Boys from the Dwarf

by BerryliciousBumblebee

Summary

Having met as kids, Arnold Rimmer and Dave Lister quite like each other. Arnold doesn't know why Dave likes him, when no-one else ever has, but it turns out they both have something to offer in this relationship.

Notes

This is for Keegan. Thanks for showing an interest in what I have to offer.

Also, thanks to Peter, for going over it first and being very sweet about it.
Then, for absolutely no reason, I suddenly moved to Liverpool

Arnold Rimmer was fourteen years old and the happiest he had ever been.

He was now a resident of Liverpool, England. Earth.

All his life, he had heard that Earth was a dump, no longer fit for humans. Everyone there was a low life, living in utter misery, with little hope of ever improving their lot in life. Everything was dirty, polluted and miserable.

But now that he was here, he saw it for what it really was: a paradise, the only place humans should live.

His classmates asked him what Io was like. Two things they always brought up, without fail, were the mining ships and the Jupiter-rise. Arnold thought that those were just pale imitations of all that Earth had to offer.

Here, he could walk outside, actually outside, breathing the actual, natural air, with the rough, hard ground beneath his feet, the blank, grey clouds above his head, and the wet, near-constant drizzle all around him.

Here, the sky wasn't an unfeeling black; it was a comforting grey or sometimes blue.

Here, the sun wasn't a star, only slightly brighter than the rest; it was an enormous ball of heat and light.

All the people who had grown up here took it for granted that they could go outside and breathe, that the oxygen was produced by the plants around them, and that the water they drank and bathed in fell from the sky above. But to Arnold, it was still a wonder.

Every time he felt the sun on his back, he was filled with warmth and joy at this new freedom, and hope for the future, which was now a little brighter than it had been before.

He still struggled at school, but it was a little easier, now that he knew his family was 390 million miles away.

His mother.

His brothers.

His father.

He hadn't seen them in months, and it gave him a freedom he had never had before.

He was still in the Space Scouts, which was as awful as ever, but at least he hadn't made any attempts at making friends. That way, as the other scouts dragged him towards their impressibly large fire, he could tell himself that it was because he was new, and they didn't know him well enough to be nice.

On a camp where they had to find and cook their own food, he wouldn't have thought that cooking another scout was an option, but he wasn't surprised and he wasn't hurt.

He fought valiantly, of course, but he was hopelessly outnumbered. His only chance at escape was an adult showing up to help. It would look bad for them if a child was eaten on their watch, so they
would have to intervene.

Just as he was being hoisted over the flames, a voice called out from the darkness, "Oi! What the smeg are you lot doing?"

That definitely wasn't one of the space masters.

The other boys dropped him (just next to the fire, luckily) and scarpered into the dark of the night.

Arnold sat in the dirt, looking with wide eyes toward his rescuer.

He saw a boy, probably about his age (a bit shorter, but most boys were), who looked like he had not only grown up on Earth, but also never been off planet. Arnold was glad not to be cooked, but worried what would happen next. As much as he loved Earth, he was still wary of the locals.

The boy came towards him and stretched out a hand. "You okay, man?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Arnold replied, taking the hand and clambering to his feet cautiously.

"What was that all about?" the boy asked, looking into the darkness the other scouts had run into.

Arnold shrugged. "Just a bit of fun," he said.

The boy raised his eyebrows. "A bit of fun? Throwing people into a fire? I always knew you Space Scouts were mental." He was grinning, but not maliciously. "You're the new kid in Year 10, aren't you?"

Arnold was taken aback. When he made no response, the boy went on, "I'm Dave. I'm in the B class, but I've seen you around. Your name's... Rimmer, right?"

Arnold finally found his voice. "That's right. Arnold Rimmer, that's me."

"Arnold Rimmer." Dave seemed to be considering the name. "Where're you from then? London?"

"No," Arnold said, "I'm from Io, actually."

"Whoa! Off-planet! You've got to tell me what that's like. Come on," Dave said, clapping Arnold a little too hard on the back. "Let's go get a curry."

Arnold hesitated. "I'm supposed to be camping out here," he said, grimacing.

Dave raised his eyebrows again. "Listen, mate, your... companions have already tried to chuck you in a campfire. I don't think you should really be out here."

"I could get into trouble."

"Exactly. And I won't be there to help you out this time." That hadn't been the sort of trouble Arnold was referring to, but Dave went on before he could say so. "People who try to kill you for a laugh are the sort of people you really ought to cut out of your life. Come on, let's get a curry. I'm buying."

Arnold wasn't much of a curry fan, but he couldn't deny that Dave had a point. Perhaps people who tried to eat him weren't actually the right sort.

"All right," he said, "I'll tell you about Io, but it's really not all that exciting."
"I've only left Liverpool once, and that was to visit Southport," Dave said as he began to walk. "Io's got to be more exciting than that."

Arnold chuckled as he began to talk.

He never thought to ask what Dave had been doing in the woods

on his own

at night.

Arnold had taught himself not to make friends. Whenever he'd tried in the past, it had ended up going badly.

If he had been in the habit of making friends, he most certainly would not have chosen to befriend Dave.

Dave was the sort of person one shouldn't like. He was slobby, he had no sense of discipline, he smelled. He was so disorganised, Arnold wondered how he managed to get to school every day, even if he never seemed to have textbooks, paper or anything to write with.

And yet, people like him. Even Arnold, who tried not to like people (especially people like Dave) couldn't help it.

Arnold, on the other hand, was the sort of person who should be likeable. He was disciplined, he was organised, he was dedicated to his schooling, he always had a pen. Yet somehow the result was a total smeghead despised by everyone.

Except Dave.

For some inexplicable reason, Dave had chosen to befriend him. Arnold didn't understand why, but he wasn't about to ask. He was just grateful to have someone he could spend time with.

Someone whom he could envy, despite his being the wrong sort of person. He envied how well Dave got on with people. He envied how laid-back and charming he was. He even envied his hobbies, because there were a few things Dave was truly passionate about. Zero-Gravity Football, for one. Arnold had never had much interest in it, but when Dave talked about his favourite player, Jim Bexley Speed, he couldn't help but feel some of that love, too.

And Dave was polite enough to listen to him talking about history, and he even played Risk with him once or twice. Of course, Arnold didn't enjoy those things as much as Dave loved Zero-G, or Rasta Billy Skank, or his guitar, or curries. But Dave made the effort to share his interests.

Maybe that was why everyone liked him.

"How could you have failed? I mean... it's not as if I did super well, but I didn't even study. You've been worrying about this test for weeks."

"I don't know," Arnold said, burying his head in his hands. "This always happens. I try to study, but I get so stressed that, by the time I write, I've forgotten everything. I don't even know if I actually studied; I can't remember..."
Dave was staring at him with an expression that suggested he had never been stressed enough to study at all.

"Well, we've got biology next week. Do you want me to help you study for that?" he asked tentatively.

Arnold stared at him for a long ten seconds. "Do you usually get good marks in biology?" he said finally.

Dave leaned back, crossing his arms. "Well," he began, eyebrows raised, "I might if I studied beforehand."

Arnold was dubious, but he reasoned that he was already doing terribly, and it was worth a try.

They didn't exactly get off to a good start. They'd barely started, and Arnold already felt like giving up. "I don't understand any of it," he confessed.

Dave was trying not to let his perplexity show. "Okay." He decided on a different starting point. "So, you know how osmosis works?"

Arnold grimaced and shook his head apologetically.

Dave nodded slowly. "Well, you're not going to get any of this if you don't know how osmosis works, so we'll go over that first."

Arnold was torn between being thankful for Dave's helpfulness and being embarrassed that he needed it. Thankfulness won out in the end, when he understood the concepts well enough to actually remember them.

"Jesus," Dave said, shaking his head. "I was really jealous of you, living on Io, seeing Jupiter, flying through space. But your school there must have been smegging terrible."

Arnold grinned.

With Dave's help, biology made more sense than it ever had before, but Arnold still panicked on the day and couldn't remember anything he'd written.

Their biology teacher turned out to be incredibly efficient and handed their tests back only two days after they'd written them. Not expecting them so soon, Arnold hadn't had the chance to get worried again, but now his heart began to thump in his chest as his intestines twisted themselves into knots.

"So," Dave said, sidling up to him as they left the lab and headed home for the day. "How'd you do, AJ?"

Arnold smiled sheepishly. "I did really well," he admitted, showing Dave his test paper: 36/50. "A lot better than I was expecting, anyway. How 'bout you?"

"41," Dave said. "Out of 50."

"Well done!" Arnold was so pleased with his own mark, he wasn't even resentful that Dave had beaten him.

"You know," Dave sighed, "I always thought, there's not point in getting good marks. I mean, why put in all that effort if it doesn't make a difference. But now that I've got a good mark... it feels
good."

"It does, doesn't it?" Arnold couldn't stop himself from laughing as they exited the school gate.

Dave laughed, too. "I might even study for the next one as well. Care to join me?"

Arnold stared at Dave silently, until he realised that he was staring. "Yes," he said quickly, looking ahead again. "Yes, I'd love to. I mean, I'd really like to study with you again."
To Ganymede and Titan

David Lister was eighteen years old, and he couldn't believe where his life had taken him.

He stared at the room he would be living in for the next three years. It was bigger than any room he'd ever slept in, and it had a virtual fish tank on the wall.

He was tempted to stretch out on one of the bunks, but he decided it would be better to wait for his bunkmate.

In the meantime, he gazed out the window, across Io and into space. He had been able to see Jupiter before he'd embarked. He was trying to imagine how much more he'd see before he ended up back here, when he heard the door slide open.

He heard a voice calling his name and spun around.

"No!" he cried out joyously, running the short distance towards Arnold. "AJ, mate, what're you doing here?"

"I think we're bunkmates, Davey Boy."

Dave chuckled in disbelief. After getting their O Levels, they had fallen out of touch. It had only been a little over two years, but evidently a lot had happened in that time, for both of them. They spent a minute catching up, before Dave remembered where they were.

"Your family still live here, don't they?" he asked. Arnold nodded in response, a small smile playing across his features.

"Well, my parents do," he amended. "My brothers are all off... probably saving the universe."

"So..." Dave was hesitant to continue. "Did you go see your parents, while you were back?"

Arnold actually chuckled. "I stayed with them for three days. I think they're proud of me, but... that doesn't really matter to me anymore."

Dave wasn't sure if that last bit was entirely true, but he couldn't deny that Arnold seemed genuinely content. When they'd first gotten to know each other, just the word "family" had been enough to reduce him to a gibbering wreck. Dave was amazed that now, despite having supposedly spent a few days with them, Arnold was still laughing and joking.

"So, which bunk d'you want?" Arnold asked, gesturing towards the two recesses opposite the door. Dave examined them and shrugged.

"I think the bottom bunk's bigger..." he offered.

"Well, then you should have it," Arnold responded, beginning to climb up to the top.

"No, you're taller, you take it, AJ."

Arnold climbed back down. "That's Lieutenant (junior grade) Rimmer to you," he said with a smirk.

Dave laughed. "All right, Lieutenant (junior grade)," he chuckled, doing a laughable impression of a salute.
Dave lay in the top bunk (the small bunk, he had dubbed it to himself), watching the digital fish and ruminating on what his life had become.

"Hey, Arn?" he said, hoping his bunkmate wasn't asleep yet.

"Yeah?" Thankfully, he didn't sound like he'd been asleep.

"Thanks for motivating me, man. Back when we first met." This felt more awkward than he had imagined. "I wouldn't have been able to get here without you." He cringed at himself and decided it would be best to stop there.

After some silence, Arnold finally replied. "You could have done it on your own. You're smart. You just needed to try to do well."

"You're smart, too, Arn. You just had people telling you you weren't. And I'd never have tried to do well if you

if you hadn't been my friend."

The silence stretched out so long, Dave thought that Arnold must have fallen asleep. But then Arnold answered:

"Thanks, Dave.

If you hadn't been my friend,

I'd never have had a friend."

Dave was glad that they couldn't see each other's faces.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!