In a Galaxy Far, Far AwRy
The Story So Far: Pincushion

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THE STORY SO FAR...

Issue 1: ***Serial Fiction Sideshow***, available in the hearts of one and all.

Issue 2: ***Home Sweet Home Invasion***, available in the hearts of one and all.

Issue 3: ***Technophobia***, available in the h—you're starting to see a pattern here, aren't you?

Issue 4: ***Armageddon Trigger Finger***, available in…hey… your heart. And one and all's too.

Issue 5: ***The Genetic Equation***, available blah blah blah.

Issue 6: ***Power Tool***, not available. Just kidding. Totally available.

Issue 7: ***The Lesser of Two Egos***, coming sometime.

Issue 0: ***The Story So Far***, you know the drill.

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High school love notes to no one in particular

PINCUSHION IN "THAT ONE THAT PINCUSHION IS IN"

August 17, 9095. 3:23 p.m. (Galactic Standard Time).

Speed limit was two hundred knots.

Officer Abioye Kofi Iwu stood on the side of the canyon road at the pit of this gorge. He stared down at his radar gun and sneered at the palm-sized transport controller hidden in his spike-riddled hand. Whenever a driver howled by in a civilian transport, civ-tran for short, at a blistering speed, it whipped hot wind past you and made your eyes feel as if they smeared across your face.

Divorced from society in this barren road between ghost towns, *every* civ-tran sped by. Nobody lingered in this blazing, wasted landscape. It was like an awkward Thanksgiving dinner here: you had to make an appearance, but you made it as quick as possible. And, the whole time, the situation would crawl under your skin until crazy Uncle Gómez went to town on the turkey by hacking it to junk. In this case, Uncle Gómez was the unobstructed sun hacking down at any driver stupid enough to keep his or her retractable roof peeled back. Uncle Gómez had dragon's breath. A bizarre comparison drawn from Abioye's childhood? Yes. Yes, it was.

And what magical wizard assigned a speed limit to a desert road?

Another civ-tran stormed past. Two hundred and thirteen. Abioye didn't bother activating the speed-trap cage for anything under two thirty, maybe two forty. No point in filing the datawork for lower speeds. A waste of expenses. So he didn't give chase, especially since he'd have to rush to his law-tran, and he'd pulled his groin last week. Reason number three to avoid tennis. Numbers one and two had to do with natural talent and coordination. He refused to elaborate without a steak dinner as bribery.

Abioye lived in Mission Beach. Yes, a placed called Mission Beach included a desert road for some reason. Who knew what went through the heads of these naming geniuses? Abioye worked for the Mission Beach PD. His nickname there was Pincushion on account of the protrusions of thorny bone that jutted from his skin in no pattern. A festivity of spikes riddling his skin. His own special birth alteration. His hypermutation. The other cops used him as the ring toss target at children's charity events, but the kids preferred to play horseshoes with him. Kids couldn't aim. Several EMTs agreed.

Traffic duty made Pincushion's mind wander. What if a band of ninjas found and attacked him out here? He'd destroy them, of course—*suavely*—with nothing more than bare hands and piano wire, because fighting ninjas was cooler with piano wire than with just bare hands. And was a band of ninjas called a band? Did they arm themselves with guitars and drum sticks?

Maybe they were a platoon. A pod? Ooh, a *murder* of ninjas. Had Jackie Chan been a ninja? Possibly.

Two hundred and three.

Under his blue uniform, he roasted. Sunny Uncle Gómez was really pouring the passionate heat down today. Pincushion wiped sweat as thick as a snail's track from his brow. He'd grown careful about letting the bones cut his skin. He'd also grown calluses.

Pincushion's fellow officers snickered at his hypermutation, but it was all playful. Except Jabronsky. He was serious. And cruel. But he thought smallpox was still a thing and had an immobilizing fear of sinks. The rest of the brothers and sisters at the PD teased out of love, like a best friend elbowing you for having thrown up because your crush finally said hi. Pincushion would know. But he wouldn't regale anyone with that high school story, steak dinner or not.

Two hundred and eight.

Or the story where he visited the gynecologist on a precinct-wide mandated checkup.

One hundred and ninety-six.

Because the new guy at the PD thought Abioye was a woman's name.

Two hundred even.

Pincushion stared up at Uncle Gómez through his police-issue aviators, and even through the shades, he was forced to squint at the glaring white circle. Someone should turn the sun down. Wasn't there a haunt control command for that? Haunt

controls were voice-activated software that automated everything so perfectly they made things seem haunted. So why not automate the sun? *Control, acknowledge. Fix Uncle Gómez. He's too loud, and his breath stinks.*

Pincushion should have been a prison guard.

One hundred and forty. The driver must have been two hundred years old and needed to stand to see over the dashboard.

Or a prison warden. Crock, compared with out here, Pincushion would rather be a *prisoner*. And, yeah, Jackie Chan had definitely been a ninja. If not, he'd help Pincushion destroy that murder of ninjas. He seemed like a cool brother. And why, whenever Pincushion baked blueberry muffins, did the berries make the muffins soggy? So much for potlucks at the precinct.

He dropped his hands to his sides when the next civ-tran roared by.

Or been a police office—Wait, he *was* a police officer. He looked up at hot white Uncle Gómez. Gómez was doing a number on him. What was the high today, eight thousand degrees? Gómez was turning Pincushion's cocoa skin into melted chocolate. He needed to hide inside a screen bubble to block the heat and light. Or under a palm tree. With a cold drink.

Two hundred and twenty-eight. Almost. Maybe a foray of ninjas? He should bake with dried blueberries. Ooh, dried berries instead of piano wire against the foray of ninjas.

Pincushion lifted his aviators, dug an eyelash out of his eye, flicked it aside. He wiped the oily snail trail from his

forehead again. Felt more moist beads trundle down the seat of his pants. Just great. Disgusting butt sweat. Butt sweat was the last boundary between uncomfortable perspiration and stinking body odor. And he had a charity ring toss to both attend and be today. This one to support sufferers of hyperhidrosis.

Two hundred and sixty-eight. A school of ninjas? Maybe—

Two hundred and sixty-eight! Pincushion jolted. He fumbled his transport controller into the sand—crock, crock, crock—skidded the dusty nine feet to his law-tran. His groin hated him. He jabbed a hand through the open window of his cruiser and punched the speed-cage activator. A hum sang through the canyon gorge, off-tune to anyone listening. An orange wire cage spat from the ground, purely electromagnetic. It shut down the speeding Derelict-brand civ-tran in a controlled deceleration until the red vehicle was immobile. A smile peeked on Pincushion's lips. He had to suppress it. The driver could bring up a grievance if he saw that Pincushion found this amusing.

Okay. Game face. Also, he had to find his transport controller. On it was his grocery list. Should have shopped on the way to work: he could have fried his eggs on the hood of his law-tran or maybe his overheated forehead thanks to Uncle Gómez, that blinding orb of torture.

Another civ-tran skidded by, but the cage wasn't attuned to it. The cage's hum only pitched up for a split second. Pincushion didn't care anymore. He had his reprieve from boredom thanks to this speedster in the Derelict. The Derelict's

latent-technology window warbled out of existence. L-tech objects were stored in computer memory, hidden in a disguise of bits and bytes until summoned for use, much like this tinted l-tech window. And with the l-window gone, an arm appeared out of the opening, hanging off the sill.

Pincushion found his transport controller. He slid a datasheet for notetaking out of his pocket and fingered the activation icon. The datasheet erased its creases and wrinkles, solidifying and coloring white. Time for action. "Sir, do you know why I stopped you?" He looked up from his datasheet

The first thing he noticed was the driver's gender. "Or ma'am." This was gonna show up in his review, wasn't it?

Chocolate-brown complexion like Pincushion's, slender cheeks, long hair that reached down her back, red and sleeveless T-shirt, light blue jeans, thin sunglasses. And those fingers had press-on nails. Why slender cheeks? Pincushion found slender cheeks alluring. Ugh. Finally met an attractive woman, and he was about to ticket her.

The second thing Pincushion noticed was the charged Autoling F20 pistol on her lap.

"Ma'am?" Pincushion's eyes remained on the Autoling. That was military issue. How'd she get it? His heart picked up the beat. Was that because of the gun or that he met a girl he found attractive? And that he'd soon ticket? The dating scene was messed up.

"My, you have a deep voice," this sir-who-was-a-ma'am said.

"Like this gorge." Pincushion tried to match this sister's laissez-faire attitude.

"How are you, officer?" The woman let a conspiratorial smile creep across her lips. Pincushion caught a glimpse of her teeth: snow white except for a single gold-capped molar that shimmered like polished sunlight. The molar was a sign, like a tattoo: she was a higher-up in a criminal clan. It reflected Uncle Gómez right at Pincushion. Almost as much an accent as that weapon. The dating scene was *really* messed up.

"I'm gonna have to ask that you exit your vehicle, cutie. I mean, ma'am. Cutie ma'am." *Smooth, dude.* Pincushion wanted to step back, but presence was everything. On the other hand, so was that pistol. Also on the other hand, so was not calling your pullover a cutie. The sweat moistening his butt crack insisted that heat was everything.

His nerves felt electric, as if he'd rolled over thumbtacks. Pulled someone over for speeding, who turned out to be an important member of a criminal organization with a military-issue Autoling pistol cradled in her lap. He should have drawn his own weapon, but he didn't want this to escalate. He awaited the speeder's response. She smacked her lips quietly, crimson lipstick against dark skin working the words she considered and considered again. Was she measuring her words with an electron microscope? "I don't think I'll be exiting, officer."

Forget that for now. If this woman brandished a pistol, what did she carry in the trunk? Trunk searches were allowable at the officer's discretion. Pincushion's transport controller had

a few icons sitting on the display.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have a look at your trunk." *Please take that literally.* Pincushion approached the trunk and hit one of the icons. The trunk clacked open, rose aggressively, swatted him in the forehead. Graceful.

"You don't want to look back there, officer," the speeder said. Oh, yes, he did.

Oh, no, he didn't. Guns. Not just guns, but high-caliber, weapons-grade blasters, all wrapped under a heavy plastic tarp with a name on it: Yolanda Grestlix. Pincushion had heard of Yolanda Grestlix. She ran a crime cartel involved in a lot of high-end activity, but why did she need *army*-issue weapons, and how could Pincushion bake muffins without the blueber—Not a good time. And where was that pod/school/murder of ninjas? He could use the backup!

Pincushion rushed around to the driver's side door. "Ma'am, I'll have to insist you exit your vehicle with your hands up. You're holding a military-issue gun and you've got more than enough firepower in that trunk to declare your own war. Out. Now." *Before I wet my pants.* "Before I wet my pants." *That wasn't supposed to be spoken.* "That wasn't supposed to be spoken." *I'm gonna shut up now.* "I'm go—" *I'm an idiot.* "Step out, cutie." *I'm still an idiot.*

"Let's try something different." The woman wrapped a hand around the butt of the Autoling—

Pincushion hurdled back and drew his weapon. Wasn't as high a caliber as the woman's pistol, but he'd bet he was a

quicker shot. He'd heard stories about pullovers like this, just didn't think they were true. Well, they were true *now*. Crock. *And couldn't Uncle Gómez turn it down a bit?*

"Out! With hands up!" Pincushion sniffled in the heat. A drop of sweat interfered with his vision, so his hand flew up and swept it away. He needed to call this in on the pea-sized communication device rooted in his ear. His gabber. "Gabber, acknowle—" The barrel of the woman's pistol clicked in his direction, so much larger than life he could crawl inside it. This sister hadn't even exited her civ-tran.

"Hmph," she said. Was that a laugh? Mirthless. "I've heard of you, officer." The woman's lacquered fingernails flexed along the butt of the Autoling, and one crawled its way into the trigger guard. "The police force around here has a few cops with hypermutations, but you stand out because you puncture all their chairs. Makes me wonder what kind of bed you own. A rock slab?"

Astoundingly close to the truth.

"How do you even hug?"

Astoundingly close.

"Officer Pincushion, right?"

Pincushion felt nervousness in the top of his throat. "Ma'am, I'm not gonna ask you—"

Blam!—a shot—a woman's snicker—a light-bullet kicked up sand at Pincushion's feet—inches from his toes—a report crackled away for miles—chased disturbed birds from their hangout spot on a twiggy tree. The blackened branches rustled,

skeletal arms scrabbling at hot wind.

Pincushion fired back—but produced only an impotent *click-click*. He checked his gun. The display was dead. The gun was off! Crock, what the crocking crock? His crocking pulse hammered in his crocking ears. Why the crock was his crocking gun off? He'd charged it this crocking morning before his crocking shift! He had the vocabulary of an angry rap star, crock!

Another light-bullet splashed dirt over his other foot. The gunshot echoed away. When it finally banged its last echo, the woman chittered. "Probably wondering what's up with your gun, Officer Pincushion."

Crocking right, I'm wondering what's up with my gun! "Crocking right, I—" *I'm still an idiot!*

"I have an inhibitor here in my car," she said. A crocking *what*? "It's new. Your gun operates on a computer, same as everything else. And, just like you shut down my civ-tran, I flicked a switch and shut down your gun." Her laugh came back, louder and more forced, like a Doberman's sharp barks. "Yeah. I know it's illegal." She aimed her pistol higher and a bullet pecked a chunk out of a boulder behind Pincushion. Pincushion dodged aside. "Don't move, officer, unless you want me to accidentally blow off the one spike that matters." She squinted through her pistol's sights.

That spike mattered a lot! It was like his best friend! "Nobody touches that spike!" That sounded wrong. "Gabber, acknowledge. Report code ten ninety-six. Tell them the offender is involved with Yola…Yo…Yola—"

"Yolanda Grestlix?"

"I appreciate the assist." Pincushion hoped backup brought a foray of ninjas. Pincushion had settled on foray. *Why did that matter right now?*

The woman bit her lip. "Tsk, tsk. Our date was too quick. Officer Pincushion, we'll have to finish this before they arrive. Problem with this road is your friends are probably six or seven minutes out." She shrugged. "Still, I should give myself a good head start. I have nasty cargo in the back and powerful people are"—she fired again, and this time the light-bullet came so dangerously close to Pincushion's best friend that it sliced his uniform's leg and scratched the tickling sweat off his skin—"expecting it." Wait, had she said this was a date?

Vultures were gathering.

"Dance for me, officer."

"That isn't a good idea. I pulled my groin the other—"

She fired at Pincushion's left foot—right foot—left foot—right foot—left kneecap—

A hit! Bone and cartilage separated from skin and tissue. Structure became liquid. Pincushion's knee disintegrated. He toppled backward, and his lower leg tumbled forward, still attached but barely. The spikes embellishing his back gouged the dirt carpet. He gasped, congealed spit clogging his throat so he couldn't draw air fast enough. He stared up at that blinding sun, that scorching white Uncle Gómez, his sunglasses having flung off somewhere.

Sirens bore weight in the air, law-trans in the distance.

"Crock, way too quick. I have to run. No time to finish you off," Pincushion heard this woman say, his heart still drumming in his earlobes. She fired up her civ-tran—had she shut down the speed cage, too?—and a slam-on-the-gas whir whined away.

Pincushion blinked, gasped to clear his mouth of the drenching saliva and sweat. The sirens screamed closer, sounded like complaining infants. Blood ruined the dirt. The light-bullet scratched his bone like it had a bone to pick with him—*ahahahaha*, bone to pick—nnrrrrrrrrrggghh! Horrible joke. Bad timing.

The sirens reached him three minutes later. Officer Rugalla gabbered in for an eleven forty-one, *stat*. Another seven minutes elapsed until that medical transport showed up. Another forty minutes until the EMTs contained the mess in his knee and raced him to the hospital. Another hour and a half until he regained enough semblance of thought to wonder why Grestlix needed those weapons. Another three hours for the docs to fit him with a metal brace to substitute as a knee. Another six hours until he realized this torment would excavate into his psyche. Another two months until the sarge even allowed him back on duty. Another three months until he realized this incident would wreak insomnia on his fragile mind. Another six years before he figured out how to properly make blueberry muffins. Rather, Chef Pierre St-Croix did. Maybe Chef St-Croix could fix his knee.

Want more? Course you do. These stories are like popcorn: what good is one handful?

Good thing there *is* more.

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