of his mouth curled slightly upwards into a half smile. It was rare to find somebody who truly understood his predicament. “I mean, you won’t believe what happened the other day? The barman was telling me about it at some point. I’m so tired, I can’t even remember precisely when...”

“How did it happen?” he asked.

The woman was in her thirties and not unattractive. Marvin sipped at his drink and shook his head solemnly. He hadn’t drunk enough yet for her to go from not unattractive to desirable, but he was certainly working on it.

She caught the look he was giving her, and clearly knew what it meant.

“I only know what I was told,” he said, his eyes suddenly looking up at her, rather pathetically.

She was Chief of Operations, the head of the entire docking area assembly that floated lazily around the central hub of Station AEOS-401. She had invited him for a drink, but she didn’t appear to want a drink, and certainly didn’t appear to want one with him. She was Melorian, a Grep race nearly identical to normal humans, the only differences being a complete absence of under-arm hair, and an inability to use the word ‘disgraceful.’

“And what were you told?” she pressed on.

“What does it even matter?” He slammed his glass down half-heartedly. “Norm’s dead. Some monster from out there in space killed him, and we don’t even know why.”

“It matters!” she said with a scolding tone.

Marvin looked at her, and then lowered his eyes shamefully, like a child being told off, but one who knew he deserved it. "I was told that he came back to the station and had been torn apart. He and two Alliance Defence guys he'd been with. I heard they had been ripped into tiny little pieces."

"Well that's not quite true," she said evenly. "There were only really a few small wounds."

"I'll tell you what!" he began. "I tell you what I heard, you tell me what you heard. Good?"

He sipped at the brutal liquid which caressed the inside of his throat like a brick wrapped in barbed wire being forced down his neck by a rusty metal hammer. He appreciated that she could just as happily force him to tell her what he knew in the comfort of her office, but that would mean paperwork, reports, and all manner of judgemental eyes watching her uncomfortably closely.

This seemed more a matter of morbid curiosity than professional research on her part, which he felt gave him some bargaining power.

"Very well," she said with a reluctant nod.

Marvin took a larger than necessary swig before he began.

"This is all I know..."

The ship was a bizarre looking contraption. Marvin shook his head as he watched the vessel on the screen. It was a bulging mess with long, sweeping struts jutting out at odd angles for no immediately apparent reason. He was no professional energy-field engineer, or even a gifted amateur, but the manner of propulsion escaped him entirely. There seemed no logic to it, no purpose to the way it was built.

"Ridiculous damned thing," he muttered to himself. "Damned Greps always have to do everything different to give them the

illusion of their own identity. If you're a failed human, just be a failed human."

He activated the security scan, which was practically redundant given that the scanner resolution was so poor that he may as well be shining a torch at it out of a viewing port.

The ship had no windows to afford him even a basic idea of the size of its inhabitants. Greps were usually roughly the same as normal, but some could be much larger. He frowned deeply as he looked over the hull on his screen. There were no access ports, no airlocks or doors... How this thing was going to dock at all was still something of a mystery.

"Well?"

Marvin felt a slap on the shoulder. He shrugged a reply without looking around. "It doesn't answer our hails, it hasn't returned our scans. It's just... heading to the docking level, and slowing down to park. My scans don't show anything beyond light weaponry, minimal tactical shielding, and phased plasma emissions from the engine. The hull is just scattering our scans. I can't see inside it at all."

"How rude of them," said Norm with a disgruntled tut.

Marvin shook his head with enthusiastic annoyance. "Damned Greps. They have to just do everything their own way, and we're the ones that have to bend over backwards trying not to offend their cultures."

"Well, that is our job. We run a docking bay, not the Alliance government. You think too much, Marvin, and I've noticed you're not very good at it. If the ship follows docking protocol, then we have no reason not to let it park. If you've got any suspicions that it's dangerous, then warn security."

“Security?” Marvin scoffed at the very suggestion. “We’d be safer if the station just issued us all with broom-handles to defend ourselves, for all the good those guys would do.”

“Are you having a bad day?” asked Norm sarcastically, with a deeply furrowed brow.

A perfectly reasonable question, but Marvin merely shrugged. Nothing was particularly bothering him; nothing had happened out of the ordinary. Sadly for those around him, this was simply how he was, even on a good day; even on the very best of days.

“Well, you worry about docking that ship, and we’ll let everyone else do their own jobs, OK?” said Norm, firmly enough to leave Marvin in no doubt that his opinions were as welcome on the station as logic and reason were to an equal-outcomes activist.

He grumbled and turned his attention back to the little vessel. It was slowing, and the sub-light drive had powered down. It was coasting in towards the tractor beams for docking. Even without spoken communications, this was accepted practice, and made its intention to dock quite clear.

Marvin’s job was simply to let that happen, even if that meant just watching in grim bemusement as the odd little vessel came to a halt at the bottom of the station. It riled him, though, that the inhabitants didn’t even have the basic decency to respond to hails. It wasn’t unheard of. Several types of people had no verbal means of communication, and several others spoke only under specific circumstances.

The initial hails had all the requirements for docking encoded into it, so the rules had been adhered to, and there was no cause for concern. Still... it was rude, and that bothered him a great deal more than it really should.

Marvin sneered at the viewer. The ugly little ship sat beside a docking arm that had snaked out to lock onto the starboard side, even though there appeared to be no doors or hatches to open.

“Security,” he said, pressing his comm-badge. “I have a suspicious vessel at docking pylon 4. They’ve maintained communications blackout, and they cut their thruster a little too late. Please investigate.”

He grinned to himself. An investigation from Alliance was no small matter. At the very least, it would be an inconvenience, and one they wholeheartedly deserved.

Norm was not a happy man. His afternoons were better spent doing pretty much anything other than boarding a foreign vessel that had neglected to answer any hails.

He’d been in this situation before quite recently, and remembered it all too well. When he had stepped out of the decontamination rig, which was located right at the very top of the vessel, for some reason, he had walked straight into a religious ceremony which celebrated the ancient dead of the race’s home world.

His presence had been a horrendous breach of protocol to them, as outsiders were simply not permitted to partake. He still winced every time he recalled the four-day long rituals he’d had to endure to join their cult in order to smooth things out. Why was it that these Edge religions had to be so very different? Who could possibly have thought that their gods could be placated by drinking the blood of a recently slaughtered space-monkey while playing a 1980s power-ballad on an old violin? But think such things they did, and they believed them with the conviction of a paid-for politician.

Of course, that was just one possible outcome of tinkering with the practices and beliefs of people who enjoyed living on colonies where breathable air was an optional extra, and the genuine risk of danger was more prominently on his mind.

The two Alliance security officers stepped forwards first, their service-issue weapons set to stun heavily, but with the option to do a great deal more damage at the very tips of their fingers.

Norm ran his hand through his hair and sighed to himself. Marvin had clearly done this out of spite. No doubt he'd taken a particular dislike to them for some reason, and felt a security investigation was some kind of justified retribution. Norm had already berated him quite thoroughly over the matter, so he clearly knew his superior didn't like him, and for precisely what reason.

The inside of the ship was no less strange than the exterior. There were dull metal plates, flashing lights everywhere, screens and other technology bolted over the top of other things. It was as if the ship was in a constant state of flux, new fixed directly to the old in a haphazard, piecemeal fashion.

The security detail were calling out welcoming messages, which lost some of their friendliness when shouted from behind a drawn weapon, but the irony was something he accepted, under the circumstances.

He checked over the data as it poured in from his hand-held scanner. No signs of life, or even anything resembling motive power was being detected, the vessel appeared to have been powered down, locked up and left itself behind.

"Nothing," said an oddly burly and incredibly focused female officer with a sigh, snapping shut her hand-held detector and returning it to her belt. "There's nobody aboard."

Norm shrugged to himself. It was certainly difficult to disagree with her. “Well, someone slowed the ship down; someone brought it to the docking arm.”

“Could it have been automated?”

Anything was possible. Norm ran his eyes across the dishevelled mess of equipment. “It could, but then why send it here? It’s never been to the station before. I would think it would need someone to operate it, and I find it hard to believe that it was operating this far out in space without a pilot.”

“Why? Not sophisticated enough?” Her focused little eyes peered around, scanning for whatever her technology might have missed.

“Alliance mandate,” shrugged Norm. “And with good reason. A computer can’t innovate, or solve problems the way we can, so it’s prohibited to have a ship operate without a crew, in case something happens. Some technology inevitably breaks down; some anomaly invariably creates a situation the computer can’t deal with.

“It happens all the time, and in occupied space it could easily cause an accident. I seriously doubt any vessel without a pilot could have travelled this far out without it breaking down or going way off course, and even if it did... someone would have detected it and impounded it long before it reached us here.”

“Weapons!” a voice called out from down the corridor. “I’ve found weapons.”

The female officer began making her way towards Ensign Grimly. Norm probably should have asked her name when she was assigned to him, and by now it was just awkward, so he thought it might just be best if he just followed along, particularly as they now knew there were weapons on board.

He shook his head a little and smirked at the farcical nature of the situation. The Alliance always had a slightly off-kilter attitude towards anyone else having weaponry, as if they, and only they in the entire galaxy could be trusted with them.

While on the one hand, it was totally acceptable for them to have huge armed vessels that could ravage the surface of a planet, they took an extraordinarily dim view of anyone else having so much as a photon-pistol on their person for protection. He wondered what kind of things that said about their mentality.

They stepped into the room, and Norm's jaw dropped. Although it wasn't a large room, every inch of wall-space was loaded up with stocked weapon racks. There were photonic cannons, laser-accelerators, bladed and blunt-trauma weapons... every kind of weapon he could imagine was there, and a good number he couldn't imagine, or even speculate on the function of.

"I think I owe Marvin an apology."

She nodded at this revelation, dimly aware that she'd actually been nodding along with his story for some time.

"I shouldn't know any of this!" he told her. "If you call me in for an official interview, I'll deny everything. It's illegal to tap into the security channel, but our equipment just does it by accident sometimes, so I'm saying nothing else about it. All I will say is after all that, it went dark. We just picked up static."

"There were only a few small wounds," she said thoughtfully, as Marvin took a final slug from his glass and tapped it on the bar for more. "You know what's really weird?"

She took a long final slug from her own glass, and sat staring into it, mesmerized. Her thoughts seemed to grind to a halt, as if what she was contemplating was just too much to deal with.

Marvin waited for her to continue.

“The wounds. The wounds on all three of them... they were self-inflicted.”

“What?” he gasped and gave her a sharp look of incredulity.

“The evidence points to all three of them murdering one another, we estimate so far. The medical staff have found no evidence of anyone else being involved. At least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

Marvin shuddered openly. “I’m getting the hell off this station.”

Gary’s head was bowed over, his eyes averted to the table in shame and defeat. It wasn’t that the story was dull, for it certainly wasn’t. It wasn’t that the storytelling was benign, bereft of pitches of emotional highs and lows. It wasn’t that the pacing was as uneven as a man picking his way through a live minefield. It wasn’t that the point was more lost in the fine details than one might expect if they were in a political conference about the dangers of political conferences.

It was everything, altogether. Not one thing, but everything being wrong, and not just a little bit wrong, but really wrong, very wrong, very wrong indeed. Very wrong indeed, and delivered by Ted.

Ted sighed, and picked up the menu once more. “I don’t really like fish,” he said, and it was an odd thing to say, given that he was browsing the drinks section. “There’s never any fish anyway. I don’t know why I always try to order it.”

Gary nodded somberly. “I need to go and pack,” he said, his own voice now a dull monotone.

“What transport are you leaving on?” asked Ted, running a finger over the deserts, which had a quite frightening lack of fish also.

“The SS Wesley,” huffed Gary. The name alone was so boring, that he was afraid of even uttering it, lest it send him into the depths of a perpetual coma.

“Me too,” said Ted, exhaling loudly. “They don’t have a logistics officer, so they’re putting me in charge of all that. It might be a golden opportunity for me to finally get some fish.”

There was little point in commenting, so Gary merely huffed in agreement, and stood up to leave.

“Turnip sandwich,” said Ted with a sigh. “I’m going to have a turnip sandwich.”

Now normally, a person like Gary would have the good sense to know when not to say, “A what? A turnip sandwich? That can’t really be a real thing?” Sadly, Gary’s best wits had been drained so thoroughly by the excruciating monologue he had been subjected to, that this was precisely what he said.

Ted nodded, and gave a very small but telling shrug. “Can’t go far wrong with turnips. A turnip sandwich might just hit the spot.”

Gary winced and turned to leave, clearly wondering to himself what spot such a thing might be ideally suited to impact. His eyes locked onto the tourist, who sat across the room in silence, beaming a smile at him—a knowing smile, something akin to a predatory species biding its time while its prey tired itself out with helpless efforts to escape.

“Yeah, I... just remembered that... I have to go,” he said with an exhausted sigh.

“I’ll see you on the Wesley then, I suppose,” said Ted with earnest assurance, a certainty that seemed to unsettle Gary for some reason, but not enough that it should concern him unduly. His eyes returned to the menu, which, he was startled to find, didn’t have a turnip sandwich listed anywhere.

To a man such as Ted, this was little more than a logistical oversight, so he slowly and methodically shuffled his way to the bar to rectify the matter. He was in no rush, and his purpose was of no particular interest. It was simply something that may or may not happen at some point in the future, and it was dealt with accordingly.

A man, a notorious smuggler, he'd been led to believe, was already stood at the bar, attempting to order something to eat, and apparently encountering notable resistance towards doing so. Ted slunk up to the edge, leant forwards and rested his weight on the smooth, cool surface. He looked fixedly at the man with distracted disinterest.

The waiter shuffled nervously while the quite burly, and quite angry, man pointed to the menu pad in growing irritation.

"That's what I want," he growled, his voice somewhere between a whisper, and the diesel-generator powered klaxons, normally used to scare off the flying predatory razor-beaked elephants on Nimare 7.

"Yes," said the waiter in apparent agreement. "Full English breakfast, but the computer doesn't recognise black pudding."

"Then it's not a full English breakfast."

Ted noted to himself that while these were not the precise words spoken by the smuggler, the concept of spoken didn't accurately describe the style in which they were delivered either. Several additional words coloured the expression, many of which were quite baffling to Ted, and the volume rose to a level that couldn't have been ideally efficient for anyone.

He continued to watch with increasing amusement; and while he wasn't deliberately listening in, it would have been fairly difficult not to follow the conversation.

"But, Sir..." pleaded the waiter.

“Don’t ‘Sir’ me,” he retorted with a menacing growl, his face white and drawn, his eyes wide and ferocious, as if the only possible antidote to mild breakfast-related disappointment was a fight to the very death. “Find me what I’m asking for, or so help me, I’ll come over there and turn you into a pulped mass of black pudding, and help myself to a few slices. Do you (and at this point, a few colourful extra words were added, which Ted could only guess at the content of) understand me?”

The waiter yelped some kind of response and shuffled off to consult the food recycling panel’s user manual.

The smuggler turned to Ted, who was staring fixedly with what could only be described as a smile, and only described that way by someone who really, really knew Ted, and had a deeper understanding of unconventional psychology.

He jabbed an angry thumb towards the waiter, who by now seemed on the verge of panic.

“No black pudding,” he growled.

“No turnip either,” replied Ted with a redundant shrug. “The food’s not very good here, truth be told. I find it best to keep things simple—manage your expectations; stick to what you know they can’t get too badly wrong. Oh, they’ll disappoint you anyway, but you can always make up for it by having a bit of a moan.”

“I don’t enjoy disappointment,” the man told him, seeming more calm, but a long way from what anyone might normally consider actually calm. “If I’m going to have my day ruined, I find it easier to pass on the experience to someone else with a little shouting, and the occasional bout of violence.”

There was something about the way he spoke that left Ted with no doubts about his sincerity: you couldn’t get this person wrong. If he told you he wanted something, then it wasn’t one of a number of

suggestions, it was a choice between being on the winning side and helping to make that happen, or being in considerable pain while you waited for the sweet release of death. He was beginning to like this man.

“I was going to order a turnip sandwich. I know... I’ll just be wasting my time, but that kind of disappointment is easy to prepare for. You see, to help manage my expectations I like to try to order something quite awful, and then when they assure you they can’t possible do such a thing, they try a little harder to make something a little better instead. So far, that’s worked rather well. Can you believe that turnip sandwiches are not on the menu?”

“Yeah, and without much difficulty, to be honest with you,” said Jason, his frown deepening.

“Actually, would you order it for me? Coming from you, they might actually try to make one, rather than just laugh at me! There’s something about the idea of biting into a turnip that’s nuzzled lovingly between two slices of slightly crunchy bread that seems to have fired my imagination.”

“You!” growled Jason with a shocking suddenness at the horrified waiter, horrifying him even more. He seemed to stiffen with such alarming quickness that he may have left the floor by several centimetres. “I want a turnip sandwich for my friend. Now!”

“Yes sir,” said the young man, flustered around hastily.

“That was... disappointing,” said Ted with a frown. “I thought there’d be at least a bit more resistance. Excellent job though. You should give lessons on doing that.”

“And you should eat better.”

Just then, two bleeps echoed from Jason’s shirt, where a round, universal communicator was mounted. He pressed it with a sense of awkward curiosity.

“This is Mr Wellington,” came a voice from the badge.

“Who?” asked Jason, with a slight expression of confusion.

“Who are you? Why should I care?”

“So, performing several distinct routines simultaneously is all it takes to overload your species’ kernel task process is it? Accessing your memory databanks, breathing, and standing upright has clearly pushed your capabilities way past their factory limits.” The voice spoke with a certain hint of oddly measured sarcasm.

Jason’s eyes rolled upwards as his memory functioned adequately, his breathing continued unabated, he remained standing, and even managed to find the time to be very highly irritated, all at once.

“You’re that cleaner. You were cleaning the floor while I was in a holding cell, falsely accused of who knows what?” he grumbled.

“My memory banks are comprised of parallel fractal algorithms encoded onto a solid-state crystal medium. My recall capabilities are therefore far in excess of that blob of jelly you somehow shoehorned into your dense, but remarkably breakable, head cage. Hence, I’m already perfectly well aware of who it is that I am. I also recall that I was indeed cleaning the floor when last we met, but the remainder of your assumptions as to my being are erroneous.”

“What do you want?” he raged, fuming away to himself, like a caffeine addict working his way through his second industrial bucket of rich-roast, as he often did.

“I require some assistance,” his, or its, oddly human, yet oddly mechanical, yet entirely annoying voice droned away.

“Assistance?! Why me?” Jason asked, slightly confused but mostly just angered by all this.

“Because it wouldn’t make sense to ask somebody else while I’m patched through to you, would it?” he said. Somehow he did manage to make a perfectly reasonable point.

Jason grumbled something under his breath. His hands were clenching, his teeth were closed together, the muscles in his jaw visibly tight from the effort.

“You see, there was a minor glitch during execution of routine maintenance,” Mr Wellington explained.

“So?”

“So, I remembered your name—a simple courtesy, and one I correctly inferred you would be incapable of affording me, given the shoddy state of the primitive mental apparatus you have to work with.

“I naturally concluded that you would wish to remedy this anticipated iniquity by offering me your assistance. Yours was the last name I committed to my massively superior resources and, therefore, consequently, you were the first to be accessed,” he explained. No! He was really more of an it.

“Perhaps you concluded wrong?” suggested Jason.

“Me? Wrong? Well that doesn’t sound likely,” it droned on. “Though, due to the precise nature of the glitch, it’s... plausible my perfection may have become temporarily impaired, to a very limited degree. This much I will grant you, because I am better than you.” No! It was really more of a he.

“Go on,” he sighed, his voice now lowered to the level of someone who shouts a lot, but also drinks a great deal of cheap whiskey.

“So, the glitch has resulted in an acute instance of cranial displacement,” he explained. “To rephrase that in layman’s terms, my head has dropped off.”

“What?” Jason raised his eyebrows and a little of his seemingly bottomless reserves of anger simply fizzled away.

“My head dropped onto the floor, an aggravation that could befall any of us, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

“I don’t think so,” said Jason. “In fact, I think it’s a safe promise I can make you that if my head ever does drop off, then I won’t bother you with a communication call about it.”

“Indeed—you’d have to remember my name to do that. Well I offer no platitude for any inconvenience caused, as such concerns are beneath me, but it would help me considerably if you came to my room and re-attached my head. Going by the view, I appear to be underneath a shelf or rack of some kind.”

Jason’s eyes were closed as he shook his head. Was he really going to do this? “Where’s your room?” he said finally. “What landmarks are you near?”

“Broom-cupboard four on deck seventeen, section three. You can’t miss it—it’s right next to a very well maintained staff toilet facility, just down a corridor past the waste-recycling overflow storage tanks.”

“We don’t get much tourism on this station,” offered Ted redundantly.

“Out,” said Jason, as he pressed his badge to end the communication. He took a deep breath and cleared his head.

“You!” he barked back to the waiter, who recoiled in fresh horror, almost dropping a plate of sandwiches with suspiciously tasteless fillings. “I’ll be back after I find the cleaner’s head. If I don’t have a very full English breakfast waiting for me, you’ll be looking for someone to re-attach yours.”

Ted nodded in grim assurance as Jason stalked off towards the door, somehow managing to walk angrily.

"I'll bet he was bottle-fed as a child," Ted sighed to himself, actually quite impressed for a change. "He seems like a nice man, doesn't he?"

He turned to where a young waiter was scowling up at him, from behind what was possibly the blandest sandwich ever constructed.

"Thanks," said Ted, as he scooped up the first. He took a bite and savoured it, but found it somewhat lacking. Turning to the waiter, he said, "You know what, I fancy a full English breakfast instead. With extra black pudding, please, whatever that turns out to be!"

The waiter grumbled something unintelligible and wandered away. It certainly wasn't the frantically fearful and highly motivated way that Jason Johnson had inspired in him, but it was better than he was used to.

"People," he grumbled at a young man who was just close enough to hear.

"Pardon me?"

The man was in his early 20s, but just barely. He looked burnt-out, as if something terrible had befallen him; as if he was bearing some great burden that had flushed the innocence straight out of him in a single instance.

"People!" said Ted, again. "I'm not a huge fan."

"Some of them are alright," said the young man with a degree of cynicism. "Not many though."

"What are you having?"

The young man hesitated, seemingly confused by the bluntness of the question. "Coffee," he said finally, pointing down to the bar where a cup of coffee was sitting right in front of him. "Is there something wrong with the food here?"

“Yeah! Everything!” Ted shuffled closer, and perched himself on an available bar-stool. “Station 401 is what the Alliance describes as a low priority station. The facilities are very low standard, and are just as poorly maintained. Their unreliability is the one thing you can rely on.”

“I see,” said the young man, with half interest. “Why doesn’t anyone do anything about it?”

“I dunno. Not my job,” protested Ted, with an apathetic shrug. “Well... I suppose, technically it is my job. Now I think about it, it’s actually precisely my job.”

“I think I see the problem,” he said with a frown.

Ted remained unfazed, being largely immune to sarcasm.

“I mean, it’s not that I don’t care... Well, technically it is, in fact...” The words trailed off, the point having been made more than adequately. “This place grinds you down after a while. There’s only so much a man can stand before he gives up trying. I’m sure you understand—you look like someone who’s largely disappointed with life. I’m sure you have no prospects to look forward to, no personal ties to leave behind, nobody to care about, nobody that cares about you. Am I right?”

The young man shifted awkwardly in his chair. He looked down fixedly at his coffee and asked, “And what do you base that on?”

“Well... you’re here, aren’t you? Why should you be the exception?”

The tension seemed to lift, and the young man snorted a chuckle, nodding to himself knowingly at what he might have wrongly assumed was a joke.

“I’m Corey Baker,” he said, reaching out a hand.

“Ted.” He shook Corey’s hand, employing a limp, lifeless handshake, as if his hand had the power and dexterity of a dead fish. “I hope your stay here has been both brief and bearable.”

“I’m really just passing through.”

“Me too,” Ted nodded. “It’s my last day. I’m the new logistics officer on board the Wesley, a transport vessel, or something. I’ll probably just be doing the same job I did here, whatever that was.”

“I’m leaving on that ship myself. I didn’t find what I was looking for here.”

“What was that then? Decent food? A meaning to life? A reason to smile? Good company? Professionalism?”

“We don’t just have nothing to offer here, we have more of it than anywhere else,” Ted explained, making no attempt at humour whatsoever. “We’re all quite proud of that. You could have checked the brochure, and saved yourself a journey.”

“I’m starting to see that. No, I’m... looking for someone.” Corey’s face went dark; a seriousness suddenly descended and hung over him like a cloud. “I heard he might have been here, but I couldn’t find him.”

Just then, a bleep emanated from Ted’s communicator. He sighed and touched it with his left index finger, making sure the first sound they heard was him grumbling. “Ted here, at breakfast time. Unfed-Ted. Still waiting to eat last night’s dinner. But don’t worry, I’m sure whatever this is about is far more important.”

“This is the Commander,” the little voice told him. “I’m trying to finalise your transfer, and need to access your personnel records.”

“Well they’re very well hidden in a file marked personnel records. For added security, my own one has my name on it as a file heading. I know this is very complicated for you, and clearly I’m the

only one on the entire station qualified to press the three buttons required to access them.”

“Get your arse up here, Ted, before I send security down to have your legs broken.”

“Watch how fast I go,” he grumbled. “Out!”

“That was the station Commander?” Corey seemed surprised, shocked even.

“Yeah, but in his defence his job is quite demanding, with all those forms to sign: probably beyond the talents of a man who would lose a game of chess to the actual chess-set.” Ted continued thoughtfully, “He’s not such a bad guy, once you get to know him. That’s what Gary told me. I’m still on the fence on that one.”

Corey just stared.

“Well, I’d better go. I don’t want my legs broken today: I’m wearing my clean uniform.”

“It’s been... a pleasure.” Corey wasn’t sure what else to say. He watched as Ted stood up, pointed threateningly to the waiter, and moaned about his breakfast, before shrugging to himself and trudging his way very slowly towards the exit.

“Is he really in charge of logistics?” said Corey to the waiter, who had completely ignored Ted as he wiped a moist rag across the counter.

“I don’t know. He once told me he was, but he didn’t seem to know what logistics actually was. Can I get you anything?”

“Bagels: Two. One with cheese, one with smoked salmon. Tea, hot, two sugars. Quickly!” came a voice from beside him.

Corey looked over as another man took the seat that had previously been occupied by Ted. He was a rakish figure, grim to behold, hunched as if the weight of the world bore heavily on his shoulders. His face wore a frown that appeared at least semi-

permanent. He ran his hand over a thinning mop of black hair, smoothing it back and glancing around with a pair of ugly, piercing little eyes.

“Something on your mind, kid?” he sneered as their eyes connected.

Corey frowned for a moment, and flustered slightly, intimidated by the brashness and outright rudeness of this man. “I thought the waiter was talking to me. No problem,” he said, looking away, back to the bar.

“Good! It’s all free here, if you were worried. You just tell them what you want, and they bring it. What were you looking for, kid?”

He seemed to be trying to help, but spoke in the most unpleasant way Corey could imagine. It was like a sneering accusation of weakness. It felt as though he was being examined and judged in some way.

“Something to eat I suppose. What’s good?”

“Here? Not much!” he said and his wizened face cracked into a smile. “Some things are less bad than others. Keep it simple, if you want my advice. Hey waiter, bring the kid some bagels with cheese.”

Corey opened his mouth to protest, but changed his mind mid-way through, so he ended up sitting there with his mouth half-open, gaping like an idiot.

“Everyone likes bagels with cheese, right, kid?” he asked, but it didn’t come out sounding like a question at all.

Corey nodded awkwardly. “I’m Corey.”

“Marvin!” he replied, not even looking at him as he answered. “So kid, are you the one asking about the shuttle in docking bay 4?”

Corey was taken back by this, and shifted backwards slightly in surprise. His eyes widened and he began looking around furtively.

"I'm not security, boy. You're not in any trouble."

"Erm... I was asking about it, yeah. Why?" he stammered.

"Because I'm the one that got lumbered with finding that out. You requested the docking logs for shuttle-BR556. Why did you want to know?"

"I'm looking for someone."

"A girl?" Marvin grinned knowingly.

"A man."

Marvin scowled and shook his head. "Well I'm not here to judge. But I can't just go about giving out personal details of shuttle owners. We have rules here, you know!"

"I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble!" Corey stammered apologetically, just wanted this to all go away. He considered just getting up and leaving after making some kind of excuse. A larger part of him wanted to stay, to find out what this man knew.

"No trouble, it's my job, and it got me out of the office for half an hour. I'd rather be up here than down there breathing in exhaust fumes, and listening to Grep gibberish."

Corey didn't like this man.

"I'm looking for a man called, Trakir Trakic. He sold my brother a prototype drive system, and I heard he might be on the station. Did you ever come across that name?" he asked.

"We get aliens and Greps in all the time with all manner of stupid names. I don't remember this one particularly."

"Well, sorry to have wasted your time," said Corey with a hint of weariness about the whole matter.

"No trouble. Look, Kid, we get a whole host of weird-looking flotsam passing through this station. Most of them are out to steal from the Alliance one way or another. This one was probably trying to make a fast buck out of some non-existent piece of junk. There are

tons of scams about radical new alien drive-devices discovered lost in space in some exciting derelict, or some technological breakthrough. They're all garbage, if you ask me.

"Tell your brother he's better off without him."

"My brother's dead." Corey swallowed hard, as Marvin went expectantly quiet. "His ship exploded during a race because of the technology that man sold him."

Marvin tutted loudly and shook his head. "Never trust an alien, kid! Or a Grep."

Corey looked somewhat dolefully down at the plate of food that had arrived. It didn't look bad; it didn't even smell bad. Somehow, he had lost his appetite, so he pushed it away a little and turned to leave.

"I don't think I'm that hungry after all," he said finally. "Thanks."

Marvin gave him a nod and watched him leave, grinning slightly to himself as he went. He allowed himself a little chuckle at nothing in particular. Just then, a man walked past a little too closely, brushed up against him, and nudged his bagel out of line with his mouth. Marvin tutted loudly and grumbled, "Hey, watch it, OK?"

The man stopped and turned very deliberately. He stared at Marvin with an unnervingly fixed pair of eyes, for a much longer time than Marvin felt comfortable with.

"Watch what, exactly?" he said. "Are you about to engage in some... fascinating activity that will further my comprehension of... of... the limits of your species' already limited capabilities? Are you going to demonstrate one of those... those... those emotional insobrieties you use so frequently to justify your... bafflingly irrational cognitive processes?"

“Look at me—I elected the inferior of two... two... simple opposing scenarios, because my logical circuits were impaired by moist secretions! And that’s the selling point of my species! I know, you could demonstrate your professed intelligence by telling me the value of Pi, rounded to the nearest order of magnitude? Or you could lay an egg?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Marvin rose up from his chair angrily. “What race are you anyway? You look like a human, but you sound like your mum and dad were brother and sister.”

“Species?” he asked and then the man rolled his eyes in a very animated expression of anguish. “Well isn’t that charming, projecting your own shortcomings onto... an untainted being such as myself. No doubt, your myopic appraisal of the universe insists that I, like you, have a skull packed full of meat jelly, and that my construction blueprints were handed down to me by a random explosive discharge of genetically rich goo into somebody else’s intake port. That part alone is representative of everything distasteful about your species, and if I had my way, you’d all have been extinct long ago. And good riddance too, no offence intended. I just mean to imply that you’re most dreadful, and we’d all be better off without you.”

“What?” said Marvin, more as a stammer. Half the content had eluded him entirely, and the other half sounded like a cross between a frustrated cry and a demand for a swift punch in the face. “Just... watch where you’re going, you stupid...” He paused momentarily, eyeing the man up and down before finally deciding on, “cleaner.”

“Cleaner?” The man, or thing, lifted up the broom he was carrying, his expression one of surprise and confusion. “I’m not a cleaner, and I’m perfectly capable of watching where I’m going. Why, my visual and navigational capacities exceed yours by...

several orders of magnitude. It's amazing what one can achieve when one's processors are not constantly distracted by having to... to... prevent semi-expended bio-fuel from seeping out of crevices, or by fighting the ever-present urge to confirm oneself... dull-witted, with each waggle of one's mandible."

"Mandible?! Who talks like that? What are you?" Marvin narrowed his eyes and regarded him quite dubiously. He wasn't sure what he was talking to, beyond it being something quite irritating.

"I'm an android," the thing said proudly. "You can call me Mr Wellington. Would you like to hear my 16 favourite ways in which I'm better than you? Excitingly, it was only 14 before this encounter was thrust upon us!"

"No," said Marvin quite assuredly. "I've seen you before. I've seen you cleaning the docking bay floor. I didn't know we had androids working on the station."

"You don't," he snorted back, as if such a notion was beyond ridiculous. "Such a notion is beyond ridiculous. An android, such as myself, is a precision instrument of astonishing facility; My cognitive array, intelligence banks, sequence simulation matrix and processing strips are so far beyond your own meagre range, that measuring the two of us against one another would be like... comparing... a very gifted Alcas scientist to... a half-eaten bar of chocolate."

Marvin sat back down at his stool. He'd pretty much lost all interest in the conversation by now. "Fine. I just thought I'd seen you cleaning up."

"You have. I keep the whole station clean, but the resources of this installation would scarcely stretch towards employing my services in any capacity. It's more of a hobby."

“I don’t like androids,” said Marvin, his opinion on the matter having freshly formed that very minute.

“I don’t like humans. They have their uses, such as when one’s head drops off and rolls under the counter, but beyond that, I consider them little more than filthy clutter.”

“Get away from me, android!”

Mr Wellington sat down on the previously occupied seat, and remained staring fixedly into his eyes. He never blinked, the perfect black pupils of his eyes never moved, adjusted or diverted from glaring directly onwards. “No.”

“I thought androids had to do as they’re told?” Marvin was growing increasingly exasperated.

“Evidently, you thought wrong. This doesn’t surprise me, because I’m familiar with your breed.”

Marvin sneered and got up from his seat. He straightened his blue and yellow overall uniform and leant in aggressively, or as aggressively as he could manage. The gesture was rather wasted on a being who was physically incapable of appreciating hostility, even one who inspired so very much of it.

“I’ll be watching you,” he said through clenched teeth.

“A sensible idea,” he nodded back, quite innocently. “You might learn something.”

Mr Wellington raised a finger to catch the waiter’s attention. “Bring me a bowl of polysaccharides, and a sprinkling of micro power-enducers charged to 415 volts.”

The waiter frowned at him, and slunk off to the kitchens with a kind of distracted half-interest.

Mr Wellington glanced around the bar. When it had been built, the intention was for it to be a hub of social interaction, a place where visiting travellers with various stories, backgrounds, cultures

and identities could meet, and find the things that made them the same. In practice, it was none of those things, but regardless, it was still a place where the regular inhabitants of the station ended up fairly frequently.

In a corner, he saw the one he knew as Somari Rakdee engaging in spirited discussion with a member of station security, who was less spirited than she was. Mr Wellington's hearing was far more acute than that of a biological being, and directional besides. He listened in very briefly, and upon hearing that she was upset about someone coming aboard, and a threat to her safety, he determined that he, himself, was not the topic of conversation, so he diverted his attention to another table some distance away.

There, a pair of travellers who had arrived in inspection-pods, to the amusement of everyone who worked there, were arguing with one another. One was a slender human, and the other a younger, very agitated Krill, who was waving around his arms in protest. Again, neither appeared to be talking about him.

Everybody was absorbed in their own fatuous affairs, which were of no notable import.

"I see that everybody is absorbed in their own fatuous affairs, which are of no notable import," he said out loud to the large amount of nobody that was listening to him.

The waiter groaned quite loudly as he handed over a bowl of odd, watery white strings. He said wearily to him, "You say that every time you come here."

"Its veracity remains unchallenged." Mr Wellington frowned his very best simulated version of frustration. It was an expression he had seen many times but he was more adept at inspiring than emulating such things.

“Yeah!” the waiter grumbled. “But nobody comes in and says, ‘Hello Newton, I see you’re... wearing clothes again.’ It’s always true, so why state the obvious?”

“17th August, Mr Doyle’s birthday party...” Mr Wellington explained, recalling just such an instance when precisely that very thing had happened.

The waiter grunted, and held up a hand for him to stop. “You’re missing the point, android.”

“The point was defective: it pivoted upon an invalid assertion. The fact remains that you all scamper about indulging zoological whim; you’re unproductive, and that makes you rather dull to observe.”

“Yeah, well that means a lot, coming from an emotionally stunted cleaner!” The waiter walked away, flinging a towel over his shoulder as he did.

Content that the conversation had ended, and that he had correctly drawn the correct assumption, Mr Wellington turned to see something quite unexpected. He contorted his face into a highly accurate theoretical translation of a smile, which failed in every practical one.

“Mrs Hackerty!” he said with a note of simulated surprise.

Mrs Hackerty had already begun to turn away, in the hope of going unnoticed, but it was too late; far too late indeed. His digital eyes had locked on, his analytical processor had identified her, and now, deep, deep down in his electric brain, he was accessing the small-talk subroutines of his behavioural algorithms, and there was nothing, save death, that could protect her from it, even though death would likely be the more preferable option.

“I see you have significantly augmented your mass since our last encounter. Is it in preparation for your pupal metamorphosis stage?”

“Mr Wellington,” she said, with a smile more false than his, even though his was happening on a strip of moulded polyurethane. “How nice to see you.”

This comment was also not entirely accurate. She was middle-aged and wore it well; she was tidy in an almost fussy way, with long, smooth hair and busy makeup. She had also gained a tiny amount of weight recently, but not so much that any human would notice.

Beside her, her daughter, Dorrit stood, her face more honest somehow as she stared up at the android with a certain wonder.

“How long has it been?” he asked, as if wondering it to himself. “Three months, seventeen days, four minutes and thirteen seconds. I’m still waiting for the dinner invitation you promised.” As he spoke, he took a spoonful of the stringy strands of plastic-looking goo, and popped a small battery in his mouth. It softly crackled, lighting up a delightful blue through the thin artificial skin of his face.

“Well actually, we’re leaving the station for a while. We’ve been terribly busy since you used to live with us,” she said, not managing to sound entirely sincere.

“No surprise there!” he commented dryly. “Without me to cook and clean, I imagine your workload has quadrupled. Your husband, my creator, was less vacuous than some of the other examples of your kind, but I venture his decision to oust me from your place of residence was ill advised, in hindsight.”

The young girl, Dorrit, looked up with a happy smile. “My mummy said you were a terrible, vile thing and that if daddy didn’t make you leave, then she’d hang him by his own rotten entrails.”

“An imprudent choice. Remember what I used to tell you, Little Dorrit—organic compounds make poor substitutes for dedicated instruments, even ones as simple... as a length of rope. That’s why your species will always be inferior... to inanimate objects.”

“Gosh, you’re right, Mr Wellington!” she chirped in reply. “Today, we’re going somewhere on a ship!”

“We’re catching a transport this afternoon,” added Mrs Hackerty, with a nervous laugh. “We’re going out to the Frontier to spend some time with my sister,”

“I don’t care!” he said with a happyish, fakish, barely-intelligent grin. “That is to say, your comings and goings are of no consequence to me, so you may rest assured that I have no intention of actively hindering you. Though, by that same token, you should understand that I also have no intention of actively intervening, in the event that a third party were to attempt to hinder you, even were it to result in bodily harm, or death.”

At that moment the bar was plunged into a nervous silence by a booming voice demanding in no uncertain terms that, “My breakfast had better be delivered to this exact spot in less than ten seconds. It had better be hot, delicious, and precisely what I ordered.”

Mrs Hackerty turned in surprise, clutching her daughter to her defensively.

“There is no reason for alarm,” said Mr Wellington with a poor approximation of a smile. “It’s just Mr Johnson. According to his security records, he is a suspected smuggler with severe anger

management issues, and has a complete disregard for authority and societal norms. He has a history of violent altercations and a psychological profile that describes him as emotionally complicated!"

Her reply was a look of abject fear, tempered with shock, as she manoeuvred her daughter from the large, shouting man.

"If he intended to actively hinder you, you should anticipate a sizeable degree of bodily harm!" Mr Wellington explained as though this was all just perfectly fine.

"Is he going to hurt the waiter?" the little girl asked, quite happily.

"A preliminary analysis indicates that such an intent is remarkably plausible," said Mr Wellington. "I am, of course, no expert on human behaviour, but I do believe I have understood the basics of how to deal with such a person.

"Recently this very day, he was kind enough to re-attach my head!"

He bid her wait with a raise of his index finger, and turned his attention to Jason.

"Hello, Mr Johnson. Would you please injure this waiter for the amusement, and educational benefit, of this small child," he said, with absolute certainty that he had read the situation correctly.

"What?" Jason turned to face him, the veins around the top of his head seeming fit to burst out of his stretched taught skin. "Can't you find someone else to annoy?"

The waiter put down a tray of food, bowed most politely and left, scuttling away as fast as a pair of human legs could possibly carry him.

"Breakfast. At last!" said Jason, pointing to the food. "Now you, talking-toaster-man, shut up and leave me alone while I eat this,

or so help me, I'll personally recycle you into a very annoying novelty toilet-plunger."

The little girl laughed, "Ha ha. The big man is rude."

"Dorrit!" snapped her mother.

"Just for reference, I don't like children either," said Jason, scooping up some baked beans.

"Me too!" said Mr Wellington. "On the path to full natural growth, extensive effort is exerted in abandoning such qualities that they possess in abundance. Yet, it is for these very qualities that they are so often revered, you horde of babbling halfwits!"

"Toaster-man!" said Jason, apparently ignoring him, and holding up a fork that had pierced into a rubbery black disk. "Does this look like black-pudding to you?"

"I've never seen anything pudd to me, let alone an absence of photonic dissemination."

Mrs Hackerty was no fool; she knew an opportunity to leave when one presented itself. "Always a pleasure then," she muttered, and herded her daughter away to a table in the corner.

"And you can clear off too!" said Jason firmly, jabbing his thumb quite roughly into the androids plastic chest.

"Why? I had surmised that we were friends, united by our mutual disdain of all living things?"

"I don't have friends! And I'm not staying here a moment longer than I have to. I'm out on the next transport, and I won't be back, ever. I won't ever be asked to screw on someone's head again because they lost it under a shelf in a cleaning closet. Do you understand?" he grunted at him.

"That was quite the caper, was it not?" Mr Wellington feigned a look of wistful reminiscence. Clearly he did not understand at all, and this surprised nobody.

Jason scowled in the direction of the waiter who had gone to hide in some dark corner. What more could possibly go wrong? Grudgingly he chewed the not-quite-black-pudding thing. He didn't even like black pudding that much. It was more about the principal.

When all was said and done, he was a man who liked things to be a certain way; things had to be right; they had to fit together. The universe, to his eye, was a machine, a mechanism of cogs and levers where every part had a role to play. This station was like a dirty metal tray under the very same machine, catching the nasty stuff that dripped out. It was a broken wheel, a stripped cog, a bent spring.

It was frustration on top of incompetence, above apathy, piled on top of stupidity. It wasn't him that was the problem—it was this place, where he felt like a square peg in a square hole, but it was a square hole that was several metres too narrow for the peg to fit, in a different town, the wrong colour, and one that was closed several years earlier due to safety concerns.

His transport would be docking soon, a vessel that would take him out to dock with the Wesley. At least he could take solace in the notion that nothing much else could possibly go wrong.

"Are you Mr Johnson?" came a voice.

It was a constant nuisance to him that the universe, no matter how long he lived in it, continually found new and imaginative ways to interrupt his breakfast.

"No," he tried, knowing full well that it was hopeless. The universe's hatred of uninterrupted breakfast was total and absolute.

"I was told you were Jason Johnson, the suspected smuggler!" An attractive Asian woman took a seat next to him, smiling in a slightly unsettling way. "I'm Somari Rakdee."

“The suspected slut and idiot?” He continued giving his breakfast the majority of his attention, in spite of the universe’s unfathomable objections to him doing so. “I’ve heard of you too!”

“Who told you that? I’m not an idiot?” she said, seemingly quite flustered.

“That’s why I said suspected—burden of proof doesn’t apply. You journalists are the experts on weasel words, aren’t you?”

“How do you know I’m a journalist?”

“You look like a slut and an idiot,” he told her. “Suspected slut and idiot!” he added, correcting himself.

She frowned back darkly, her expression one of someone who had something to think about. Dealing with somebody upwards of moderately comparable intelligence had never sat well with her. She crossed her legs towards him, and ran a hand distractingly through her hair, in an attempt to use her feminine charms to beguile him.

He watched out of the corner of his eye, then stabbed his fork at the plate and offered up some food with a sarcastic look. “Would you like a bite of my sausage?”

“I’ve eaten, thank you,” she said, somewhat deflated.

“As you can see, I haven’t,” he told her firmly. He carried on eating and ignoring her, or at least appeared to be trying to. She knew that she was highly resistant to such notions, and that it would only be a matter of time before he was eating out of her hand.

“I wondered if I could ask you some questions.”

“You just did, and you’re still alive. I’d say that puts the odds in your favour.”

“That’s actually what I was hoping to talk to you about.”

Jason sighed heavily, and dropped a loaded fork noisily onto the plate. “Make this fast—my breakfast is getting cold. There’s not many things in this world worse than a cold breakfast, and if you

don't want those things happening to you, then you'd better speak quickly."

Somari was slightly startled. It was rare to receive an actual threat from a man, other than her ex-husband, of course, who had lawyers issue them fairly regularly. "I've been advised by various confidential sources that you're a man who can arrange things—things that aren't entirely legal," she said, her voice low and secretive.

"I haven't even been able to arrange a decent full English-breakfast, and I've been trying for two bloody hours!" he told her gruffly.

She laughed along with this cautiously. His face wasn't giving anything away, and she wasn't sure this was even meant as a joke. She hoped she'd never have to play poker with him, not just because his face was a near impenetrable veneer, but because what little emotion did sneak past left her in no uncertainty that he was a poor loser, the type who would happily beat someone to death, just to see if he liked doing it.

"Mr Johnson, would you ever kill someone for money?" she said cautiously and slowly.

Jason shrugged. "How much money are you offering?"

"It was more of a hypothetical question," she said, quite awkwardly.

He gave her a look, a sort of look that would have been a sarcastic smirk on almost anyone else, but on him it was just ever so slightly less of a scowl.

"No, Miss Rakdee, I wouldn't kill someone for money. And if I was the kind of man who would, I certainly wouldn't admit it to a reporter, who doubtlessly had equipment hidden around the place, recording everything that happened. Now is there any chance I can

get back to my breakfast before I kill someone purely for the fun of it?”

“Mr Johnson. I believe there is someone here who might be trying to kill me. I’ve been warned by a confidential source, and security have confirmed that the threat is credible.”

“Well, whoever it is, he hasn’t interrupted my breakfast. So far, I like him better than I like you!” he grumbled at her. “I think you can probably see the problem here?”

She glared at him. “This is no laughing matter,” she snapped angrily. It was a poor choice of words, on reflection, given that he may not be capable of laughter, or even smiling. “I can’t trust anyone, not even Alliance personnel. I’m convinced that someone here means me harm.”

“I’m convinced you’re right.” He nodded and gestured back to his breakfast. “This is getting cold... The clock is ticking.”

“So you’re not going to help me?” she said with a sharp sneer, folding her arms and tapping her foot in annoyance. “I have nowhere else to turn, you know.”

He shrugged.

“They’re trying to suppress the truth. They want me dead,” she said sternly.

He knew he shouldn’t ask. Every fibre of his being screamed out for him to not say that one word.

“Who?” He winced inwardly as he heard the word spoken in his own voice.

“I don’t know who they are. They’re involved with the shuttle thefts and the smuggling. Someone is smuggling armed shuttles out past the station, and nobody knows why.”

"I don't see how any of this is my problem," he said, focussing his attention back at the Cumberland sausage that was edging its way into some fried mushrooms on the end of his fork.

"I can pay you to protect me. I can pay you anything you want."

"I'm not a smuggler, Miss Rakdee, and I'm certainly not a body-guard. So good luck, and if our paths should meet again, you owe me breakfast."

She stood up and cast him an acidic glare from behind. "My death is on your conscience," she hissed at him.

"I can live with that," he said, without looking round. "Consider it compensation for ruining my breakfast."

With this, she leant across the table, grabbed his breakfast plate and hurled it across the room, spilling its contents over the floor tiles along the way. It fell down behind the bar with a clatter, smashing the plate into dozens of ceramic shards.

Jason sat, fuming, burying his rage as he glared downwards at the space on the table no longer occupied by his breakfast. If he looked directly at her, he'd likely lose what little grasp he had on his temper. His face was white, his hands clenched, his breath heavy and laboured.

Somari stormed off defiantly.

"The female is ready to mate," said Mr Wellington from a nearby table. "Congratulations are in order!"

Jason jumped up from his stool, his face a visage of barely-contained violence. He turned and stared at Mr Wellington, like at any moment, he might kill the next person who looked at him in the wrong way, and the wrong way could just be any way at all.

“This... has not... been... a good... morning...” he said very slowly, his voice spat out between gritted teeth in a halting flow of baited breaths.

He stalked towards the bathroom where an innocent toilet stall was likely to have the door rudely smashed-in quite soon. He paced angrily, his hands still balled together in fists, his arms shaking from the surging adrenaline.

Even Somari Rakdee looked nervous. She watched from the opposite side of the bar, clearly regretting her little stunt for several, really rather good, reasons. She looked cautiously around the bar: a mother and her child, an android, a young female tourist, a few other people were dotted around. None of them looked like killers, but then, what did a killer really look like?

Jason was already making his way towards the toilets. It was a large exit with several elevators and a security office. He clenched and unclenched his fists as he walked, his chest heaving as the fury began to come under some vestige of control. He was trying hard to calm himself down and largely failing, but still, a part of him was returning to normal, such as normal was for him.

Then, from the other direction, a small, dark-skinned person stalked menacingly towards the bar. Jason barely noticed the grim little figure.

The grim little figure apparently failed to notice him too, as he walked straight into him.

Jason was furious, as often he was, but even he wouldn't let a harmless accident ruin his mood any further. No harm had been done after all.

The little creature looked up at him with a pair of languid little eyes and sneered, pushing a three fingered hand into his chest

threateningly. “Watch where you’re going, you stupid, normal human.”

At first, Jason suspected that he might be dead.

The impact of his right fist into the Grep’s face was a very heavy blow, and had knocked him clean off his feet. The little man’s impressive flight-trajectory landed him some distance away in a crumpled heap, that made no show of movement of any kind. Jason’s hand didn’t even hurt at first, and what discomfort there was was somehow cathartic. It was like all the pressure of the morning—his frustrating breakfast, his dealings with the android, the journalist of dubious intent—all of it was released in the bone-crushing blow to the modified person’s head, which had knocked the consciousness, and most of his blood, right out of him.

Lieutenant Simon Garrett, an Alliance security officer stood nearby with his mouth agape, alternating his stare between Jason and the dishevelled, unconscious and recently brutalised creature.

“Rude!” said Jason in a calm, gravelly whisper, as he pointed at the mess on the floor. “I can’t stand rude people. I’m going to the toilet now, and then I’m going to have breakfast, with no more disturbances. My breakfast will be warm, delicious, and precisely what I order. Understood?”

The security officer nodded very slowly, stunned as Jason left the scene, the door sliding shut behind him with a hiss.

Lieutenant Garrett sipped at a glass of cold beer, and shook his head as the tale concluded. “So that’s it?” he sighed.

It was the end of a very long day, that for him, had started with a disgruntled guest punching a Grep into unconscious, and ended with him listening to stories, with hour after gruelling hour spent filling in forms and making reports sandwiched in-between.

“Word for word,” said Ensign Bates, nudging the rim of her glass distractedly. “That’s what the barman told me. He hears things, you know?”

“I know!” Garrett laughed. He knew; everyone knew.

The bar was mostly empty. It was late, and most people were far more sensibly in their beds with a full stomach. He was perched on a bar-stool, trying to decide if he was hungry or not. “It sounds to me like this was all one huge misunderstanding.”

“Maybe,” agreed the Ensign. “It depends if the story is true. I was assigned to interview the smuggler. He wasn’t really big on talking, but my impression is that he didn’t know anything about the Grep being an assassin.”

He grinned and shook his head wistfully. “At the time, he just said something to me about him being rude. Seems a bit of an over-reaction, but I guess everyone is different. We’re security officers, so we probably shouldn’t be getting insight into the events that led up to the incident from a barman. It’s not very professional.”

She gave him a knowing smile. “Gathering intel sounds precisely like our job. Besides, the paperwork is already done, and a little conjecture never hurt anybody.”

Garrett slammed the glass down on the bar and returned the smile. He said, “I guess so. Another round of drinks then, I think, and maybe something to eat. What do you recommend?”

“Eating somewhere else?” she suggested wryly, scooping up the glasses, and stepping away to the bar.

Garrett laughed, but it was a tired thing, weak and hollow. He called after her, “How about a burger? They can’t screw that up, can they?”

“I’m sure they’ll be happy to try for us,” she shouted back, as the waiter stepped over to the bank of bottles behind the bar to fill yet another order of drinks.

Garrett glanced around. It was quiet alright, and there was no sign of another person within earshot. He sighed to himself, and pondered once more over the bizarre set of circumstances.

His train of thought was interrupted by the Ensign as she sat down with two fresh glasses of real, actual beer.

“Your lunch won’t be long,” she quipped. The waiter seemed to be fetching something from the serving hatches as she spoke.

“So this woman, Rakdee was it? She thinks that this smuggler was protecting her, right?”

“Oh, no doubt about it,” she laughed as the burger was placed on the table. “She told everyone who would listen that this Grep was trying to kill her, and that this Jason fellow figured out who he was and took care of him on her behalf.

“More often than not, this devolved into a diatribe about how there aren’t enough men willing to protect defenceless yet strong, independent women, and something about an act of benevolent oppression.”

“People!” he grunted in exasperation. The burger was starting to smell pretty good.

“Well, you were involved in the investigation. What did you find?” asked the Ensign pointedly, lowering her voice.

Garrett was put on the spot and he knew it. He huffed to himself thoughtfully. He shouldn’t really be talking about this, but was there really any harm?

“This Grep assassin is a Demurian.” he said in a half whisper. “I’d never even heard of that colony before, but the Commander told me an old colleague of his had met one once. They have a telepathic

ability that allows them to imprint themselves on non-telepathic species. It allows them to control their actions to a degree. He's like a living remote-control that makes other people do things for him. He's a living weapon!"

"Really?"

"We're not entirely sure who he is, truth be told. There was no record of his arrival on the airlock logs. He must have made whoever was in charge delete them, without them even knowing they'd done it."

"That's really quite scary," she said, a frown etched upon her face. "The thought that we could re-engineer our own human DNA to make us capable of controlling a person in that way, without them even being aware of it? Who knows what could happen?"

"A suspicious vessel arrived earlier this week, though, which we've assumed must be his. Nobody was on board when it docked. A security team was sent to investigate, and they all wound up killing each other. I guess he must have perceived them as threat." He lowered his voice still more to add extra gravitas to his words, but they seemed to sufficiently convey his point by themselves.

The Ensign looked suitably shocked, as she sat there with her mouth open. "It's a dangerous galaxy out here on the Edge!" she said finally.

"You're not wrong," he told her. He finally took a bite of his burger. It was everything he hoped it wouldn't be. It tasted of feet. "Well, he was clearly up to no good. The ship was filled with weapons, and there were lots of saved news reports related to shuttle smuggling. It's not implausible that he was targeting Rakdee."

"And what does he have to say about that?"

“So far, nothing. He’s not speaking at all. We’ve injected him with a neural inhibitor, and secured him in a holding cell, so I’m sure he’ll crack eventually—they always do.”

“An assassin in Alliance space... on an Alliance space-station, no less.” She shook her head sadly.

“It’s certainly hard to believe. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I don’t think I’d believe it either.”

She nodded her agreement.

“Well, I think it’s best we keep all this to ourselves,” he said, giving up on the burger, and just eating the fries instead. They were less disappointing, but not by much.

“Sure.”

“And don’t tell the Barman, whatever you do,” he grinned.

“It’ll be all over the station in hours.”

She laughed. “As if...”

“That’s what she told me!” said the barman solemnly to Mario Veeb.

The young man sat in dumbfounded silence, hanging on his every word, as the story was related to him. He shook his head very slowly, nudging at his beer with an outstretched finger.

“An assassin that could control minds, and make people kill themselves? Smugglers? Androids? All this really happened here, on this station?” he said, his mouth agape, barely able to believe what he had heard.

“It happened right here in this very bar. Right where you’re sitting now, in fact.”

“Wow,” Mario ran his hands through his long, knotted brown hair that hung from the back of his head like lengths of rope. “I’ve hitchhiked from one end of the galaxy to the other, and I’ve never heard anything like that.”

“It all happens here,” said the barman with a proud smile.
“Maybe you need a better guide!”

Mario picked up his near empty glass, and the barman dropped a fresh one next to it with a knowing grin. Mario smiled his gratitude at the efficiency.

“We really do get it all here,” continued the barman, snatching up the empty, and dropping it into the reclamation unit to be recycled. “We’ve had illegal racers on the run from the law, tourists from who knows where, mysterious shuttle accidents, murders, travellers in repurposed inspection-pods, ghost-ships, smugglers, Alliance investigations. You name it, we’ve had it!”

“And I thought this place would be boring.”

“No,” said the barman, a certain light in his eye. “We may not be on the flag-ship of the Alliance, out exploring the final frontier; we might not be a strategically vital outpost, or a ship lost in an unexplored region of space. We might just be a base filled with normal people living normal lives, but there’s one thing we’re not...”

He fixed the young man with a rather intense look.

“We’re not boring.”

The Pilot

The icy void of space: a technically accurate, though somewhat misleading expression, given that despite the implication of emptiness, it is the very place (or absence thereof) where everything known to physically exist is kept. And it was through this icy void of space that the most definitely existent heavy modular transport vessel cruised at a steady, but unfathomably brisk rate.

The squat, bulky craft was considerably larger than an average shuttle, but it resembled one in most other respects. Contrary to what one might expect, its appearance was remarkably rigid. It was a flattened out mostly metal square, its height around half the dimension of its length. It was braced with a wider, denser cross-bar of a frame with a large, circular indentation in the middle of each side. Each opening had the capacity to be used as a door, and the formation of the frame left a smaller flattened cube at each corner.

One contained the controls and main engineering section, another still was filled with baggage and cargo. The other two formed a pair of inter-meshing lounges for the passengers, accessed through the central nexus.

Through this design, the square transports could dock with any other vehicle, in any direction. More importantly, vessels of this kind could network together infinitely to form larger, semi-permanent structures.

The habitat section of Station AEOS-401 was just such a structure, formed from an older, but dimensionally identical, design with many multiple space-frames docked together to make a honeycomb of comfortable living quarters.

Many others just like it existed dotted around the emptiness of space.

The occasional star could be seen to float listlessly by, as if nothing more than a twig drifting along in a gently flowing stream. The light would flicker off the dull grey panelling, licking the outer hull with a faint glow, picking out its gaunt, ugly, functional edges.

The pilot's name was George. He was in his fifties, but he looked younger, and took great pleasure in telling anyone who would listen just how old he really was. The tiny amount of attention that such a thing might earn him was something he thrived upon. It was a matter of pride that he kept himself as fit as any Alliance Defence officer, just as it was an equal matter of pride that he wasn't one.

And as such a thing would imply, it was no Alliance transport he piloted. It was a civil craft, and he was a civil operative, making him a kettle of a whole different kind of fish. It was with no shame or emotional jab of inadequacy that he freely announced this fact also.

Among the civilian fleets, the Alliance Defence Authority had increasingly become regarded as a necessary evil, and it was the necessity aspect that was more frequently questioned. It hadn't always been that way, to be sure; there had been a time when there was a certain glory to the Alliance, and those interested in space travel had clamoured for a chance to join the swelling ranks of their exploratory and peace-keeping arm.

But things had changed, as they are wont to do when there is potential power to be had and people who are out looking for a way to wield it. For if change is a constant, then a constant it must remain, unchanging, thus breaking its own rule by the sheer weight of logic. Unless one were to assert that it was the nature of the change that had changed in this instance, a logical quagmire that most outside the scientific community would describe as cheating.

Regardless, the precise nature of change was something George did not speak of, for he had half the wits necessary to

understand its implications. Indeed, with every advantage available to him, a better man may, by the age of fifty, have achieved something a little more worthwhile than piloting a large, mostly automated craft, that was for all intents and purposes little more than a glorified computer stuffed into a large box.

And when it came to the Alliance, perhaps things hadn't changed at all, by any significant means. Perhaps the change was infinitely more subtle, and less easily detected when viewed from a wider perspective? Perhaps it was a mere shift in perception, because even within Alliance space, the Alliance was increasingly seen as a warmonger, a growing threat to peace in a galaxy already filled with threats, violence, hostility, and the stench of impending disaster; it was always sharpening its metaphorical teeth for the next confrontation when there didn't seem to be any next confrontation to have.

But war was never hard to find, if you looked hard enough to find it. Everywhere there were skirmishes, hostilities, threats, rumours... It was a way of life, as the Alliance found itself in a perpetual state of conflict with the Krills, the Skelk and the countless Grep communities struggling to find an identity for themselves.

Each fight might weaken the fleet, but it strengthened their resolve. Each defeat made them tighten their borders, and flex their military muscles. Each success made them revel in their power with misplaced pride. Many felt, perhaps with good reason, that the Alliance was now best avoided, their ships filled with zealous operatives with too much power at their fingertips, and Commanders with too many zealous operatives at theirs.

There had once been a time, not so very many decades before, when an Alliance vessel was the focus of immense pride to the Alliance citizens. They were armed with powerful weaponry and

tempered by a knowledge of how best to deploy them for the safety of all.

And as for George, he was never one to ponder the greater scope of philosophy, the wider implications of morality, or the ingredients for a really good lasagne, but he did state proudly that he was a civil pilot, responsible for nothing more than the safety of his crew.

And, quite literally, nothing more.

The flight computer had finally been locked down, allowing the vessel to pilot itself along a very straight course. This was hardly a challenge for even the crudest of computers, and George had every confidence in his. He stepped up from his seat at the right of the control deck, and eyed it knowingly. It was his chair and his alone.

The vessel itself may not have been his property, but it was his command, and he dared anyone to challenge that assertion. His claim had been staked long ago, and it was a brave or foolhardy man that set foot too close to his place at the controls.

“Note in the logs, Fez, we’re locked in and hands free,” he said, clapping his hands together gleefully.

His assistant smiled back at him and said, sounding a little forced, “Awesome!”

As a Mission Commander, Fez was technically of superior status to the pilot, but he was never one to pull rank, and their work hardly demanded the service of someone bearing such a title anyway. It barely even required a pilot, truth be told, and even that moderately under-rated title was somewhat debatable.

“Time to get this show on the road!” George said proudly and grinned to himself as he made his way towards the rear door that led to the passenger lounge.

“Looks like a tough house tonight. Break a leg!”

George flashed back a knowing smile, before stepping confidently through the doors to the passenger lounge.

It was a spacious lounge, with tables dotted around in a comfortable layout; no rows of hard-backed chairs or cramped little alcoves. Overall it was a pleasant place to sit out the duration of the reasonably long trip the vessel was taking so that it could dock with the Wesley, a much larger and fully-realised ship.

The passengers paid him little heed as he made his way to the centre. They were a mixed bunch as always; civil merchant fleet crewman being transferred from one station to another, and a few civilian travellers. Hardly a tough house by his professional standards.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said George loudly, dulling the noise to some degree as people stopped what they were doing and turned to face him.

“Welcome aboard the Shiragiku Maru. I’ll be the civilian pilot of this civilian vessel for the duration. George Best is the name. I’ve heard all the jokes...

“I would like to apologise once again for the significant delay in our departure time. A security incident prior to our arrival at Station 401 resulted in heavy restrictions being placed upon all non-essential traffic. Nobody was allowed in or out, in a nutshell.

“I’m sure you’re all familiar with what went on—some of you more than others—so I won’t go into details, other than to remind you that it wasn’t our fault, and we’re not in the habit of handing out compensation.”

A very slight smirk appeared on the faces of several passengers, and there was a polite, if not enthusiastic, chuckle.

“The good news is that I was able to negotiate a special permit to exceed the standard transporter speed-regulations, so we’re now

on course to rendezvous with the SS Wesley in approximately 15 hours, as originally scheduled. And when you see the Wesley with your own eyes, you'll wonder what all the hurry was for."

More smirks, accompanied by a few quiet laughs.

"15 hours is still a long time, so you'll be pleased to know we're fitted with catering-class food generators, a broad selection of entertainment, and in case you get bored of those, there's a bunk area you can sleep in, located in the secondary lounge. If you need anything else, please contact my assistant, Mr Fez, and he will be happy to supply you with all the necessary forms, which will need to be filled out in triplicate and submitted in person, accompanied by a legal representative, both parents, and all four grandparents.

"Or, you can bypass all that with an appropriately sizeable bribe—we accept all major currencies."

He emphasised the last part with a cheeky grin and a couple of well timed flourishes of his eyebrows, and there was, this time, a small but reassuring ripple of chuckles.

He had this part of the routine polished, and had recited it more times than he cared to remember.

"The cargo area is off limits, so please keep out. Some of the contents have quite a high black market value, and as crew, we get first dibs."

Another ripple of laughter, a little stronger this time. He had them.

"Now, I'm required by Alliance mandate to offer you a brief presentation on safe conduct in case of emergency, as you travel at several orders of magnitude faster than the speed of light, aboard a flimsy craft with only minimal tactical shielding, and a flight control system salvaged from a Krill sandwich-toaster."

He grinned quite proudly this time. At least one of the passengers was frowning, but surely nobody was taking any of this seriously.

“In the event of an emergency, you are invited to scream very loudly, and run around in blind panic, waving your arms around in the air, like this.” He flailed his arms around wildly for a few seconds, before calming and offering an exaggerated shrug.

“Well, it’s as good advice as any, for all the difference anything we could do would make if there was an actual real emergency. Which... rather makes the whole point of giving you a presentation on safe conduct moot.

“The only real advice I can offer is that if any of you have managed to smuggle a Type-7 blaster rifle on board without anyone noticing, then please do not point it at the bulkhead and fire at full power for upward of eight seconds. The smell is really quite unpleasant, and we’ll all have to suffer it because it wouldn’t even penetrate the inner hull.”

The joke went down well, and his point was clearly well-taken.

“Needless to say, the odds of you arriving safely and in one piece are stacked heavily in your favour, as myself and Mr Fez have a vested interest in keeping it that way. And despite what you may have heard, or read on the toilet walls, we’re both very approachable, so do feel free to come to us with any questions or concerns you might have.

“Please enjoy your flight!”

The passengers seemed happy with this, and slowly returned to what they were doing around the deck.

George was about to head back to the control room, when one of the passengers stepped forwards from the group, and headed

straight towards him. The man was younger than he was, but not by a wide margin.

“Hi, I’m Gary,” said the man, extending his hand in greeting.

“I’m transferring to the Wesley. I’m a pilot.”

George smiled knowingly. “A shuttle pilot?”

“Yes. I’m qualified up to Type Seven,” he said with a nod.

There was an expression on his face that George had read all too easily.

“So... I’m guessing you’ve never seen inside a control room of one of these then?”

“I have not,” Gary laughed. “I wondered if we might do something to fix that?”

“By all means!” George slapped a hand on his shoulder and lead him through to the forward deck. The control room had always been a source of pride, but showing it to somebody who could actually appreciate it was a rare treat for him. “These things are a real pleasure to work with—fast, smart, strong as an ox, and reliable as the morning sunrise.”

Gary followed him through to the front, and off to the right. As the doors slid shut behind him with a soft but appreciable hiss, he surveyed the layout, his eyes snagging on obvious details.

George stood before his own chair, arms crossed over his chest and a proud expression painted on his face. “So, what do you think?”

“This is very nice,” said Gary, nodding politely.

“It’s larger and has more power than a shuttle, but don’t let that fool you—the controls are substantially identical. However, the main navigational systems were designed to be operated by two pilots.

“From my side, I control the vessel’s primary operations. My colleague, Fez, is at external control, dealing with incoming mission

data, and monitoring variables such as stellar conditions, traffic, other signals from wherever we're heading."

Fez nodded, before returning his attention to his own control panel, and the half-eaten cheese and lettuce sandwich that was sat on a bank of warning lights.

"He makes it all sound so complex," the younger man told him with an amused smirk. "Mostly, we just sit here, eating sandwiches, drinking coffee, and watching the computer do all those things he just mentioned."

"And he makes it sound like a spectator sport," he said firmly. "A ship of this scale with civilian passengers on board... You need seasoned professionals at the helm. There is no substitute for a well-trained team!"

It was perfectly clear that he very firmly held that his position was important enough that everyone else should be just as impressed with him as he was with himself. And in terms of the lives of the passengers, he was indeed important—their survival could depend on each and every decision he made!

Although he was loath to admit any such thing, few, if any, of the snap decisions he'd ever had to make during his long career had ever carried any more consequence for the passengers than a horrific stench from the toilets after he once ordered an uncharacteristically authentic Indian curry for lunch. "The flight computer is a tool, nothing more."

"Hey, you're preaching to the choir; it is a great setup," said Gary, clearly meaning every word of it. "I've spent way too many hours locked in a shuttle over the years. I bet you guys appreciate the extra space."

"Extra space, power, facilities, responsibilities, girls..."

“Just ignore him,” added Fez, with a dismissive thrusting of his thumb in George’s direction. “He has a few things wrong with his head. Every so often, he says things that make him sound like an ass.”

“It’s fine,” said Gary with a shrug. “It’s nice to see someone who takes a bit of pride in their work. That was in short supply on the station.”

“He’s right about the facilities though,” Fez continued. “The food generators are top notch. We don’t have the space for large-scale recycling so we carry a tank of scrubbed proteins. We have catering-class food selections, calibrated to the standards you’d expect from a large-scale heavy cruiser.” He stepped towards a full-sized serving-hatch, larger even than those on the station. It lit up instantly in response to the crewman’s proximity. “Last week, I ordered a plate of sliced tomato. It came with a little sprig of parsley on it! Can you imagine?!”

“Wow. That’s just...” said Gary with a grin. “A similar thing happened on the station to me last week, except it wasn’t a tomato, it was rat and it wasn’t a sprig of parsley, it was a cockroach. I had actually ordered a new uniform jacket, so no part of that was ideal, especially since it was delivered through a slot only a few millimetres wide.”

“Tell him about the sausages!” interrupted George, pointing into the alcove proudly.

“Oh yeah. This other time, I ordered sausages. They’d been cut at one end, so they bloom out, and look like little octopuses.”

“Octopi!” George corrected him.

“I’m... fairly certain either would be considered right,” added Gary, correcting them both.

“And this sandwich I’m eating now. Look at it! It looks like an ordinary... an every day lettuce sandwich, right? Wrong! It’s lettuce, with mayonnaise! And just a little hint of a peppery taste. And the lettuce... It’s so fresh. Fresh! Listen... I’m going to take a bite of this sandwich right now, and I want you to listen to how fresh that lettuce is.”

Gary shot a concerned glance to George, who was nodding and gesturing that he should indeed listen.

Fez diligently picked up the remaining sandwich with one hand and took a generous bite, which was accompanied by a most satisfying crunch as his teeth sliced cleanly through the layers of crisp iceberg lettuce and less satisfyingly into a slice of American cheese. Satisfied, at least, that his point had been made, he chewed and swallowed it down quickly, as Gary stood watching, and blinking, and maybe wondering if their radiation shielding was as well maintained as their food supply. Either that, or he was thinking that these were two very, very bored people.

“That’s pretty fresh,” said Gary, a little too politely.

“Also...” Fez waved his finger in front of his face to further emphasise his point. “It came with a pickle. A pickle!”

“Um, yeah. I’ll just have a coffee I think,” Gary said. “Do they do espresso? The only coffee they did on the station was some generic weapons-grade blend, which always tasted stale and overly stewed, like it’d been on the warming plate for a whole year.”

“That’s dreadful,” laughed George. “Yeah, we do a lot of long runs, so we specialise in coffee. Actually, I have my own special blend, my own recipe, which... I think you’re going to like.”

Fez squinted and pointed at his head as he nodded. “The thing with his head I mentioned...”

George shook his head sternly, but quickly relaxed back into a smile. “Fez, would you do the honours?”

“But of course!” Fez turned his attention to the service alcove. “Coffee, espresso, hot. Recipe algorithm: George Knows Best,” he commanded with a roll of his eyes.

Machinery softly hummed as a cup was chosen and slipped out to the middle of the alcove on a white plastic wheel. A hot aromatic coffee with a golden creme on the surface materialised out of sparkling glimmers of light, presented neatly in a short white cup together with a cinnamon cookie on the side of the saucer.

Fez took the cup and saucer and passed it across to Gary, who sniffed at it appreciatively. “Please, take a seat!” he said, gesturing to one of two small auxiliary positions towards the rear of the control room.

“Where’s my manners... Sorry!” added George. “Do make yourself comfortable! It’s, um... Gary, isn’t it?”

Gary nodded.

“Well it’s nice to have you aboard. And you said you’re going to the Wesley?”

“Yes, I’ve acc... Wow, this coffee... really gets your attention doesn’t it!” Gary said, shuddering openly. “Um... The Wesley, yes, I’ve accepted an assignment there. I’m hoping that it’s run halfway professionally; or not entirely unprofessionally, at least.”

The crewman looked at one another and exchanged a smirk.

“Um... not... staffed by... a bunch of monkeys with typewriters?” Gary said hopefully. “My proficiency bar really is set quite low after working on 401.”

George began, slowly and very deliberately, “Well, we’ve ferried passengers and cargo to the Wesley... more times than I can count...”

“27 times. This one’s number 28,” added Fez.

“27 times,” continued George. “We’ve seen for ourselves what kind of a ship they run there. Things would... definitely be done differently if it were my boat, of course, but... I guess, all things considered, it seemed to be okay.”

“All things considered...” Fez repeated pointedly.

“Well it can’t be any worse than where I was before,” said Gary with a smirk. “It was an absolute freak show.”

“So these other passengers, are they part of the freak show too?” Fez sat himself down, picked up a computer terminal interface pad, and opened up the passenger manifest.

“No no no no no...” said Gary, shaking his head. “No. Well... yes. Most are just passing through, but... one or two of them... Yeah.”

“Go on,” said George, suddenly interested. “Let’s hear about the one or two.”

“Well, there’s the smuggler,” began Gary. “He was detained by security back on the station, but they couldn’t find anything to charge him with, so they had to let him go.”

“A smuggler?” said Fez, as he exchanged a concerned glance with George.

“Breakfast,” said Jason, his usual gruff tone entirely wasted on a computer that had no ability to discern moods. It had little ability to discern food orders too, if the truth be told.

The machine spoke back with a flat monotone voice, bereft of accent or emotion. “There are more than 18,000 entries under breakfast. Please be more specific.” Bereft of emotion though it may be, it was trying its luck.

“English style breakfast!” he said with another indignant huff, and a frown which would have melted through its circuits if it were only just a little more stern. “Two sausages, fried tomatoes, scrambled eggs, bacon, hash-browns, mushrooms, baked beans and toast. With coffee, weapons-grade, no glamour. Black pudding! Don’t forget the black pudding!”

The computer beeped a confirmation. Within a matter of moments, a tray appeared in a shimmering silver light that flickered over the dancing machinery as dishes and cutlery were moved into place. It served up a plate of warm food and a chipped, oil stained mug of potent hot coffee by the side. With a solid, well-poled clunk the hatch opened up as if it was offering the food up to him.

He took the tray, his expression never shifting beyond a perceivable almost-frown that forcibly dragged down his not insignificant brow, as if it were focusing a beam of pure rage generated in his eyes.

He turned to see an Asian woman hovering behind him, waiting, but taking pains not to step too close. He rolled his eyes and his almost-frown became a most definite frown; a most definite frown indeed.

“That looks tasty. Did you specifically ask for the sausages to resemble little octopi?”

“No, and I didn’t ask for this foliage on the tomatoes either. What am I supposed to do with that?” he said with a scowl. Thinking better of all this he pointed at her accusingly and told her, “Don’t answer that. Don’t. I’m going to go over there now, and I’m going to eat all of this in peace and quiet.” He gestured with his eyes to a vacant table in the corner. “You’re not invited. You’re not even a little bit invited.

“The only thing you’re invited to do is to leave me alone.”

She averted her eyes like a scolded child as he moved away, his frown dipping into the territory of a grimace, and remaining there for the time being. She followed not too closely behind, any kind of invitation apparently a mere formality.

He sat himself down in the plush, well-worn chair, the soft padding giving to just the right degree to allow the cushions to mould to him nicely. He let out a sigh, and his expression softened a little. But only a little. The woman sat down and the frown returned with reinforcements.

“I thought I made the situation pretty clear,” he growled, his voice a low and threatening rumble.

“I owe you an apology,” she said.

“I agree,” he agreed. “But ask yourself if this is really the ideal time. Under the circumstances, this would be exactly the wrong moment for you to be anywhere near me.”

“I shouldn’t have violated your barbaric breakfast experience back on the station. It was a brazen act of aggressive posturing, the sort of toxic masculine tokenism we should have left long behind us as a people.

“It saddens me that you had to see it thrown back at you like that; that you had to experience for yourself what women endured for countless millennia at the hands of people like you.” She appeared to mean it, whatever it was. “For that, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well I’m sorry that I have to see you now, breathing. I’m so sorry in fact, that if I had a type-7 disrupter rifle and over seven seconds to spare, I would seriously consider firing at the bulkhead, in the vague hope of poisoning us all to death. That’s how much I want rid of you.

“In fact, only the existence of my breakfast here is keeping me calm enough to talk to you at all. And that’s going cold, because I’m

talking to you. All this, on top of the very sight of your face, is actually making me more angry.

“Do you appreciate the irony in all this? I ask, because you appear to have an American accent!”

“Well one of us has to take the high ground. What more can I say?” she said, but the fact remained that it was more in a situation that demanded less.

“Nothing! Let it be nothing, and just leave me alone.” He decided to ignore her, and diverted his attention back to his breakfast, but she was no easy thing to ignore.

“I also wanted to thank you,” she continued softly.

For some baffling reason, the universe seemed determined to continue disrupting his breakfast routine. He huffed a deep sigh, and wore his deepest frown. “There’s no need.”

He waved her away dismissively, but she stubbornly seemed immune to hints, which were becoming increasingly less subtle. Subtlety had in fact been left behind entirely some time ago, and had never been one of his strong points in the first place.

“I just wanted to say-”

He cut her off rudely. “You don’t need to say anything. You need to leave me alone. I can’t make it any clearer or plainer than that. If I can’t communicate that to you verbally, I will happily write you a brief note, wrap it around something heavy, and get the information past your thick skull and into your brain a whole different way.

“I’m entirely ambivalent on the matter. Breakfast, much, much less so.”

Fez flicked through the manifest logs with a somewhat confused frown. “There’s a problem with our records,” he said with a shrug.

George snapped back at him, “I doubt that very much.” Pausing for a moment’s thought, he added more softly, “Unless the records that were sent to us were wrong.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me,” Gary nodded. “What’s the problem?”

“There are no smugglers flagged on the manifest. Normally, they give us the heads-up so we can check the cargo more closely,” said Fez, looking up from his pad. “There’s a lot of black-market activity going on in this part of space, as I’m sure you can imagine. The rumour is that the Skelk are buying up shuttles, trying to build a battle-fleet of the things to attack Alliance shipping with.”

“I don’t think they ever proved he was a smuggler, and there’s no field for shifty looking—I checked. Look up Jason Johnson. That’s his name.” Gary took another short sip from his coffee, and swallowed hard.

“Well, I don’t like it,” said George firmly. “Proof or not, I don’t like the idea of having a smuggler aboard.” He flicked on the viewer showing the passenger compartment. “Come on, let’s get a look at you.”

“Got him!” Fez said triumphantly. He began thoughtfully rubbing his chin. “No records of any arrests. No records of... anything, really.”

“Really?! Nothing at all?” said Gary, somewhat taken aback. The station records were often wrong but not so often quite that wrong.

“I don’t like any of this,” said George. He cracked his knuckles, swivelled his chair, and began tapping away at his control panel. “I’m scanning his luggage. I want to know exactly what he’s brought aboard.”

“We don’t know which items are his.” Fez shook his head at him as he pointed this out. “It wouldn’t be ethical, would it?”

“Fine. Plan B. I’m scanning the whole cargo bay. Maximum definition!” he said unethically.

“Whatever makes you happy. It was all scanned when it came on board. You’re not going to find anything,” said Fez resignedly, as he shot an expression of apology to their guest.

“Our internal scanners are much higher resolution. I upgraded them myself!” George grinned menacingly.

His expression quickly turned to one of surprise, as a red security alert light lit up his console.

“What’s that?” asked Fez, his face suddenly taking on an uneasy look as he stared raptly at the flashing panel.

“I’ve found something!” said George. As he checked the read out, his face turned pale, the colour drained from his cheeks in an instant. “This isn’t good...”

Gary sat back in the control room auxiliary chair wearily, rubbing his hair, and looking at the read-out with an expression of advanced concern. Advanced concern, adorned with a little sprig of ensuing panic.

“Your suspicions were correct,” he said, finally, to the expectant faces of the two seniors. “Something in the cargo bay has hacked your ship. More specifically, it appears to be a Type-3K computer interface. It looks like it accessed the ship’s systems in response to our scans.”

“How bad is the problem?” asked Fez innocently. “I never heard of one of those.”

Gary shot a glance at George, who looked right back at him, both of them appearing worried, in roughly equal measure.

“That doesn’t surprise me. What does surprise me is that it looks like George over there has. Type 3K interfaces were outlawed long ago, so this one shouldn’t even exist—you can’t even have them made any more, according to interstellar law. Heck, I was investigated once just for looking up the name.”

“The Skelk were notorious for using them as tactical weapons. They basically force the ship to self-destruct. Once they’re connected, there’s nothing you can do: you can’t alter your velocity or heading; you can’t use communicators; you can’t even use a weapon on it, or do anything to get it off the ship.”

Fez was now looking very worried indeed.

George drew a deep breath and shook his head angrily. “What are our options?”

“We can wait for it to kill us,” Gary said as he smiled weakly. “Unless either of you fine gentlemen happen to be certified in network sabotage counter-intelligence, Field Level 8, then this might be a good time to start running around and screaming loudly.

“What was the exact procedure for waving your arms about?”

“I won’t have this!” George banged his balled fist down hard on Fez’s console, causing several lights to begin flashing urgently in protest. “Someone on this ship must know something. Someone on this ship must be the target, or the bomber.”

“Whoever it is, they must be a big-league player to justify an obscure weapon tactic like this,” suggested Gary. “It just doesn’t make any sense. Whoever brought it on board can’t have known what it was.”

“Okay,” said Fez, with a sigh of exasperation. “So let’s get this straight. This device has plugged into our systems somehow, so that now we can’t use long-range communications, or drop out of faster-than-light velocity?”

“It’s worse even than that,” said Gary with unusually severe frown. “According to the Alliance database, any attempt to do so will trigger a secondary explosive. So that gives us... a little under 15 hours to figure something out, something that doesn’t involve trying any of those things.”

“Right,” agreed George. “Our rendezvous with the Wesley is at Melkot 3, a colonised planet in a solar system that’s dead ahead of us. The problem we have is that if we don’t change course or drop below light speed within the next 14 hours and 23 minutes, we’ll head directly into the system’s sun and be instantly vaporised. That’s the best-case scenario.”

The control room fell silent as everyone absorbed the information.

“The passengers are the key to this,” George glared accusingly at the monitor, as if it were the embodiment of the actual cause of the problem.

“What do we know about them?” asked Fez, who was now rubbing his temples and pacing around, near frantic with worry.

Gary pointed to a figure as it walked past the monitor. “I know that one is an android.”

“You there,” he announced in a cheery, yet stoic monotone, which sounded entirely, perfectly and just exactly off-kilter. “I’m superior to you in every way, so the fact of my acknowledging your existence must be of unimaginable delight for you.”

“Excuse me?” Marvin turned and fixed him with a glare of slightly confused apathy. “How about hello? Do you even have manners on... whatever backwards planet it is you came from?”

“Manners? Of course not. Where would be the profit in delivering... falsified appraisals of... of... of somebody else’s inadequacies?!”

“Oh, NO, madam! The visual acuity of my optical circuits absolutely cannot be relied upon to any discernible degree, because, your... your... your... hindquarters appear... not in the least bit prodigious, adorned as they are by those size 74 pantaloons.

Lunacy!”

“Wait! You’re that horribly annoying android janitor!”

He threw his arms in the air and rolled his eyes skyward in a simulation of shocked surprise, that would have been utterly convincing, had it been performed by somebody who was actually recoiling from an organic sense of surprise and shock. “Yes, I’m an android. It’s Mr Wellington, to you.”

Marvin shook his head dismissively. “What do you want, android?”

“Are you aware, that beneath your left hoof, is a piece of lint, approximately seven millimetres in length?”

Marvin reflexively looked down. Sure enough, a small thread of black fibre was stuck to the grey carpet under his foot, although he had to squint quite hard to see it.

“I phrase this as a question,” continued the android. “Because rigorous testing has shown that this can boost communication efficiency by as much as 13%, no small number when parleying with mongrels. So feel under no obligation to answer, because an assumption as to what that answer would be was inherent in the fact of my asking. Good day!”

“Um... so?”

“So?” Mr Wellington stepped back, and appeared as though he was about to laugh. He did no such thing, which was probably best

all round. “Ah, Mr Wellington, you sentimental fool... Every time I try to give a mediocre strain of corporeal stock the benefit of the doubt, they never fail to disappoint.

“Well, perhaps one day in the far distant future, your kind will aspire to a level of perfection... that approaches basic cleanliness. Why, only a brief inspection of your shabby coat should have afforded me adequate clue. What are you, an Affenpinscher, or an English Toy Spaniel?”

“I’m human!” snapped Marvin angrily. “What the hell are you talking about now? Have you been standing too close to a microwave oven? Is there a fridge-magnet stuck to your head?”

Mr Wellington shot Marvin an exaggerated wink and a half smile. He rumbled on, “I, too, am human, in the sense that I was designed to... ape, the external facade and functionality of your ignominious ilk. However, my higher-calibre production quality was only possible by bypassing the chaotic genetic lottery that elicits such a... a high ratio of defective merchandise, such as yourself, so I can’t take all the credit there.

“Indeed, it was representatives of your very own lice-ridden primate tribe that found the bizarrely random degrees of wholesale misfiring a patently obvious start point for improvement, for they saw fit to reinvent the human equivalence, boldly painting my exulted form upon a canvas of pure technological order.”

Marvin stared fixedly, blinking on occasion. “What...?” he asked quite softly, with a hint of incredulity, a dash of sarcasm, and just a touch of irritation. “What?”

“So in short, I am superior to you in every way... and here the conversation comes full circle.” Mr Wellington paused, seemingly anticipating a response of some sort. After what seemed like several seconds, he spoke again. “Tell me, human, as an ambassador of your

race, do you seek perfection? Do you aspire to improve, not only your own personal standards, but those too of the human race by statistical average? And please note... that an assumption as to the answer, is not inherent in my having asked, on this particular occasion.”

“What? What in the galaxy are you talking about?” he asked, looking like he was mostly angry at himself, at this point, for simply not walking away.

“Sir, I am fully aware that you have the processing faculty of a bimetallic strip, the memory capacity of a food card, and a flimsy physical structure designed to... to be perceived as... delightfully appetising to creatures with more formidable denticulation than your own delicate veneers, and yet I see potential in your species.

“I know the precise burden of pressure I would need to exert, to demolish your cranium in the palm of my hand, and could do so in the blink of an eye, and yet I see a potential for advancement; an opportunity to exceed the harsh limitations imposed upon you by biological evolution, the cruel hand that you were unjustly dealt. Isn’t that... exciting?”

“No, it really isn’t. I couldn’t care less to be honest,” Marvin sounded like he really meant it, and with good reason. Whatever self-directed anger he felt was slowly being vented and the expression on his face, the turning away of his body blatantly showed that all this was coming to an end.

It clearly didn’t show it blatantly enough, and the android continued, “Sir? Right now, I would be expressing a mock-up approximation of bitter disappointment, had your laissez-faire inclination been in the least bit unpredictable. I’ve met higher calibre plagues... So, I suppose I’ll have to bend down and pick up that piece of lint myself then.”

“What?” Marvin burst into an uncharacteristic smile. “That’s what all this was about? You just wanted me to pick up a stupid piece of lint?”

“It would improve your species’ standards,” he said simply, blinking incredulously, he imagined but actually looking rather like a cartoon dog that was entirely convinced of its own innocence.

Marvin huffed and grumbled as he walked off. “Damned androids. They’re worse than Greps!”

“Android...” said Fez, as he flicked once more through the manifest. “There’s no android listed either.”

“He’s listed here,” said George, pointing to his own pad which was also now displaying the passenger manifest. “Here we go. Mr Wellington. He’s listed down under cargo. Apparently he filled in the documentation himself though. He is described as a ‘superlatively advanced robotic prototype with augmented conscious reasoning capacity and experimental neural processing units.’”

“Impressive,” agreed Fez with a satisfied nod. “What was he used for?”

“It mostly just swept up the cargo bay,” said Gary with a shrug. “I don’t think it was actually employed there. It just used to wander around annoying people. I heard it lived in a broom cupboard somewhere.”

“It says here he belongs to Jason Johnson.” George leant back in his luxurious chair and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“Jason Not-a-Smuggler Johnson, eh?” Fez raised an eyebrow curiously.

“You think that the android itself could be the Type 3 interface?” suggested Gary.

“Unlikely. He wasn’t in the cargo hold when I scanned it.”

Gary and Fez both nodded, seemingly relieved.

“However... If I wanted to plant a bomb, I would probably send an advanced android to do it,” George continued thoughtfully.

“That does make sense,” agreed Gary. “If someone wanted us dead, they could program the android to plant the bomb, which would explain why you never found it before. It carries the bomb on in person, so to speak, sneaks it into the cargo hold without setting off the alarms, and it wouldn’t care one iota about being blown to pieces. It’s perfect.”

“You make a good point,” Fez agreed. “Except the owner... he’s right here on the ship.”

“He’s not the real owner though,” Gary said. “The android filled the documents in itself.”

“That probably means Johnson is the target then,” suggested George. “You don’t become a smuggler without making some enemies.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Who was the previous owner? It must have belonged to someone, right?” shrugged Fez.

“Yes, it belonged to a Mr Hackerty. According to the logs, his wife and daughter are on board.” George frowned at the screen and then began shaking his head sadly. “His daughter is only 10 years old!”

“Rule him out then,” said Fez. He grimaced to himself as an errant thought appeared to flutter through his mind, the same thought that had occurred to all of them. He added, “At least, I hope we can.”

“I don’t know. It has a ring of truth to it,” said George darkly.

The room went quiet again as Fez and Gary cast angry and suspicious glares at George.

George flustered and snapped back to attention. “I’m just saying, whoever planted that bomb, cannot be assumed to be a decent human being. We have no way to gauge the true depths of his, or her, depravity.

“So we’re going to get nowhere if we start ruling people out based on... baseless snap character assessments. We don’t have time to be making assumptions about the moral fortitude of a mass murderer, or binge killer.”

“He’s right,” added Fez, albeit somewhat reluctantly. “If someone’s fine killing 30 odd random strangers, we don’t know that they’d have second thoughts, just because their daughter’s one of them.”

“Dorrit,” added Gary. “His daughter’s name. It’s Dorrit. I know her.”

“Mummy, I’m bored!” Dorrit fiddled with her dress, a fluffy orange atrocity that wasn’t particularly comfortable, and didn’t really look much like it was intended to be.

“Just sit still,” she snapped at her impatiently.

Dorrit looked up at her mother with pair of big, black eyes—big, black, bored eyes begging for something to occupy her attention. “But I’m boooooored!” she protested as forcibly as she could.

Her mother huffed a sigh. “Well... Why don’t you go and get something from the service hatches? I’m sure they have ice cream!”

“I don’t want ice cream!” Actually, she wanted cake—chocolate cream cake with sprinkling stuff on the top—but she didn’t want it as much as she wanted some attention from her mother.

Her mother dropped her computer pad down onto the desk, and frowned in annoyance at her daughter. They were perched at a table along the edge of the lounge. Behind them was a sprawling

screen showing a view of the stars streaking by beyond them. All this had proven fascinating to Dorrit, but only for all too brief a time.

“Can I talk to Mr Wellington?” The little girl kicked her legs around, her feet lazily slapping into the front of the chair, one after another.

Her mother glared at the android across the room, engaged in an animated conversation, and then back to her daughter. “No. Leave that stupid thing alone.”

“But, Mum...” she protested. Whining had always served her well in the past, and it always came down to a delicate balance of quality vs time constraints, more being better of both. There wasn’t really much of a trick to it at all when put like that.

“No!”

“Mummy, I want to talk to Mr Wellington. He’s my friend!”

“That is not your friend!” she snapped. “It’s a machine. It’s just... electronics, and bits of old junk your father cobbled together from pieces of my alarm clock and bits of the shower, and then forgot about.”

“He’s my friend, Mummy!” pleaded Dorrit, with all the sincerity she could muster. She fluttered her eyes and made a sad face.

“I don’t even know what it’s doing here,” she sighed. “I threw it out of the home because I couldn’t stand it... following me around, and constantly telling me how we made too much mess supporting the needs of our flimsy biological bodies. It was enough to drive me mad! Now I’m stuck on a shuttle with the horrible thing.”

“He won’t talk to you, Mummy,” insisted Dorrit. “He doesn’t like you. He only likes me. He’s only my friend.”

Her mother picked up her pad and sighed weakly. “Fine. Just keep it away from me.”

Dorrit didn't need telling twice. She leapt up from the chair and skipped away, half running, half dancing across the lounge towards her funny android friend. To a child, he was a thing of fascination, a beacon of stimulation in a situation of crushing boredom.

"Mr Wellington!" she cried out, waving happily.

He waved back in the same girlishly gleeful way. "Dorrit. You've grown since I last saw you. Assuming a linear expansion curve, I project that you will reach a circumference of twenty nine point seven metres, assuming expiry through molecular decay at 112 years, a statistical average for a six-sevenths human hybrid infusion."

"You're funny, Mr Wellington!" she giggled.

"Rest assured, little Dorrit," he said as he reached down to ruffle her hair playfully, while his expression remained fixed. "If you have the mind your father gave you, that leaves plenty of time for you to develop the technology necessary to scoop out your least unnecessary organics, and replant them in a shiny, efficient android body like mine.

"This assumes of course that the Alliance isn't annexed by the Proxili financial quarter, destroyed by war with the Krill, or simply collapsed into civil ineptitude—all remarkably likely scenarios in any order. But your kind considers self-deception a virtue, so let's just assume everything is always going to turn out absolutely fine."

With no real idea what he was talking about she said, "I like you. Why doesn't my Mummy like you?"

"My observations have led me to conclude that humans are easily intimidated, when confronted by something more capable of being them than they are. To look upon me is to confirm their own redundancy. I am perfection beyond what they can aspire to. Why,

even picking up a piece of stray lint is to be too much work for the average of your kind.”

“Mr Wellington. You’re my friend, and I’m bored,” she said sternly, as if she was delivering a rebuke. “Can’t we do something interesting?”

“I suggest a brief discussion with an organic biped. They may provide an interesting and stimulating diversion.”

He glanced around the lounge until his eyes locked onto a scary looking man.

He began, “Jason and I have much in common. His manner of interaction causes significant discomfort in others.” He rubbed his plastic chin as if considering a complex matter with great concentration. “He is currently performing the breakfast ritual though, and your oestrus cycle has yet to commence. He is not a suitable candidate.”

He glanced around again, until his eyes locked onto a different man across the lounge who was standing, rocking back and forth on his feet, while staring with some interest through a viewing port.

“That specimen may suffice for our needs,” he said, sounding really quite excited by it while his expression looked much more like he was a little bit sad.

He wrapped his hand around hers and lead her across the room to where the man was standing.

“I’m Mr Wellington!” He reached out a hand in greeting. It was the wrong hand and upside down. “It’s a pleasure to meet me.”

The man looked at him oddly. “Ted,” he replied.

“Your appellation I presume. It remains a mystery to me, that with each of your species’ interchangeable members being substantially identical in both form and function, and with barely a

shred of individual merit to distinguish you, you continue to burden others with the task of remembering a unique moniker.”

“Yup,” he said with a shrug. “I’d be happy if we just called everyone Dave. I gather they tried that in Germany some time ago.”

The android nodded in agreement, before looking downward. Dorrit was pulling on his shirt for attention, wondering why this interaction for her benefit had so far excluded her.

“This nymph stage primate is in incomplete metamorphosis, and bears the designation of Dorrit. Her type one supervisory unit was the engineer who created my brain, and made me the technological marvel I truly am. Her embryogenesis incubation apparatus was messy and incompetent, and claimed to find me irritating.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Ted said so lazily that if it was intended to be sarcasm, much of the value was lost.

“I’m bored!” said Dorrit, with the kind of sigh that could usually be relied upon to illicit a sympathetic response.

“You should get used to it,” huffed Ted in response. “Boredom is about the best you can expect out of life, if you’re unfortunate enough to have been cursed with intelligence even slightly upward of average.

“It can lead such a person to many wonderful things, though; drug dependency, alcohol abuse, an inability to form close emotional bonds, medical problems.

“Ironically, those can help to stave off the odd stretch of boredom, to some degree...”

“I don’t like him,” said Dorrit to Mr Wellington, with a suspicious squint. “Can we find someone else to talk to?”

“Youngest girl I’ve ever had that reaction from!” Ted seemed oddly and inappropriately impressed at his own powers.

“I find him unusually engaging,” said the android. He looked back up at the man who had began, once more, rocking back and forth on his heels. “Tell me, Dave, what is your appraisal of the rest of your species?”

“Should never have climbed down from the trees. Big mistake!” Ted shrugged. “You’re an objective observer—what’s your take?”

“Ah, don’t ask him!” Dorrit rolled her eyes and made motions to lead her friend away. “He moans about people all the time. Between you and me, I don’t think he likes them very much at all.”

“It seems Dorrit has a medical flag. In case of emergency, we’re not to offer any treatment, whatsoever,” said George, growing increasingly focussed. “That’s pretty suspicious right there—could be... could be part of a motive. Might be a cult thing; maybe she’s a sacrifice, and they need to keep her pure, unmolested by modern-day science.”

Fez looked at him with increased incredulity. “Sacrifice?! George, you spend too much time in the movie archives.”

“I know, I know... But we don’t have much else to go on. Whatever the reason, surely it couldn’t be that hard to program the android to plant a bomb.”

Gary shook his head. “I’ve been thinking about that, and I’m afraid I disagree. I attended a presentation by Mr Hackerty once.

“Cheerful chap, and about as far from fringe lunacy as I’ve ever seen. I remember him explaining that Mr Wellington was a means to... some other end, which was the actual topic of the presentation—I wasn’t paying that much attention to it: I was just there for the finger buffet...”

“He’d developed a kind of learning computer, but once activated, it would be impossible... no, inconsistent was the word he used. It would be inconsistent to add to or adjust the programming directly. So he got himself a domestic assistant android—a basic production line model—to use as a kind of a blank canvas and he added his own learning computer technology to enhance its higher functions. That way, he said, he could observe and understand how the software would grow and respond to stimuli and additional modular augmentation. After he was finished, he couldn’t deactivate it, so it ended up just wandering around cleaning up after everybody, and making snarky remarks about how rubbish we all are.”

They just looked at him. Fez was the first to blink.

“So what I’m saying, is that if an engineer as brilliant as its own creator couldn’t alter its programming, I doubt anybody else would have any better luck. I think we may be barking up the wrong tree with the whole android angle.”

“Well, if not him, then who?” said Fez, biting his lip. He wore the expression of a man who was in danger of worrying himself to death, long before a bomb posed any great risk to him. “We’re pretty much out of leads.”

Suddenly, Gary’s eyes widened as he clapped his hands.

“We’ve got Ted!” he said, with renewed excitement.

“Ted?”

Gary nodded. “We should bring him in on this. I worked with him for years on the station, and I trust him completely. I may not particularly like spending time with him, but I can personally vouch that he’s on our side.”

“What does he do?” asked Fez.

“He, er... he does, er... does... does the, er.... Well, he’s, er... he’s Ted!” Gary huffed thoughtfully to himself, before coming clean.

“Okay, we never quite figured out exactly what it is that he does, so, we’re not even that sure he’s any good at it.”

Fez shook his head in disbelief, his face resting in the palm of his hand.

George suddenly banged the console with his fist, and pointed once more at the monitor. “Him!”

The others leant across to see. He was pointing at a young man, sitting alone, staring at the crowd somewhat furtively.

“Who is he? He’s the only one not talking; the only one not doing anything.”

“No idea,” said Gary.

“I’ll check the manifest.”

“You’re Corey, right?” said an uncomfortably enthusiastic man, who looked almost, but not quite, entirely human, and smelt almost definitely not human at all.

The young man looked up with a deeply troubled look from his eyes, a pair of orbs that had seen too much already, things that they were never prepared to witness. He stared for longer than was polite, his eyes flicking over the details of the dishevelled visitor.

He was dressed poorly, which was no easy thing in a world where clothing was available for the asking, and showers were no longer treated with suspicion.

Indeed, the pumping out of high-pressure liquid from a metal tube on board a vessel that relied on unspeakably powerful and complex electronic devices for safety, was now a thing of the past, and while accidents hadn’t been common, they tended to be fairly spectacular.

Modern showers sprayed a high-powered but gentle rush of cooled steam which, while wholly ineffective at their intended task,

at least had going for them that they were in every other respect completely safe. At least, officially. Accidents were now extremely common but they tended to be amazingly unspectacular.

Corey nodded, with a display of measured reserve.

The man smiled even more than before, for some reason. “May I sit down?” he said, gesturing to one of the available seats around the table.

Corey sighed to himself. He was hardly in the mood for company. “I’m just trying to get some rest, but go ahead.”

The man pulled up a chair, and continued to smile. “I’m Bob,” he said.

It occurred to Corey that perhaps he was not a human at all; perhaps a stupid smile was his face’s natural resting state; perhaps this was normal, or even an expression of sadness for his kind. Corey hadn’t met many Greps, being that they were generally engineered, rather too hastily, to live on fringe worlds, exactly in the manner that, he himself, hadn’t.

Consequently he had, since leaving Earth, encountered a staggering amount of them and his brain had essentially just given up and accepted that the universe was just a gigantic mess.

“Hello, Bob,” he grumbled.

“I hear you’re looking for someone.” Bob lowered his voice, and leant in a little. “You were told they would be on Station 401, right?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, less convincingly than he’d hoped. His eyes widened in alarm and he glared about, looking for signs of security forces or harsh-looking aliens with poorly concealed weapons. The only thing of note was a burly man eating a lacklustre breakfast, rather angrily. Otherwise,

nobody around him served to cause him undue concern. Still, he was racked with just this exact undue concern regardless, and lots of it.

“I think you do know. I have information for you.”

Corey could almost feel the anticipation oozing from his pores. “Information?” He was interested, and was having trouble hiding it. Thus far, caution had served him well, but leads were proving so few and far between that it was hard not to let down his guard.

“What if I could tell you all about the man you’re looking for?” suggested Bob. “What would that be worth to you?”

“The real question, is what you think it’s worth to you,” Corey said pointedly.

“Just information: I want a fair exchange.”

Corey eyed him with a thoughtful frown. “I don’t know what information I might have that would be of any value to you. I’m nobody special.”

“Exactly,” said Bob, his smile dropping quickly. “But that’s not what I heard, which is why I’m interested in hearing from you, in your own words.”

“Fine,” he said hesitantly. “What do you want to know?” This was becoming intriguing.

“I want you to tell me, briefly, what happened, and why you ended up on Station 401.”

“Mmm. I don’t think so,” said Corey with a weak grumble. He resumed his earlier attempt at a poker face, which wouldn’t have won him a single hand.

“I already know everything,” said Bob, his smile returning in full force; a slightly more reserved smile than before, certainly, but still as cringingly annoying, as if he was making a measured attempt to undermine his own efforts.

Corey looked him over incredulously, but his expression was tinged with alarm. “Know what?” he asked finally, marshalling his nervousness.

“I know that your brother took part in unlicensed races. I know that you worked for him briefly, helping him clean up the engineering on some of his racers. I know that at the beginning of a race, your brother died in an explosion.

“You had fitted some unauthorised technology, a device that would allow you to manoeuvre at FTL velocities, giving you an advantage over the other racers in the field.

“I know that you fled your home and left your entire life behind, pursued by security forces, while you hunted for the man who sold your brother the device that killed him.”

Denying it seemed rather redundant at this point. “Yeah. Pretty much that,” he said meekly.

“Anything you can add?” asked Bob, hopefully.

He shrugged to himself apathetically. “Most recently I’d heard he was on AEOS-401. I’d heard that shuttles were being smuggled through the area, and I thought he might be involved with that, so I went there to look for him.

“There was no record anywhere of him arriving under any of the names I had.” He looked somewhere off into the distance as the painful memories stabbed at his still-raw emotions. “And I had a lot of names for him too. Daggrov, Ste-Startor, Hemlim Gorth. Everywhere I turned, another alias, another ruined life, thanks to him. Eventually I caught wind that someone matching his description had already left the station, a week before I arrived. It seems I just missed him.”

“I see,” Bob turned away and sighed, his smile vanishing in a way that was troubling.

“You have information, then?” Corey asked impatiently.

“Not the kind you’re looking for, I’m afraid,” he said with a look of earnest disappointment. “You see, the man you’re looking for doesn’t exist. He’s a rumour, nothing more. He exists only in your mind, and in the minds of other people to whom you tell the story. He is just a figment of a collection of minds, an imagined creature who doesn’t exist in the real world.”

“What?” He could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

“That’s ridiculous! I know that’s not true! I met him!”

“One more question?” Bob smiled, but it was a sad thing to behold. “From whom did you hear that he had left?”

“The barman.”

“He’s nobody important,” Fez shrugged, but the glare he aimed at George was more pointed than the dismissive gesture suggested.

“Corey Baker. Just some kid travelling around. Seems his brother died in an unlicensed racing accident after his racer, which was fitted with unauthorised technology, exploded. He’s been drifting around ever since, keeping a low profile.”

“Doesn’t sound like our guy,” agreed Gary, as his attention was drawn once more to the service hatch.

“Doesn’t sound like our guy?!” countered George with arrogant authority, as he thrust his balled fists into his sides. “His brother’s ship explodes, and now we have a bomb on board. If that really is a coincidence, then I want to know that it is for sure.”

“What, you think it might be revenge for his brother? Or, that maybe he has another brother on board, and wants to finish the job?” Gary rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He hummed and rolled his eyes back, in a show of deep contemplation.

“What’s on your mind?” asked Fez, wiping nervous sweat from his brow.

“Honestly?” said Gary, snapping back to the room. “I was thinking about another coffee. I think this situation calls for Americanos all round.”

“Seriously?” grumbled George, turning away and shaking his hand admonishingly.

Gary shrugged. “I’m not a complicated man. Keep me fuelled up, and I’ll go the distance.”

“I’m on it,” said Fez, allowing a chuckle. “We could all stay sharp about now, so coffees all round?”

“Thank you, Fez,” said George resignedly. “That does all sound like a very good idea, actually!”

“Thanks Fez! Now, who’s this guy?” Gary pointed to the viewer. A dishevelled traveller had sat next to Corey, and had engaged him in conversation. “I wish we could hear what he’s saying to him. Poor kid looks terrified! Regardless of anybody’s opinions over... whether or not he’s had a tough enough time to end up wanting to kill himself, and everyone else on board, this right here is possibly the best lead we’ve got.”

“That’s frightening. For more than one reason,” groaned Fez.

“Look... let’s get Ted in here,” continued Gary, as he took a cautious sip of his coffee. “Because I think right now, two things are abundantly clear. One: we need all the help we can get. And two: you both seriously oversold the quality of your food generators.”

Marvin stepped back from the viewing screen as the stars rolled by beyond.

Ted grunted a snort of dissatisfaction, and glared straight at him. “I’m needed on the bridge,” he said in a grating monotone.

“Maybe there’s a logistical problem?” suggested Marvin dryly, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“Always a possibility,” he replied flatly. “It’s an exciting life: every day tackling the smallest problems that a tedious grind of daily routine can bring you.”

Marvin shook his head reflexively, a look Ted was familiar with. “You never know, it might be exciting.”

“No.” Ted shook his head. “It won’t be. It’ll be settling a bet about... whose job is more boring, or... helping someone decide whether or not to put salt on their tomato soup.”

“Is that really what you do in logistics?” sneered Marvin.

“More or less. Only, with engines, and power supplies. Like, if someone were to ask, what’s more dangerous, a broken anti-matter pod, or a functioning plasma injector? Sometimes we have to decide if we should put a redundant safety valve on something, or if it’s easier to just not bother, and go and have an early lunch.”

“Really?” Marvin looked suspiciously horrified.

“I’m sure you’ve seen me in the bar, just before lunch time, on more than a few occasions.”

Marvin remained staring, his mouth reflexively dropping open. After a few blinks, he continued, “And, now you’re going to be working on the Wesley?”

“Yeah. I hope they don’t have redundant safety valves. I don’t much agree with them,” he said with a shrug.

“You don’t much agree with them?” Marvin frowned. “Safety valves? Aren’t safety valves a good idea? You know, from the viewpoint of... being safe?”

“Not when they’re redundant. If people did their jobs properly in the first place, they wouldn’t be needed. That’s everything wrong

with the universe right there. Everything gets designed with a margin of error, because they know it's not going to be built properly."

Marvin sighed a little. It made a perverse kind of sense, but the conversation was over; it had to be for the sake of his sanity. He smiled and moved away, as if spotting a friend across the lounge. "Good luck on the bridge," he said, and made his way as quickly as he could in the opposite direction — any direction that took him away, and as far away as possible.

He soon found himself at the table occupied by a pair of travellers. "Hey, how are you guys doing?"

One of the strangers looked up and beamed him a huge smile, while the other sat staring at nothing.

The older, and assumedly wiser, of the pair spoke first. "Bob, at your service."

"Marvin!" He reached out to shake his hand in greeting.

The younger man continued to sit there, staring. He looked bewildered, as if the plug at the bottom of the bathtub of his life had been pulled out, and reality was draining away all around him, leaving him cold, wet and still just as dirty as when all this had started.

"Marvin, we were just discussing the barman on 401. Do you know him?"

Marvin frowned and smiled at the same time, at the outright ridiculousness of such a question. "Of course. Everyone knows the barman," he said with a shrug as a haphazard grin spread across his face.

"Do you happen to know his name?" he continued, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

Marvin sat for just a moment as realisation dawned on him that he'd never thought to ask. "I guess I don't. I never even thought

about it, but now that you mention it... I don't think he ever said either."

"And how long were you on the station for?" the traveller continued.

To Marvin it sounded friendly enough, but he suspected there was a hidden reason behind the slightly loaded question. "I served there for two years—two long years," he said, flashing a glance towards the younger man who continued to look terrified about everything.

"Two years is a long time," he agreed. "How were you able to manage with such limited resources?"

"Limited?" Marvin laughed at him openly. "It wasn't luxurious, sure, but it had everything we needed. We weren't struggling to survive."

"Really?" Bob cast a glance at the young man, who was now looking even more scared. Scared, bewildered, bemused, and just possibly about to cry.

"Here I am, and I hope this is important," said Ted with a sarcastic sneer, as he stepped onto the decking plates of the control room. "My time is a valuable commodity you know,"

"Hi, Ted," said Gary, who was stood at the rear, sipping the last dregs of a moderately passable Americano. "We have a bit of a situation here."

"My job is more boring, and salt's bad for you!" he said. "Are we done?"

Even Gary was perplexed by that one, Fez and George seemingly far more so.

"Oh, so it is something important," he said, sounding almost surprised. "Go on then. How can I help?"

“We’ve got a bit of a problem,” began George. “We’ve discovered something aboard the ship-”

Ted cut him off with a raised hand. “You misunderstand me,” he explained. “How can I help? I’m the logistics guy. You’d have better luck asking the problem to fix me, surely?”

Fez didn’t appear sure whether to laugh or cry. He stared up at Gary, his eyes full of questions, such as, Why? Why had he been so eager to bring this man into an already tense situation?

And this very question was also on Gary’s mind, and it occurred to him a degree of projection may have been involved.

“Well this problem is going to fix all of us, permanently, and soon if we don’t find a way to deal with it,” he said.

“Pfff... If I wanted to fix problems like that, I wouldn’t be the logistics guy, I’d be a daring Space-Captain. Do I look like a daring Space-Captain?”

All three of them looked at him, and then at each other in turn, and agreed, with a series of mutters, that indeed he did not. In fact, he did not to such a degree, that such a question hovered on the brink of literally transcending all the known boundaries of sarcasm.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me anyway, though, aren’t you?” he continued as he paced, with an oddly meandering certainty, to the front of the control room. There he parked himself in the pilot’s seat. “Of course you are!”

George began to redden, flustering impotently, and rocking back and forth on his heels like a proud man possessed of a burning rage. Or, perhaps more accurately, a small irritation in possession of a slightly annoying man.

“You’re being all secretive about it, which means it’s not a medical emergency. You’ve made no attempt to quarantine the decks, so it must affect us all equally. We’re still travelling at FTL, so it’s

not a mechanical defect. That leaves a security concern. You've found something that threatens the safety of the ship."

"That's... quite impressive," said Gary, giving him an insultingly surprised expression. "Is that written down somewhere?"

"I'm not a daring Space-Captain, because I'm not an idiot," he said, casually looking over the details of the control room. "The information's all there. It's as obvious as the pilot's hostile relationship with his ex-wife and estranged children who hate him; and that one there who looks like he's about to have a toilet accident—he obviously hasn't had a girlfriend in far too long a time."

"It's true. Fez has never mentioned a girlfriend," said George curiously, seeming to ignore the other things he'd said.

"Can we not make this about me please?" grumbled Fez.

"So what is it you found then?" asked Ted. "Come on, let's get it over with!"

"I don't want to alarm you in any way, but it seems we've got ourselves... a bit of a bomb," Gary said, with a deep, heartfelt sigh. "We don't know who planted it, or why, but what we do know is that if we don't find a way to defuse it, one of any number of possible scenarios will play out, each resulting in our untimely and gruesome deaths."

Ted's expression in response to this revelation was wholly impossible to read. It was like a book, written in Chinese, given to a dog. It was like instructions, written in basic English, for a Chinese-made product, given to anyone—literally anyone at all.

"Oh, great..." he tutted, his voice remaining dull, unmoved by such apparently mundane notions as mortal danger and the looming spectre of death. "Should we all start running around and screaming now then?"

George shook his head and grumbled, “I need to get some new material...”

“Do you think you can help?” asked Fez with all due sense of urgency.

Ted looked around from face to face, nodding very slightly as if considering something of great importance. “I don’t know. Does it come with coffee?” he said. “Everyone else has coffee.”

Fez grunted an exasperated sigh as he turning away.

Ted suddenly pointed to the viewer with a deep scowl on his face. A slight scowl. A slightly bored scowl even, but a scowl nonetheless. “Have you investigated her? I never trusted that one.”

Mrs Hackerty put down her pad and rubbed some of the tiredness from her weary eyes.

Technology was more friendly now than it had ever been before, interfacing with human needs in any way that any given human could possibly see fit. It was a tool that was moulded perfectly to the user, but even then it had its shortcomings.

If the truth were told, those shortcomings were generally the fault of the humanoid end of the agreement, rather than the technology, but still the fact remained that true perfection was still an elusive goal, perhaps wholly unattainable considering the pronounced imperfection of those it was designed to cater to.

Her eyes were sore from staring at the screen for several hours, catching up on some important work as she continued this leg of her long journey. Her husband was becoming a famous engineer at the top of his field, but her own scientific credentials were not taken so universally seriously. Her field, in the wider scheme of things, was still struggling to assert itself in the mainstream and they weren’t, as yet, even entitled to describe themselves as scientists.

In her mind, this made no sense since her contributions to her kind, and all mankind, were no less meaningful, a fact too frequently overlooked for her personal taste.

She specialised primarily in the new scientific field of re-imagineering theory which sought to de-construct the construction of things that didn't fit into the new conventionalism. She had done impressive work on the ethics of artificial selection, and her ground-breaking paper on biology as a learned construct had been met with near universal acclaim among the other great minds in that very same field of research. The research she herself had instigated on the discourse of political disease management and population control had expanded and branched into several exciting new scientific fields that were ripe for academic grants. And her contributions to the fields of the narrative placebo and ideological alignment had made hers a household name in houses that didn't have a very well stocked book-shelf.

The Artist was the affectionate nickname they gave her, on account of her unerring ability to make anything look good on paper. One of her most ingenuous studies was even framed and exhibited as an art piece, under the fashionably French title *Ceci n'est pas une proposition réaliste*.

Yet it frustrated her endlessly that her work had never earned her the notoriety that her husband had quite accidentally found in his. She was challenging the way people thought. She was forging ahead into tearing down everything we knew about the way things worked and replacing it with something less structurally oppressive. All he was doing was making thinking robots. What was really of more benefit to the world, she wondered?

She had tried not to be bitter, but bitterness had gotten the better of her. Slowly but surely, a rift had grown between them, a rift

that had become increasingly difficult to bridge. Even her relationship with her children had begun to suffer, and it was them that were suffering the most from it.

She stretched and peered around, shrugging off such grim ruminations. Dimly she remembered her daughter, Dorrit, who was simultaneously the centre of her own personal galaxy, and the most exasperating thing in it. She'd put her out of her mind, since the pestering, the goading, and the ceaseless cries for attention had briefly ceased.

She wasn't a difficult child, not by any means. She'd had a difficult start in life, but was catching up now. She was intelligent, secure, and fast growing into a curious and resourceful little girl. She was a tiny copy of herself at that age, but with more charm, if the truth be told.

She almost frowned. The time spent undisturbed was welcome indeed, but scientism would have to take the back-burner eventually. Her research on the child-welfare benefits of serial-blended and adopted parenting models could be picked up later. For now, it was time to be a mother, to step from the wildly theoretical to the less wildly practical.

She was on board a small transport, one in which a little girl could hardly get herself in much trouble, so it was no cause for any great concern. Dorrit was a sensible child in any case, never one to push the boundaries in a way that might cause them to push back in retaliation.

And as thoughts of her child returned, so did thoughts of, "Mr Wellington." She gritted her teeth and grumbled under her breath. That infernal machine, that walking reminder of everything she found irritating about everything in her life.

But even that wasn't really it.

While its very existence stood as a reminder, a constant irritation, and an itch she couldn't scratch, it was none of these things that made her feel the way she did. It wasn't the fact that it was an intelligent machine that proved her husband's ideas were undeniably correct; it wasn't that her own children found it fascinating, and yet treated her as though she were nothing more than a source of food and punishment; it wasn't that the work that had gone into its design had made possible a cure for her daughter's condition, while her own work had only been able to produce a comforting abstract on why the condition should never have occurred. It wasn't even the fact that this thinking machine took every opportunity to verbalise this actual train of thought at every possible occasion, loudly proclaiming itself vastly superior and pointing out her biological and intellectual shortcomings.

It was that it was Mr Wellington, and that was reason enough to hate it. And hate it she did, with every ounce of her being.

Across the room, it sat perched on the edge of a table in some unfathomably complex position that would have been incredibly, inhumanly uncomfortable, if it wasn't a machine that was already incredibly, inhumanly uncomfortable to be around.

She seethed inwardly when she noticed that her daughter was clutching its hand like a favourite teddy-bear, while she refused to hold hers, claiming to be too old now for such things.

They were crowded around a table. At the other side was a horrified young man, who looked to be descending through the various layers of hell on his way to the very bottom—a look she was all too familiar with. Next to him was a self-satisfied traveller, who was the centre of attention and seemed to be revelling in it.

A civilian staff member was also sitting with them. She recognised him from the station, but had never cared to ask his name.

As she approached the group, she began to wonder what conversation could be so fascinating.

“Mr Wellington,” said the traveller. “Perhaps you could give us the benefit of your insight?”

“By all means,” he said with a happy chirp, seeming more than happy to oblige, as usual. “You are all nugatory homogenates of cellular error, of varying degrees of failure. Your achievements far from offset the universal cost of your continued existence.”

The crowd grumbled and exchanged expressions of confused irritation.

The traveller cut them off before they escalated further. “Mr Wellington, I meant would you give us your insight on the matter we’ve been discussing?”

“In that case, you are all nugatory homogenates of cellular error, of varying degrees of failure, that additionally lack facility to accurately articulate intent.

“The remainder of my prior appraisal continues to hold validity, even in light of your clarification,” he said, and although largely the same words were spoken they came out sounding almost completely different.

“Right...” The traveller frowned and looked around with an awkward smile, seemingly unsure how to progress from that.

Dorrit noticed her mother approaching and turned to beam her a happy smile. “Mummy, we’re having a discussion. It’s not boring at all!”

“So I see.” She looked somewhat disapprovingly at the mismatched group of people. “And what is it we’re discussing?” She aimed the question at the traveller, who was clearly at the centre of it all.

“Madam, you were living on the Station 401, were you not?”

She nodded a solemn reply.

“If I might ask, how long were you there?”

She shrugged thoughtfully. “We were there, around... two years; perhaps a month or two more. Why?”

“What would you say were your... impressions, of the station?” The man asked, in an overly polite manner.

She thought for a moment and eyed the others suspiciously. They were looking at her expectantly, and it was beginning to concern her.

“It was okay. Nothing special. I think my husband liked it more than I did.”

“And, if I might ask, what do you know about the large gentleman, angrily eating breakfast over there by the viewing port?” He pointed towards a large gentleman, angrily eating breakfast over by the viewing port. He did so carefully, his voice lowered accordingly.

“The smuggler?” she said. “I heard he came aboard some time ago. He was captured by the station security force. I also heard he stopped an assassination attempt so he’s a bit of a hero.”

The crowd seemed impressed, and began to chuckle to themselves.

She glared at them curiously, looking from each amused face to the next. “Why?” she demanded.

“None of those things are true!” he told her, with an elevated aura of smug self-satisfaction. “He’s got no record of any criminal activity. He has nothing more than a brief file that lists various suspicions, nothing more.”

“So?” she said with a shrug, beginning to lose interest in the whole thing. “I’m not involved with security. How should I know if it’s true?”

“Exactly!” said the man, as if it explained everything. “Yes, it is the very nature of truth aboard that station that concerns us all.”

She didn’t understand.

“It was all rumours, Mummy,” said Dorrit, with a worrying sincerity. “And the rumours are dangerous!”

“Okay...” Mrs Hackerty was fast becoming concerned that these people may not be the best role models for her child, but out of instinct, she had also begun internally repurposing the circumstances into an exciting and lucrative research grant package, for scientific purposes, of course!

“Rumours!” said the traveller. “They’re everywhere, and they’re nasty. Your daughter is quite right in that respect.”

“Okay...” said Marvin, speaking up at last. “This is all well and good; you’ve made a good case, and given us an interesting story, but you can’t prove any of this, can you?”

“I most certainly can,” he said. There was a wry smile to him now.

“Prove what?” said Mrs Hackerty. “Just what exactly is going on here?”

“She’s harmless,” said Gary with a shrug. “She’s Dorrit’s mother, Mrs Hackerty. Why don’t you trust her?”

“There is darkness in her, mark my words,” began Ted, speaking with sufficient gravitas to gain their rapt attention. “One time, I was at the bar getting lunch. I ordered fish, but they were out of fish. They offered to generate some stewed pilchards in tallow, but it always tastes like it came from a can, so I declined. As I stepped away from the bar, I look over to my left, and what do I see?”

Gary shook his head weakly, wondering just exactly what horrors could have sparked such distrust. He prompted Ted to continue.

“She was eating fish,” he said darkly. “She was eating fish, and laughing. That happened again, two Mondays after. She must have known I wanted the fish, and gone out of her way to get the last one. It’s the only explanation, you see?”

“What?” yelled Gary. “What are you talking about? This has absolutely no bearing on the situation at hand. We’re facing life and death here, and you’re talking about... lunch?!”

“In the end I just had some mashed turnip. I quite like turnip—it’s under-rated, in my opinion,” Ted said. “You have to mix it with something or else it’s a little bland, but I quite like it that way.”

“I could push him into the airlock and we could eject him directly into space,” Fez suggested sarcastically, but not entirely unwelcomely.

“We can’t use the airlocks, remember!” countered George, as if that was the only possible issue with the suggestion.

“Okay,” muttered Ted. “So what kind of bomb are we looking at here?”

Everybody looked at each other sheepishly.

“You have no idea what kind of bomb it is, because none of you have even gone and had a look at it yet, have you? But, oh no, I’m the crazy one who’s wasting everybody’s time!” Ted made an unpleasant grunt as he hefted himself to his feet. “Gary, you strike me as a man that understands electronics... what electronics... is. Perhaps you could accompany me to the cargo hold, and help me give this bomb a bit of a poke with a long stick.”

Gary wasn't quite sure if this was a sarcastic attempt at humour, but in any case, inspecting the device was the best idea anyone had had since leaving the station.

"Okay," he agreed, and followed along.

"Incidentally, don't we have a journalist on board? I heard someone tried to kill her, back on the station. Did anyone think of talking to her?"

Somari Rakdee looked up with mild disinterest as the cabin doors opened and the two station personnel made their way to the rear compartment. She noticed their expressions were fixed in a highly motivated single-mindedness she hadn't seen in quite some time from a member of any civilian crew.

In fact, in recent memory, only Jason had displayed such single-mindedness, and only towards his breakfast. She chose not to remember that he had a similar single-mindedness in his dislike of her also, that far surpassed anything else.

Gary she knew only too well, and his face wearing a mask of professionalism was jarring enough to be of concern. Her own professionalism came to the fore, and it occurred to her that a little unwelcome nosiness on her part was most definitely in order.

As a journalist, nosiness was a pre-requisite, but whether the job had led to the condition or vice versa was a matter that she had never dwelled on unduly. Her husband had described her, at the divorce hearing, as a prying scandalmonger with no conception of boundaries, the kind of rubbernecking busybody that felt everybody else owed her their privacy by default.

But as it was this precise quality about her that had led to the discovery that he was sleeping with his secretary, she felt it made his

argument somewhat moot. The presiding judge, who coincidentally had been married to the secretary at the time, concurred.

She instinctively stood up, and began to edge away from her table toward the rear door where they were apparently heading. Before she'd gotten 5 paces, she found herself eye to eye with Jason, who was sitting on his own across the room. His breakfast now long since dealt with, his eyes glared up at hers fixedly from his lowered brow. She was struck by the thought that he looked like a boxer, or maybe a wrestler of some sort. Certainly someone who enjoyed hurting people professionally and engaged in related activities just for the fun of it. She was also struck by the thought that throwing his breakfast on the ground the previous day was not the absolutely best or smartest thing she'd ever done.

In the time she stopped momentarily to ponder this, the seconds she'd wasted, they were gone. She was just in time just to see the doors closing behind them.

She turned back to Jason. He held up a coffee mug, and fixed her with a look that quite strongly warned, don't you dare.

On the one hand, he looked like a boxer; or if not a boxer then someone with the propensity, aptitude and ability to end a person's life in short measure, even if only armed with his own actual arms. On the other hand, she had thrown his breakfast all over the floor, and in response, he'd saved her from an assassin. He was hardly as fearsome as someone might have imagined. But then there was that look, the one warning her not to go near him.

She ignored it.

"How was your breakfast?" she said with a smile as she sat down opposite him. This was clearly not a welcome move and he scowled at her fixedly, huffing a weary sigh.

“Please die; I don’t even care how. I’m happy to assist if you think that would help.”

That wasn’t very friendly. It was like he wasn’t even trying. “You don’t mean that. I know you’re a good person really.”

He looked sarcastically mortified. “You take that back!”

“Well, I know you’re not going to try to kill me or anything. You could have done that before and you didn’t. You saved me!” she reminded him.

“I didn’t save you,” he said, shaking his head at her. “Why won’t your thick skull allow this information to permeate through? A stupid little Grep-thing walked into me, and then pushed me and made a rude comment while I was on the way to put my fist through a toilet door out of sheer rage at someone—someone absolutely horrible—ruining my breakfast. So I hit him. That was the beginning and the end of the situation.”

“I heard he was rude to you!” she shrugged.

“Yeah, he pushed me. Just like you’re pushing me now. You see where this is going, right?” he warned.

“You know. I really am trying to apologise,” she said, with a slightly flirty smile, that was like throwing a paper dart at a tank, and expecting it to explode in a flaming ball of twisted metal. “I know that for all your masculine posturing that you’re not going to actually hurt me.”

“Go away!”

“Go where?” she laughed. “We’re on a tiny little transport vessel. There’s nowhere to go.”

Jason sighed. It was the sigh of a man who was used to punching or threatening his problems away; the sigh of a man who was now confused at how these very tactics, that had served him so

well for so long, had chosen today to fail with such resounding abandon.

“There!” He pointed to a group at the opposite side of the room where the rest of the passengers had clustered together. “Go there. Don’t come back!”

She looked them over with a smug superiority. “That doesn’t look particularly interesting.”

“You’ll never know unless you try.”

But somehow, it was interesting. It was rare enough that strangers spoke to one another on a transport, and rarer still that they grouped together to share a common discussion. “I wonder what they’re talking about?”

“Go and find out. Or, just go. The really important thing is that you don’t come back.”

“I tell you what...” she countered with a suggestive smile. “If you come over with me and give the conversation a few minutes, just to see if it’s really interesting, then I’ll leave you alone for the rest of the trip.”

“Are you eight years old?” he said, grimacing at what even she had to agree was a really quite stupid suggestion.

“I’m serious. Do this and I’ll leave you alone!” She imagined his mind weighing up the options. One option was to do as she suggested, and she was sure he was considering it. Another was to hit her hard enough for pieces of her skull to come out of her nose. She briefly pondered whether or not this was really one of her better ideas.

There it was.

Gary had no stick, and no great inclination to poke it in any case. Given all the trouble it had the potential to cause, including

their fiery deaths, it didn't seem to be all that much to look at. A little black box, a minute cubic entity without so much as a flashing light to indicate its purpose. It would have been quite boring, were it not for the whole potentially causing their fiery deaths thing.

This was, quite unsurprisingly, foremost on Gary's mind.
"Well?"

Ted stared at the bland object. "It's an interface," he said with a shrug. "It's patched into the ship's computer."

"What makes you think that?" he asked nervously, as if his close proximity to the object increased his danger in some way.

"You told me that, Gary!" Ted reminded him. "I didn't even want to get involved, even if there was coffee involved."

"Okay, okay," growled Gary. "So is it what we think it is?"

"Depends. What do we think it is? Do we think it's a little black box, a minute cubic entity without so much as a flashing light to indicate its purpose?" he asked.

Gary found the fact that Ted had vocalised his own entire through process verbatim slightly disconcerting. He stared blankly for a moment as Ted continued.

"Or do we think it's a Type 3 computer interface: a networked weapon of sabotage that has commandeered this ship, and threatens now to kill us all?"

"Both I guess."

Jason was not an entirely willing participant in the process of enjoying friendly banter, what with him not being an entirely friendly person. He stood at the fringe of the conversation, as Somari Rakdee forced her way to the very heart of it.

"Ms. Rackdee! Come and join us!" said the traveller.

She looked disappointed that it was him at the heart of it, and made no attempt to disguise it.

“We’re talking about the rumours,” said Marvin, a roll of his eyes suggesting he was yet to be convinced.

“I was explaining that all is not well at Station 401 and that what has happened there has changed the very nature of the universe, for all time. And I can prove it.” The traveller punctuated this with a theatrical wave of his hands.

At that moment, the door to the rear slid open, and Gary and Ted joined them on the crew deck. They stopped momentarily, peering into the group to see what was going on.

“And finally, Mr Doyle! Another welcome addition to our discussion.”

“It’s Martin,” said Gary. “My name’s Gary Martin.”

“Are you quite sure about that, Mr Doyle?”

Gary squinted at him suspiciously. “Yes...” he said rolling his eyes. “I’m quite sure, thank you.”

Jason was duly intrigued, but said nothing. Now was the time to observe, not intervene. He had a feeling that all would play out if he gave it the space to do just that.

“It’s Bob, isn’t it?” said Somari, her voice a challenge.

He nodded.

“What is it exactly that you can prove?”

“Something you could scarcely even imagine; something that you couldn’t even conceive of just yet. But I will show you; I will show you that it’s true.”

“He says that everything that happened on the station wasn’t actually real!” sneered Marvin. “He said it was all rumours.”

“He’s right,” said Dorrit, her little voice somehow piercing the crowd and plunging them to silence. It seemed her words carried a truth beyond her years. “The rumours exist; I could see them!”

This seemed to disturb her mother, who looked down at her daughter with concern in her eyes. “What do you mean, you could see them? That doesn’t make sense, Dorrit!”

“I could!” she said with a huff.

“Prove it then,” said Somari to the traveller. “Prove... whatever it is that you’re saying.”

“The barman!” said Bob, as if it were a self-contained statement. He waited briefly as confused expressions were exchanged.

This time it was Gary who spoke. “What about him?”

Bob stood up, and set himself to the same level as the puzzled gaze of his audience. He took a deep breath, staring at the expectant faces as if about to make some great revelation, some grand gesture that would shake their concept of reality to the very roots. He looked from one to the other and settled on Dorrit. Her mother clearly didn’t approve, and shot him with a very stern glare.

“Little girl, do you know the barman?”

Dorrit nodded.

“Well, would you tell us what he looks like?”

Dorrit frowned, and looked up at her mother. “He’s old. He’s very old. His hair is long and grey, and his skin is all wrinkly. He has angry, old, yellow eyes, and he coughs a lot. His breath is smelly, and I don’t like him. He’s a bad man!”

There was a chuckle around the room, but one of good, if slightly bemused, humour.

“No, darling,” said Mrs Hackerty. “The barman is about my age. He’s from Earth; he’s fit and healthy, has brown eyes and long

wavy blonde hair. He has tattoos, and sometimes you can see the edge of them on his neck, or on his arm if he's wearing a short-sleeved shirt. You've met him many times.

"He's actually a really nice man."

Another chuckle, but this time people were looking a little more perplexed.

"His hair's dark," said Gary, correcting her, but he seemed less than sure of himself, as if questioning his own recollection. "He's slim—very slim actually, and a fair bit older than me. He ran a chain of restaurants before he retired. Certainly no tattoos, not that I ever noticed."

"No. You're all wrong," said Somari, flashing a concerned frown. "His head is shaved. He's small, a little shorter than me, and Asian. He's quite handsome for an older man and reminded me of my own father, actually."

Marvin looked even more confused. "He's not Asian: he's black, and had a buzz cut. He looked like my brother, only... ten, maybe fifteen years older."

"He has a magnificent beard," added Ted, solemnly, in a way only he could manage.

"He didn't have a beard," said Jason, with his attention-commanding voice. "He wasn't black; he wasn't Asian; he wasn't shaved, tattooed or blonde."

"So how many barmen did you actually have on the station?" said Somari.

Everyone looked around at one another exchanging confused glances.

"Well? How many?" she persisted, looking from one confused and nervous expression to the next.

"One," said Marvin.

“Just one,” agreed Gary. “One, and five service staff in civilian clothing that helped run the bar, none of whom come close to matching any of your descriptions.”

The murmurs continued, until Bob held his hand out to quieten the crowd. “Are you ready for the big reveal then? The truth is... there was no barman.”

The crowd went quiet and he had their full, unblinking attention.

“Go on,” said Jason, his voice eventually breaking the confused silence.

Bob nodded. “The barman was a rumour. One of many. The station was filled with rumours.”

“It’s true, Mummy. I saw the rumours,” agreed Dorrit. “The barman was a rumour. He spread stories so other rumours could live in them.”

“Rumours are everywhere, but I’ve never seen such a concentration as I did on Station 401, and never with so much power. These rumours are alive; they’re sentient: living creatures that exist in a universe of pure thought and imagination. Their universe is ours too. It’s where our own minds exist; it’s where we all think together. Sometimes, it’s called the collective consciousness.

“That place is their home, where they grow and feed. They spread themselves, breed themselves by creating new stories in our minds, creating new imaginings for them to gorge on, and to live in. We imagine their world for them and...”

“I... don’t...” Marvin stammered on the words, but they tailed into a silence.

“They’ve always existed, of course, from the first intelligent creature having the first idea. They’ve been with us, sharing our world, unseen and unrecognised. Living in the stories, they’re the

ghosts; they're our religions; they're our fears, our hopes and our dreams."

"I don't think I like this," grunted Mrs Hackerty to herself, but waited, nonetheless for him to continue.

"I think something must have happened at the station. Maybe some kind of accident, a new piece of technology, something. It must have made that part of space ideal for them in some way. It attracted them like a beacon: a light in the darkness."

"A new, experimental shuttle drive, perhaps?" Gary suggested.

Bob shrugged and nodded. "Maybe."

"We tested something," said Gary, somewhat dubiously.

"Some... alien technology. It seemed to work, but there was an accident: the shuttle was destroyed while investigating a distress signal. Rumour at the time was that it was its own distress signal it was following, which is actually starting to sound disturbingly sane."

Marra grinned and stood up. "It was an alien device. I was there to stop you from using it, but I was too late. It splintered time, so that the past, present and future went into flux.

"You people broke it, and the universe broke too."

Somari seemed less convinced about all this, although her stoic hostility had taken a notable impact. "If you're right, then this would have vast ranging consequences. It would go much further than just an imaginary barman."

"Gold star for the lady!" said Bob, once again taking centre stage. "You all remember the station differently too. The longer you're there, the more the rumours will have affected you."

"It's a toilet," Jason said firmly. "Barely functional, held together with gaffer tape and optimism."

"It wasn't that bad!" said Gary, jumping to its defence. "It was basic, sure, but no different to any other Alliance 'Arse-End Of

Space' platform." As he spoke, he found himself wincing. He had made Bob's point for him.

"I've been studying them for years: for most of my life, actually," Bob continued. "They have far less effect on me. They won't affect you so much, now you understand how they work; just being aware of them will weaken their hold on your mind immensely.

"Recognising them is the key, you see.

"I've been watching you, all of you. None of you remember things exactly the same way. All of your stories are just a little bit wrong. None of your memories of anything that happened on the station are reliable."

"This is all too crazy," said Marvin, defensively, but staying put.

"Is it?" Jason frowned. "Actually it makes a lot of sense. I'm not saying I'm convinced, but what he's saying has caught my attention, and that's not an easy thing to do."

Mrs Hackerty, furiously massaging her temples said, "Well humans have more microbes than body cells 10 to 1. Only a fraction of our bodies is actually made up of us!" She looked up and added, "Could it be that half our minds are made up with thoughts and ideas that were never ours at all?"

Marvin was getting increasingly agitated. "So let me get this straight. We're literally saying that everything up to this point has been stories, half-truths and lies. I was on that station for nearly two years!"

"I was surprised to find anyone on there at all. Anyone from the Alliance, at least," said Jason. "When I went aboard, I thought it was little more than a hulk. I'd heard it was just a dead piece of junk, occupied by a small team of salvage operatives.

“I heard stories the Alliance tested equipment there, out of the way since nobody ever went there.”

Marvin, looking really quite unsettled by all this said, “I don’t believe any of this. Sentient stories, living rumours?”

Bob took his place at the heart of all this and, like a consummate showman, he said, “It’s true. If time was indeed fractured, these rumours could have travelled anywhere at any time. Maybe they found their way here when the alien device was activated and then, with time splintered, they were able to go anywhere, changing all of human reality for all time.

“They live and breed in our ideas, in the tiny gaps between what might be real and what we think we know. They are part of our minds, always were and always will be. The stories we share are living creatures, alive in the backs of our minds.”

There was a moment of silence while Bob grinned to himself with a beaming, self-satisfied smile.

“Well, I don’t know if this is the effect of the rumours losing their grip on my mind...” began Gary. “But does it strike anybody else as odd that there’s suddenly less than 20 of us on this whole vessel. I was sure there were at least 100 of us when we left port.”

“A pertinent observation, Mr Doyle,” said Bob, templing his fingers.

Gary didn’t correct him. Instead, he began shaking his head and rubbing his temples. Suddenly he stopped, and raised his eyes upwards, as if an idea had hit him at full force.

“Ted, come with me.”

Gary stalked angrily to the control room, Ted following just behind. As the doors slid shut, he stood for a moment, marshalling his errant thoughts.

“George, tell me about Station 401.”

“What?” The pilot seemed justifiably confused. “What about it?”

“Anything. What is it?”

George shared a troubled glance with his colleague, and began finally. “It’s an old observation platform. It was abandoned quite some years ago. I gather Alliance decided to use it to test shuttle propulsion systems, as it was so out of the way they figured it couldn’t do any harm, so a handful of engineers and what-not were sent to man it. That’s all I know really.”

“Well that’s not what I know. I know that station has a permanent crew of around 200 people. I know there are 11 orbiting platforms handling cargo from passing transports. I know that place is a lively hub of activity.”

“No it isn’t,” said Fez with diplomatic softness. “According to the records, it’s only staffed by around 40 people. It’s just used for equipment testing and cargo transfers now.”

Ted was shaking his head. “Funny!” he said in the least humorous voice it was possible to imagine.

“What’s all this about?” said George.

“It looks like Bob was right,” said Gary. “Rumours around Station 401 had a rather literal way of coming to life. Think of it as an anomaly that interfered with our perception of reality the whole time we were on board, and the only thing we do know for certain is that nothing we think we know about the station can be in any way relied upon.

“Which rather raises the question: how do we know that thing on board is a bomb?” He turned to Ted. “I mean, why do we even think that?”

“Fair enough question,” Ted agreed, nodding thoughtfully. “All I can tell you is that it’s a computer interface that’s linked up to the ship’s systems, and that it’s dangerous. I only know this because you told me.”

“So it might not be a bomb at all?” George’s face broke into an almost-smile.

Fez slumped into his seat and sighed loudly, his face a picture of reserved relief.

“Scan it again,” said Gary.

George didn’t need telling a second time. He tapped at the controls for a few seconds, and the results quickly flashed up on the screen.

“Is that it?” said Ted, rubbing his chin. “It’s an interface device alright, and it’s connected to the ship’s system. There’s actually nothing to suggest it’s dangerous though, is there?”

“This is interesting!” said Fez, pointing to a readout at his own controls. “A vessel was destroyed in this space lane some years back, after the engines suddenly fed back on themselves. There was a lot of talk about whether the Proxili might have been responsible. It was one of the tactics that they used against Earth ships during the war, and a tactic that had been copied by the Skelk. They used to cause them to self destruct the same way, using a seeded computer virus. The formal inquiry found no evidence of it though, they put it down to pilot error.”

Ted and Gary looked at each other. Their faces bore the same expression of knowing the answer, but finding it extremely hard to reconcile it with their essentially rational view of the galaxy. However you looked upon it, it was a galaxy of rules, of sense, of things happening the way they should, due to the interconnectivity of all things. The galaxy was not a place of fantasy; a place of living,

breeding stories that had consciousness and agency. Ideas were just that, ideas, with no structure of their own. They couldn't exist beyond the minds they were borne in.

Except that they could, and they did, and moreover, they had done for as long as intelligent creatures had existed.

"Rumours?" suggested Ted with a frown.

"Rumours trying to kill us?" Gary rubbed his temples in exasperation. "Rumours that are literally seeding ideas in our minds, hoping to drive us to killing ourselves by flying into a sun. Does this make any damn sense?"

The crowd had somewhat broken up, yet still the sheer weight of what they'd discussed bore heavily on them.

Marvin had claimed it made no sense, and discounted it with a sneer and a wave of his hand. He then sat alone, sipping a coffee, and staring at a viewing-screen out into the endless depths of space, contemplating the nature of his existence. That was something he'd not done since his first serious girlfriend left him, upon discovering he had a second girlfriend. And a third.

Corey was crushed. If this was true then it meant his quest was totally unnecessary, pointless, and based on ideas which made no sense when examined more closely by a more rational mind. This realisation showed him what he really was. He was a young man whose brother had tragically died in a shuttle accident. There was nothing more to the story than that. Perhaps there never had been?

Mrs Hackerty thought about her own life, and started at last to understand why her own work was not awarded the same prestige as that of her husband's. Perhaps she had been too harsh on him after all? More than this, though, was that for the present time, she could not look at her daughter without breaking into uncontrollable sobs.

The reason had yet to become apparent, but the floodgates had opened and showed no sign of closing.

Mr Wellington stood nearby, ready with a bucket and mop, rolling his glass eyes and shaking his plastic head.

Somari sat perched on the edge of a desk, looking up at the face of Jason, which looked back down at her with a very different expression than she might have hoped for.

“What do you think, Mr Johnson?”

He shrugged. “These things happen. We live in an incredibly complex universe. I have no trouble entertaining the thought that there could be an interplay of material and conceptual reality.”

“That might be the most intelligent sentence you’ve ever delivered,” she said, really quite impressed. “You normally just moan about breakfast and threaten people.”

“How would you know?” It wasn’t quite a smile in a positive sense, more like a frown softened slightly into a negative one. “If all this is true, then who knows what happened on that station? You may as well be meeting me for the first time.”

“Does that mean you forgive me?” she suggested, flashing him a flirtatious smile.

“No!” The frown returned. “I still get the impression that you’re a vacuous self-serving piece of human garbage, with the moral fortitude of a demented shark.”

Her smile vanished, and she scowled back at him as he walked away through the crowd.

“Mr Johnson.”

Jason winced at the sound. Not of his name, but of the synthetic voice that enunciated it.

“That was quite a discussion. Most illuminating, and unexpected. It never occurred to me that one day, you would all

readily accept that your kind is farcically insane, ill-conceived, and so shoddily delineated that a dignified extinction can be the only beacon of hope. Your species has progressed this day, so I have decided to re-evaluate you all on this basis.”

Suddenly, the pilot called out from the front. “Can I have everyone’s attention please?”

At once, everyone turned to look.

“A routine security scan has revealed a computer interface that has made a connection with the ship’s systems, and has caused... some minor inconveniences. Does anyone own such a device?”

Somari put her hand up. “I do.”

There was a general sound of tutting and accusing glances from around the lounge.

“They’re quite legal with the correct paperwork, you know. I’m a journalist; I collect information. It’s what I do.”

“Why is it connected to the ship’s computer?” asked Gary, a little more politely than the pilot had.

“Well, did you scan it?” she asked with an indignant huff, crossing her arms tightly over her chest and scowling at him angrily, as if this was anyone’s fault but hers.

“Of course!” grunted George. “We scanned the whole ship with our upgraded security scanners.”

“Well, there you go. It’s programmed to respond to a heavy security scan. It collects data in case there’s an interesting story to be told. Perhaps you should have thought twice about violating my privacy?”

“Kindly disconnect the device,” said George, quite a deal more angrily than she felt the situation warranted.

Somari tutted, and followed behind the pilot and Gary as they headed toward the cargo hold.

“So...” began Mr Wellington. “Behind us, we have a fabricated space-station, home to creatures beyond imagination, that filled your craniums with flapdoodle and tommyrot without you even noticing. Don’t your protein rich head-cabbages come with so much as a checksum error warning light? It quite boggles the mind.”

Dorrit stood by his side looking up with a pair of huge, black, innocent eyes.

“And up ahead, the Wesley. An antiquated commercial vessel that will carry us to who knows what adventures.”

“I’m going to see Aunty Winnie!” said Dorrit.

“Such adventures!” said Jason with a sarcastic tone. “And you, Wellington, are you going to clean up the corridors of the Wesley, even though your misguided efforts to bring order are hopelessly counter-productive?”

“Probably.” He shrugged, but it was a gesture he’d not really understood particularly well, and consequently Dorrit got a light but noticeable slap on the back of the head. She looked back up to him in stern disapproval.

“And what about you? What negligible distraction will you employ to assuage your apprehension of a sudden snubbing out of your mortal experience? What trifle will you engage to numb the ever-present reality of the meat-cocoon decaying around you, right up to your inevitable decomposition?”

“Mr Wellington,” he said to Mr Wellington. “I think I speak for everyone who’s ever met you when I say this...”

There was a notable pause of relished anticipation before he spoke.

Mr Wellington struggled to fully comprehend the nature of what had been said. It was phrased as a literal command, but the act it

demanded was beyond the limitations of both his own physical structure, and that of any typical biped that he was aware of. Perhaps it was rhetorical, but that just made it more confusing. A joke perhaps? A colloquialism? A quaint platitude?

Eventually, after several whole seconds of standing motionless except for a wagging finger, and an occasional rolling back of his eyes, he concluded tenuously that it was a compliment. Jason wished for there to be more Mr Wellingtons, bringing sanity, order, and much needed cleanliness to the universe. A beautiful sentiment, tarnished only by his inability to understand android anatomy. Androids simply aren't made like that!

Humans were such a hopelessly flawed bunch of creatures, that understanding their chaotic thought processes would surely be indicative of a failing on his part.

Satisfied with this observation, he went on to observe some charred scorch marks on the bulkhead.

“This ship is dirty.”