

#3
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IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY

Issue 3: Technophobia

Liam Gibbs



When Station One goes berserk, can the Good Guys survive long enough to cash in on their homeowner's insurance?

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In a Galaxy Far, Far AwRy
Book 3: Technophobia

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THE STORY SO FAR...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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CHAPTER ONE

SQUEEZING WATER FROM A STONE

November 3, 9109, 7:13 a.m. (Galactic Standard Time).

“You’re dead,” Legion heard Schizophrenic’s left head, Lefty, say. “All of you. I’m not afraid of you slobber punks. Heh. My idiot ‘friends’ are going to slaughter every one of you.”

Legion’s antennae twisted to the staticky sound of the prisoner, the two-headed Schizophrenic, rapping on the transparent shield screen that divided him from the three Good Guys. The screen made his voice echo in the cell. Pertinent data on him scrawled across the screen, consistently switching through a variety of subjects: vital signs, rap sheet, kinesics, body composition, sleep schedule, and favorite breed of mule.

“I don’t cares, just gimme the skinny!” Power Plant vaulted from his stool and slammed an open palm into the shield screen. He stumbled cheek-first with uncontrolled momentum, and blue spiders of electricity crackled around the screen where he made contact. And what had Lefty said? Everything had gotten mixed in with “idiot friends.”

Power Plant staggered back, the scent of burned fabric wafting from his sleeve and the bandage around his healing shoulder blade. “Ow. That thing taste like an ogre’s squeegee.”

However an ogre's squeegee tasted, Legion wanted never to know.

“Oh, for—” Franchise, the other half of the two-man interrogation crew that produced the same results as a mako shark delivering a sermon, grabbed Power Plant's shoulder and peeled him back. “Smashing into a shield screen is not how you question a prisoner. Every prisoner has an in, and you have to figure out what that in is. Crock, why am I telling you? You still have trouble with the microwave.”

“Hey, I can figures out the microwave plenny fine. Cook, kitchen timer, power level. It ain't hard to makes cereal, ya know.”

At the Good Guys' space station, Station One, these three Good Guys and their prisoner occupied the small cellblock. Steel walls divided the holding cells from one another. Humming shield screens separated those cells from the main area, prisoners from their captors. Yes, only three holding cells. Evidently, the Good Guys' parent organization, Intergalactic Protection, followed the creed “Shoot first and ask questions later.” That still sounded better than Kamikaze's creed: “Shoot ourselves first and what was the rest?”

Legion tapped MUTE on a nearby console so the shield screen wouldn't transmit sound to Schizophrenic. “Guys, please calm down and take this interrogation seriously.” He felt like slapping them both. A few times. “This is our one opportunity to get the drop on Lowensland and the Bad Guys at their station. Any information we can squeeze out of Schizophrenic

might make the difference between a win and a loss.” He unmuted the screen.

They *needed* inside information on Lowensland’s operations. That concern dug into Legion’s heart like a jackhammer. Yesterday, he had attempted to coax even the smallest secret from Schizophrenic’s steel-trap heads, but he’d had no luck: Lefty resisted cooperation to the highest degree, and Righty said he would talk only for a Popsicle. The one time the Good Guys had run out of Popsicles.

So call it a final stab, but Power Plant and Franchise now interrogated Schizophrenic simply because they had asked to do so. It had sounded like a harmless idea. After all, the continued survival of the galaxy might depend on Schizophrenic’s knowledge. Now, more and more, Legion doubted the effectiveness of this interrogation, especially when he considered Power Plant’s questions: What was the color of Schizophrenic’s blood? And could he tell them how to iron the wrinkles out of old people’s bellybuttons? These marked the apex of penetrating inquiries from Power Plant and Franchise, interrogation team extraordinaire.

“I’m telling you. Once they get here, you’re *dead*.” Lefty’s tongue slithered out between his teeth.

Wait, did he use the word *dead*? Legion couldn’t hear with Power Plant blaring over Lefty, “Jakey, ask him where’s Master Asinine buys his pajamas. Ya think his blood’s like acid stuff, like blood of a alien space invasioner? Can it melts through steel?”

“Yeah, sure it can. Why not?” Lefty spat a laugh at Legion. “Do you actually think these two pissing bung suckers have enough brains to question me?”

Legion shrugged halfheartedly. “It was almost worth a shot.”

Genuine heroes such as Colonel Patton—or, since his promotion to Intergalactic Protection’s Good Guy supervisor, *Brigadier General* Patton—would have interrogated this prisoner into free-flowing tears in minutes. By now, the Good Guys would have been swimming in information on Lowensland, the pajama-buying Master Asinine in question. Power Plant and Franchise had, by contrast, taken twenty minutes to attempt extracting anything, and that extraction had come as a demand that screamed, “Gimme the skinny!” These two questioned prisoners with the success of a deaf man learning French from an audiochip.

At their hijinks, Schizophrenic’s heads both sneered (Lefty) and clapped giddily (Righty). Lefty almost snickered—almost, as if he would display even a scrap of joy. Righty chirped for more, clearly still high from the sugar in the chocolate éclair he had engulfed. Or from the previous nine. In many ways, he resembled Power Plant. Which reminded Legion to ask him, “Do you need to potty before you wet the prisoner bed? Again?”

A chill swept past Legion. He preferred heat, but a chilly cellblock usually unsettled prisoners, helped to pry out that crucial, survival-dependent information. Same with that

unintentional musty odor in the room. Neither of these unsettled Schizophrenic. Righty had even asked to see polar bears bouncing on beach balls. This was not a circus.

“Oh! Oh! Oh, oh! Oh!” Power Plant’s arm bolted up with a hand flapping from his skinny wrist. He dropped it. “Lesse if he balance a stack o’ chairs on his snout. Or a stack o’ missiles!” Legion groaned at the suggestion. Maybe this *was* a circus

Lefty scowled at Power Plant. “They’re on their way right now. First they’ll kill you. Then they’ll kill whichever of your parents let you live.”

“Both, but neithers was very good at it.”

Legion leaned forward. “Did you just say Power Plant’s parents are on their way?”

Franchise turned from Schizophrenic, cracking his knuckles. He wore a salesman’s smile. “Legion, you can’t question a prisoner like that. You have to work your way up to the real questions. Schmooze. Ask him how his day went. You know: be slick, be smooth.” He smiled at Schizophrenic and leaned on a wall with an elbow, his palm against his temple. “You having a good day so far? You all right? Want the lights dimmed? Some quiet music? A shoulder to cry on? Hey, I’m here for you.” He eased a hand onto the shield screen. The screen shocked him in response, so he yanked his hand away. Legion never, ever, ever wanted to see him do that act again.

The odor of Power Plant’s sizzled impact shirt still singed the air like moldy cotton. “I thinks he talk if he maybe eat some more brains,” he said.

“I’d keep that in mind if he were part of the living dead.” Legion checked his watch. He had to meet those investors soon.

Though Legion had taken up Intergalactic Protection’s offer to extend their medical plan to the Good Guys, he had declined IP’s umbrella funding plan that would have made Letchtech the Good Guys’ main sponsor. Wanting their dangerous latent technology far away from this space station, he instead had opted for the investors he would soon meet. Neither Letchtech nor its computer-stored l-tech belonged on this station, aside from l-clothes, which some Good Guys needed to use their inborn hyperabilities. L-tech, whether from Letchtech or any other manufacturer, was dangerous garbage, and Legion couldn’t understand how it had become mainstream technology. Letchtech responded to Legion’s refusal by pressuring IP into withdrawing offensive support from the Good Guys after the Bad Guys’ space station was located. Without IP’s help, the Good Guys couldn’t attack the Bad Guys, who sat exposed. An assault now would be perfect, though, since the Good Guys’ attack on Lowensland’s new headquarters a few days ago had left him shorthanded on generics, the no-name henchmen he employed.

Station One had a haunt control, voice-recognition software that enacted a user’s verbal commands—so named because it made the location in which it was installed seem haunted. So when Legion had realized he’d be late to meet the visiting investors, he told the haunt control to summon the closest available Good Guy to greet them in the station’s

reception lobby. The haunt control had chosen Kamikaze, their suicidal madman and least likely ambassador. Because he could autoresurrect, Kamikaze loved death and pain. He didn't understand that others didn't have his hyperability, so he strung everyone else along in his thrill seeking. Legion should have thought before commanding the haunt control to pick *any* Good Guy.

“Guys, not to rush your marginally effective method of questioning, but we have investors arriving right now, and I need to greet them, get their money, get rid of them, and get back here so I can wheedle anything—*anything*—out of Schizophrenic. And, Power Plant, did IP seriously schedule a parents' day on Station One?”

Power Plant jerked his head at Legion. “Why does we needs investors, anyway?”

Lefty snorted. “To hire better interrogators than you two idiot-level morons with your second-grade grammar.” He had grown mouthier since Legion had confiscated his toothpicks.

“Unless things have changed since you asked me that exact question all of five minutes ago, it's because our funds are nonexistent right now,” Legion said. “And the fact that you two are our prisoner interrogators is testimony to our need for more funds. Plus, what he said except a lot nicer. Anyway, finding an investor is better than finding a sponsor. No bothersome ads every ten seconds or logos to sew onto our media outfits. And, Power Plant, stop tapping the shield screen. Schizophrenic isn't a fish.”

Power Plant still tapped. “Wouldja maybe thinks drawing him a pictures of a robot on fire might help?”

This was a test. Alaphus, in all His godly wisdom, was testing Legion. To build his character. And on this test, Legion expected an F. “No, drawing him a robot on fire won’t help. Or the thundermammal on fire you mentioned or, my least favorite, the explosion on fire. But if you *do* draw one, our prisoner would have something to pin to the wall of his cell. Or to your neck.”

He placed an elbow on the stony wall and rubbed his forehead. The wad in his pocket folded like a knuckle against his left buttock. The sleep-inducing knockout glove he had confiscated from Schizophrenic. He had never seen their prisoner use the glove. He assumed Lefty preferred beating adversaries into paste over putting them to sleep. Righty probably preferred dressing them in troll costumes.

Franchise began pacing, his expression telling Legion he was pretending to think. He even curled a hand around his chin. Good show. “Okay, we have a two-headed prisoner, and we can’t even pop out the first juicy secret. He’s just like our candy machine. And, just like with the candy machine, this calls for the bad Good Guy, worse Good Guy routine.”

Legion stood straight. “Is that why our candy machine is broken?”

“Quit holding out on us, or we’ll send you back to your cave without supper, you doubleheader!” With a face like blood on fire (Power Plant’s obsession was affecting Legion), Franchise whirled around and glared at Schizophrenic. “We

have ways of making you talk, and we're close to figuring out what those ways are."

Schizophrenic sprang at the shield screen and slammed both palms against it. It snapped at him, but he didn't react. "For the sixtieth crocking time, I don't live in a cave!"

Power Plant slashed a finger at him. "So ya admits to livin' in a jungle outhouse guarded by jackrabbit-elephants mush-ups. Answer now or face a fistfuls o' hurled Legion!" He grabbed Legion by the collar.

"Hey!" Legion wrestled free.

"Will you chumps listen? My buddies are coming for me." Lefty spoke as calmly as if ordering dinner. The kinesics readout on the shield screen agreed: his body language said he felt a high level of comfortability. "We don't take kindly to one of our own as a prisoner of war—especially not me, our head of security. When Asinine shows up, he's going to kill the most diabolical of you first. That means you two, and I'll laugh and point you out so he knows whose eye sockets to grind their heels into. People think he's an idiot. He is. But that collection of lost marbles at least has the sense to rescue one of his own. He doesn't have to be a genius."

"I—AM—A—GENIUS!"

At the railing of a third-story balcony, Master Asinine overlooked the crowd of generics in the parking lot that sat thirty feet below with lampposts spotlighting it so no one stole any hubcaps off the transports. Asinine had summoned the

crowd to announce his newest invention, one that would commence the Good Guys' final undoing. He loved undoing things. His bootlaces especially. They presented an exciting challenge.

To be continued...

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Communicate via sign language. It's fun to learn and a helpful skill to have in a pinch. Plus if you're not watching, you could poke someone's eye out.

No one told...

Master Asinine has a new scheme up his pants: take control of the Good Guys' space station by usurping its controlling software, the haunt control. His method of attack? The word-jumbling Scapegoat and the buffet-bingeing Multipurpose.

...Master Asinine...

When Scapegoat and Multipurpose install Asinine's new Haunt-Control Control, it wreaks havoc: public-access lyrics to the tune of disco beats. Oh, and attempted murder. Now Good Guys Ace Spandex and Smitherreens must find a way to shut it down.

...that disco is dead.

To boot, the captive Schizophrenic escapes Good Guy lockup. All this while Legion needs to impress investors whose money will ensure that the Good Guys continue operation. Not easy when Schizophrenic takes him hostage.

How will the Good Guys deal with the enemy...when the enemy is their own home?

"Is this a pyramid scheme? This is a pyramind scheme."

— SOMEONE. I DON'T KNOW. I DIDN'T CATCH HIS NAME.

"That is one beautiful piece of work!"

— A GUY WHO WAS LOOKING AT A FERRARI BUT *MUST* HAVE BEEN TALKING ABOUT MY BOOK. RIGHT?

"You still haven't said if you're coming for dinner. We're having stew."

— MY MOM. AGAIN. (*MOM, I'LL LET YOU KNOW LATER. YOU'RE EMBARRASSING ME.*)

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