
**In a Galaxy Far, Far Awry
Before They Were Famous:
Appetite**

Liam Gibbs



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.

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We cool? We cool.

Hey, man. This story here? Might not
be in its original form. Just to let you
know, there might be slight changes to
this later on.

THAT ONE THAT APPETITE IS IN

June 30, 9108. 10:32 p.m. (Galactic Standard Time).

“Oh, come on!” Bulch whacked an open palm on the window of the control room. “Seriously?”

“What’s got you in a mood this time?” Bulch’s brother, Jabari, looked up from pretending to read his wafer-thin computer, his datasheet. It stored a tutorial on reading. He was pretending to read a tutorial on reading. And it was upside-down. He flipped it over. Considering he was the guy who once ate a shoelace, flipping it over wouldn’t help.

“The gargoyle. Or whatever it is. The gargoyle thing’s got me in a mood. Like it does every day. Thing gives me the jeebies.” Bulch shuddered audibly. “And my allergies got me in a mood.” Yeah, he’d forgotten his allergy meds at home today. Of all days.

He wiped his nose on his sleeve, slurped up the rest of the cold snot, and looked at Jabari. His brother was an odd combination: a toadlike cranium sitting on a rail-thin body. He looked as if someone had taken two vastly different yet equally unattractive Ken dolls and switched the heads. His wardrobe was monochromatic and dull: a brown sweater with tan khakis and mud boots. Bulch’s getup did no better, though: a white

long-sleeved T, damp with his allergies, and faded jeans that needed a wash.

In the warehouse's control room, which spread out on an iron walkway like a plump cat and overlooked the storeroom below, Bulch and Jabari waited for orders. This warehouse felt as empty as a graveyard in winter, a term that applied since they worked the graveyard shift. Shelves arranged in rows and rows and rows and rows and—you guessed it—rows and rows of weaponized devices occupied this one-storeroom repository that sprawled into the distance, as if someone had rolled out the red carpet. In those rows, shelves reached as high as the ceiling you couldn't see in the near pitch blackness. The only scant light in the storeroom dripped from light panels floating sporadically throughout each row—hardly able to cast detail in the overpowering shadows—and a sleepy neon sign that snored the storeroom's name, Weaponized Warehouse, and attracted all the flies. At least enough light panels congregated in the control room, where Bulch and Jabari spent most of their time.

Place felt as stuffy as an overworked sauna, like hay fever itself lived here. The vents were busted, and head office hadn't fixed them yet. Carpet upon carpet of dust swathed everything here, and Bulch's allergies were on red alert.

Butch and Jabari worked the night shift alone, if you didn't count the population of insect life that had more seniority here than the employees. Bulch and Jabari's job was so routine that saying a monkey could do it wasn't off the mark. Bulch felt the boredom as tangible weight, like a ball and chain attached to

his feet.

And their routine? Weaponized Warehouse's head office received an order from somebody—an order to ship out something some dimwitted villain somewhere needed—and, if this location hid it, Bulch and Jabari got the order. Lucky them. The order popped up on their control room's single viewscreen. So they located the product, hauled it into a shipping crate or box or whatever, sprayed in a decent amount of packing foam, added more packing foam to cover the insects, got into a packing-foam fight, shoved the item on its way, and cleaned up after the foam fight.

And rows and rows.

A spit of life scurried through the neon sign. It was choking on a bug above the *w* in *Warehouse*. A scent like burned cabbage trickled up.

A ding. An order popped onto the order viewscreen. At night, the warehouse got about four such orders a shift. Bulch slurped up his mucus, sighed, and lurched away from the window to check the viewscreen—that listed an order to ship off that stupid gargoyle they'd received from *somewhere*. The gargoyle? He gasped. Finally! He had despised that gargoyle thing since head office had stuffed it away here six months ago. And he had promptly shoved the gargoyle into some desolate corner of the warehouse because it kept eating. Everything. Everything and then the rest of everything. And *Bulch and Jabari* had to keep feeding it. And feeding it. Constant panting, constant slurping, constant shameless chewing manners. It

didn't even use utensils. It ate the utensils. And tater tots. Garbanzo beans. Cake. Aluminum siding. Parts of this warehouse. Bulch's work shirt. The metal rod Jabari had used to whack it over the head after it had eaten Bulch's work shirt. One of these days it'd probably find out it could eat through its current cage, same as it had the previous umpteen, but don't give it any ideas because, once it tasted freedom—literally—anything in this warehouse was up for grabs and down its gullet.

But it was going. Yes! Bulch's heels wanted to click *their* heels. "Holy crock, would ya look at that viewscreen? Jabari, our ship's come in!"

"Huh? We're about a hundred miles from the harbor."

"Just got an order. We're getting rid o' that gargoyle." Bulch flicked a finger at the viewscreen and the new order that still glowed hotly on its display. He stabbed the viewscreen's FILLING ORDER icon as he passed. Another ding. He whirled out of the control room and onto the walkway, boots clanking on the wrought-iron floor, and gripped the railing in both hands. "Y' hear that, gargoyle? You're gettin' gone today!"

"What does this have to do with a ship?" Jabari called out. He held his datasheet a scant three inches from his nose. That wouldn't help him read.

With a gargoyle's face but Charles Atlas's body, gray skin, meaty wings, clawed fingers, and talons for toenails, the creature who didn't know what "recommended daily intake" meant dug its claws into the concrete floor of its industrial cage, deciding cement tasted like a ham sandwich. A ruckus like a jackhammer

rending rock echoed away. The gargoyle tossed this chaos of wreckage into its cavernous mouth like a popcorn kernel and worked it around its stalagmite jaw and its other stalactite jaw.

Bulch threw a hand at it. “No matter what I put this thing in, it eats its crocking way out. It’ll be outta that cage by this time tomorrow morning.”

“It’s nighttime. This time tomorrow morning nighttime. I mean, tomorrow night morning. I mean, tomo—” Jabari sighed. “Look, one of those *must* make sense, right?” Still seated, feet on a console, he ruffled his datasheet to straighten it. Why? Datasheets hardened when activated.

Wait. Bulch glanced at Jabari. Jabari’s datasheet drooped in deactivation. “Bro, that thing ain’t even on. Forget it. Anyway, that gargoyle thing’s shippin’ out today.” He skittered against the sharp iciness of the stippled wall when the gargoyle clawed into a cage bar. “C’mon. Let’s get this over with. That thing makes me jolt whenever it moves.”

“You jolt at everything.” Jabari stood and joined Bulch on the walkway.

“Not true.”

“You jolt whenever someone knocks on our door.” Jabari watched Bulch as Bulch spread his fingers on the wall as if to burrow deep inside it, jaw clenched tautly. His cheek twitched. “Are you still feeling the effects of that raccoon bite?”

“Gargoyle thing doesn’t use a knife and fork. Or hot sauce.” Bulch smeared his nose on his sleeve, felt prickles of irritation from dry wiping his nostrils so much. He led the way

to the elevator airfoil that lowered him and Jabari to the storeroom floor. And closer to that eating monstrosity. “Its sodium level must be through the roof.”

“It don’t even have genitals,” Jabari added. “How’s it pee and poop?”

“At least it don’t fart. Same can’t be said about you.” Bulch snorted. Allergies were on high tide today. He wiped his nose again on the same shirtsleeve. The wiping sleeve. Juicy. That unplugged his nostrils. The dust here felt as thick as a washcloth forcing into his nostrils. Employment laws where they were today and head office still couldn’t give a rat’s crock about fixing the ventilation. Oh, and the lighting here. The neon sign that just claimed a centipede wasn’t much help. Neither were the light panels in this wartime warehouse the size of a military hangar. And that gluttonous gargoyle that someone labeled as a bioweapon just finished chowing down on the best one. It licked its lips. Nice one, glutton.

Now a few tight feet away from the cage, Bulch hazarded closer to the gargoyle like a rodeo rider inched closer to a steamed-off bull. He swept aside a dead spider with his foot. The gargoyle lunged, tried to gash him with its claws, but he jolted back. He waited for it to shuffle away and face its back toward him—and then he bumbled up the footholds on the cage’s corner and onto the cage’s roof. The chalky cardboard roof. Even more dust up here. And a moth. “Ha *ha*. Try eating me now.” He brushed off some grime with the tread of his shoe, clearing off layers and layers of filth and probably a hidden

treasure map.

He sneezed again, which cleared the airways for a moment. He peered out into the distance, down the aisle that retracted into the pitch darkness. Every aisle looked alike: dismal shelves painted in muted grays and blacks, filled to capacity with every type of armament head office foisted onto this storeroom and out to the public.

Jabari still held his datasheet. He sniggered at Bulch. “Try eating me now.” He rotated the datasheet around again. “Wouldn’t say that around your woman.” And rotated it again. “You know.” And again. “Because she’s fat.” The datasheet was still off.

“Hey, she’s a whole lotta woman. That’s all!” From on top of the cage, Bulch threw a snappish finger at his brother. Whoa-ooahhh. Almost lost his footing. He was pretty high up here.

Jabari still tried to read. “She once ate a twelve-foot-wide pressboard sign of a doughnut. Oh, *she* knew what it was.” And rotated it again. “I don’t buy that ‘it smelled like a doughnut so I thought it was’ story she tried conning us with.” And again.

“That datasheet ain’t even on, professor.” Bulch said. “And stop talkin’ about Meryl like that. I can spit on ya from up here.”

Jabari reached to a shelf, grabbed an umbrella, and shook it open with a *thwOOMP*. Huh. Apparently Bulch had threatened to spit on him before.

Bulch probed into his pocket and grabbed a few magnet

tablets. Glad head office got the ones you didn't "lick and stick" (corporate's saying) anymore. He got on his knees and whacked one tablet on each of the cage's corners. Wiped his nose on his sleeve again. "There. Ready." Stood up and loomed down at Jabari. "Okay. Activate the crane." A tumultuous crunch underneath him told him he'd better get off this before that beast treated the cage's ceiling like a baby treated applesauce. "This thing finally figured out the cage is eatable—edibl—he can eat it. I'm outta here." Hopped off.

"The word is *eatitable*." Jabari finally put that datasheet down. "I give up on reading this datasheet."

"It's good to know your limits." Bulch looked up and grunted his throat clean of phlegm. "Control, acknowledge. Transport item number"—he squinted in the melancholy light to check the stenciled code on the side of the cage's three-inch roof—"eight A sixteen."

"Activating crane. Transporting order number eight A sixteen," the haunt control said. Haunt controls, magical technological crap, were voice-activated software that ran houses, buildings, or warehouses like this. They were called haunt controls because they operated locations so well that those locations seemed haunted. "Shop at Clown Depot this Saturday and participate in our pie-in-the-face-eating contest!" Oh. And they thrived on advertising.

A magnetic arm, hanging immediately underneath the thirty-foot-high ceiling, wiggled to life. It croaked as its panel lumbered into position above the cage. With a hum, the magnets

blinked awake and levitated the cage upward, as if the arm goaded it with invisible beckoning fingers. The cage hit the arm. The arm then dug hooks into the clefts on the cage's roof and dragged it toward the warehouse's loading dock.

“So who's the genius getting that thing?” Jabari asked.

“Whoever it is, I hope he likes grocery shopping constantly.” Bulch appeared beside Jabari and peered up at the viewscreen through the control room's window. Nothing doing. Too far away. He grabbed Jabari's datasheet and thumbed the activation icon. The datasheet straightened from flaccid to stark rigid, changed from red to white. “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Bulch said at the swirling Letchtech logo that appeared on the datasheet, danced around the display, and then disappeared into the corner. He swiped through a menu tree to reach the warehouse's order information, which melted across the datasheet's surface. “Customer is some shmuck named...Master Asinine? What kinda name is that?”

Jabari looked over Bulch's shoulder, down at the datasheet. Considering his reading skills, the order info probably looked like hieroglyphics. Nice act, though. “I heard of that guy on the news. Runs some criminal gang. Used to go by a regular name: Jorge something or other. Said he intended to take things over.” He tapped the datasheet. “Look what the order says here.”

“You're pointin' at our return policy.” Bulch scanned the order data. “Order requisition form number eight A sixteen. Appetite. Half gargoyle, half beefcake, all eating machine.

Indestructible, brainless henchman. Eats anything in its path and also whatever's not in its path. Use as garbage disposal or statue at dinner parties. Get rid of all your nasty canned goods. Also useful as a brick wall. Do not keep in direct sunlight. No assembly required. Price: eight hundred moolahs or best offer.' And then Asinine paid nine hundred moolahs." Bulch shrugged. "Straight-up idiot."

Jabari clicked his tongue. "Go easy, man."

"That's what it says in the customer's notes. 'I'm a straight-up idiot.'" Bulch pointed down the invoice. "Also says to gift-wrap it. 'It's a present to myself for being such a super guy and eating all my Brussels sprouts. I like surprises.' Ain't enough money in the world gonna make me gift-wrap *that* thing."

His eyes rolled further down the text. "George Lowensland. *That's* Master Asinine's name." He tossed the datasheet aside. It clattered against a shelf and woke a cockroach. "Anyway, I'm grabbing a beer from the fridge doojigger." He groped along the underlit aisle toward the kitchen on the far end of the storeroom. Thanks, gargoyle, for eating that light panel. "Break time."

"You took a break fifteen minutes ago." Jabari checked his watch.

"No, I didn't." Bulch took a break *ten* minutes ago. "Look, learn to read words *and* tell time, and then maybe I'll take you serious." He didn't look over his shoulder. No point. No light. He felt his nostrils dripping, so he wiped. "Oh, for

crocking out loud. Gargoyle ate through the cage's floor. It's in the middle of the aisle making a meal outta some nuclear missile. And your lunch." He sat, right between the missiles and the shaken soda-can bombs. Wanted to just lie there. "Say good-bye to your roast beef sandwich."

"Aw. Mom made that for me," Jabari said. "That sucks—" *Thunk*. Huh? Had Jabari fallen? Bulch's ear perked at that sound. It wasn't one of Jabari's usual thunks. Jabari even screwed those up: they never sounded like thunks. More like whaps, clunks, or, when he got hungry and electricity was nearby, zaps.

"Jab?" Bulch called into the dark. Nothing. Nothing but shuffling clothes, material chuffing against material. Jabari's silence felt weird.

Bulch stood—"C'mon, bro"—and squinted down the avenue of darkness. Ho, boy. He didn't feel like swimming through those inky shadows. His heart jacked up a beat, like a music station switching from folk to jazz. "Jab, say something. Spew up as much nonsense as you want." He searched the darkness. "You can even talk more about how you think ice cubes clog our dishwasher."

This aisle wasn't completely barren of light: a slice insinuated through the sliver window twenty feet up. That light dripped through the window like an oil spill across water. It revealed a person.

Bulch double-sniffed the fuzzy allergies from his nostrils. "Jab, this ain't funny. *Nothing* you done's been funny since that

phase in high school when you started going to puppet therapy.”

A crinkle sounded. Not a crinkle, but the rambling clicks of a pistol. Bulch wasn't very familiar with pistols, but he'd shown up at the firing range a couple times to celebrate a pay raise. Not based on performance. Minimum wage had hiked up, but, hey, he'd take it. And, though he'd always hit a bottle of Scotch a little too hard before the range, he had a clear memory of that crinkle. That crinkle liquefied his stomach right now, made his bladder leak. Liquid heat dribbled down his leg.

“Hello there,” a voice came. Bulch had heard that voice on news reels and telethons.

He risked a peek, not with his head, only his eyes. And, even in this stingy light, he recognized the criminal cast in silhouette a few feet away, mainly because that silhouette came with a necktie as happening as a disco nightclub. George Lowensland, puppeteer of the Mikazin Clan and socks. Master Asinine now.

“Wh-wh-what are you...” Bulch shut his eyes and reattempted the sentence. He reopened his eyes. “What are you d-doing here?” His heart's music genre had skipped from jazz to rapid techno so fast it shook his body.

“Oh, such an awesome story.” Lowensland danced back a step, his gun tracing circles in the air as he snorted a laugh. “I was at the tax bureau, and you guys are almost right next door.” He motioned his hands to his chest, pistol carelessly pointing inward. “You see, I had to clear up some embezzlement thing. They say they can't find proof that I did it. Seriously? I'm more

of a bad crock than they give me credit for! So I marched in there, fired a few warning shots, hurled a stone through a window. I ended up killing two birds with that thing. The whole threat kit and caboodle. Oh, and Elaine was celebrating her birthday—such a dear, that woman, she does so much for everybody—so I said hi and had some cake. And then, *bam!*”—a gunshot barked out of his pistol, clawing into the dark nether above—“here I am. Ow. Got ceiling stuff in my hair.”

“W-we just sent off-f-f your Appetite and r-rewarded your W-weaponized Warehouse Warbucks to y-your account.” Bulch swallowed. “Also, J-July is-s National History Reenactment Month, so r-receive thirty percent off munitions for the h-h-hoable”—his shuddering lips mangled his word—“*whole* month.”

“Ooh. Thanks. Anyway, I’m here because...well...we have a problem.”

“Jabari f-finally l-l-learned not to pet stray dogs”—*Mommy*—“s-so p-problem’s solved. Isn’t it?”

“That’s not...Wait.” Lowensland chewed the inside of his cheek. “Lieutenant, was that dog thing the problem?”

A holler from another aisle: “No. Your problem is petting stray *bears*, sir.” Apparently one of Lowensland’s cohorts had found the grenade inventory interesting. “You said the problem *here* was you needed to eliminate the witnesses. Ooh. I like the grip on this one. Finger contours.”

“Rrrrrright. We’re concentrating on improving our witness elimination tactics around the Mikazin Starship. We’re

at seventy-two percent and that's just not acceptable. Unfortunately for you, you're a witness. Man, you have unusually wide gaps between your teeth."

"I'm a w-witness?"

"Yup. And I can't have people knowing my order history and what I'm up to. Soon your little company here will enjoy a visit from my scientist, Brick, and his hacking skills. He'll remove any trace of my order. But I'm here to remove the *physical* traces. Like you, for instance." Lowensland circled around Bulch, tapping his pistol's barrel along Bulch's body. "Also, may I use your bathroom?"

Bulch swallowed again. It didn't clear the mucus from his throat. Weird that the mucus felt so dry.

"Anyway, sorry it had to come to this. But...*pppff!*"—Lowensland shrugged in the scant light—"too bad, so sad." A muzzle flash accented the darkness, and another single gunshot barked out.

And then the darkness no longer mattered.

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

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