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

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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Three Flash Fictions, available upon request from the author

High school love notes to no one in particular

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take away from.

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You have my blessing and my thanks.

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 POWER-PLANT IS ALSO IN

July 20, 9108. 4:18 p.m. (Galactic Standard Time).

The Refensil Recharge Station wasn't a happening place on a Saturday afternoon. No customers. Not even a stray dog outside scuffed around the lot. There was better garbage to root through at the chemical plant two blocks away. Even the trees refused to sway in the wind. The station slept as silently as an empty funeral parlor and felt as lifeless and still as a corpse on a gurney. The single-lane street outside was lonely like a desert at night, dry wind whistling eerily through the recharge bay. The inactivity was so palpable, it weighed on your lungs like inhaled water.

Jacob's cheek was lodged into a half fist that pressed into it, an elbow crutching it on the counter of the cash booth in the rear of the recharge station's kiosk. Stuck working. His lips lazily rubbed together in the longest boredom moue he'd made since his mom had dragged him to that charity book burning.

On a contentedly brilliant day like today, Jacob noted how few customers needed a recharge. The only living thing that had popped in to the kiosk was a pigeon with one tattered wing. The pigeon had mustered the gall to flap in through the latent-technology door, which dispersed into computer memory to

allow it to pass. The bird snatched a bag of chips off a rack and dashed back out the l-door. *Dash* meant it had swooped around in a lopsided circle, clonked its head against the milk fridge, and then twirled its way drunkenly out the l-door. And know what? Jacob let it. Watching that bird escape offered the most entertainment he'd had all day without access to a rock and that abandoned window factory. Besides, the pigeon had made off with a bag of onions-and-chives-flavored chips. Blech. Thank you, come again.

The l-door reappeared, blocking the brittle heat from entering the kiosk.

When he couldn't find any mice to pit against each other in the death match ring (first prize was cheese, second prize was a shoebox grave), Jacob spent his shifts flattening out his short, brown crewcut for lack of anything better to do. Today, *that* didn't even entertain him.

Nope. All the happenings and occurrences were happening and occurring elsewhere. Happencurring. Hapcurring. Hapcurring-hapcurring-hapcurrin—Okay, now he knew it was possible to die from boredom. And that words really did sound weird when you repeated them over and over. And over and overoverover—

Jacob huffed out through those pressed lips that had dried together from underuse. He drummed his fingers on the booth counter, which woke the cash computer embedded in the glass-top surface. Now he was charging up a nonexistent civ-tran at coil four. A fat conduit hissed to life, thrashing like a

snake pouncing on its prey. It snapped at an alley cat rummaging for food in the bathroom stalls. Okay, correction: *this* offered the most entertainment he'd had all day. Holy hapcurring, life was sad.

Jacob heaved out a melancholic sigh, a full-body affair. Across the desolate street filled with filth and life's depression, a mil-tran Fireball whispered to the pavement at the rival station, the Better Than the Refensil Recharge Station (trademark in a tug-of-war due to a languishing legal battle). Two Terrans exited. Riding on self-propelled flight, one rocketed around haphazardly like an untied balloon farting out the last of its payload, his hair as yellow as the sweltering summer sun above. A hyperperson, like Jacob. The other Terran, redheaded, tried to coax Yellow down with shouted promises of fried bacon wrapped in maple bacon. Yellow whacked into the Better Than the Refensil Recharge Station sign, shattering "Better Than" in a wispy contrail of neon sparks and glass. Oh, good. Nothing like a little customer confusion.

Jacob lifted his cheek out of his hand. Cracking his knuckles, he sat. On the sticky floor behind the cash desk, he sat. He couldn't see the area of the kiosk holding the snacks and transport supplies except from the security viewscreen affixed to the ceiling, but so what? That lopsided pigeon could flap in and steal the kiosk's whole arsenal of cookies for all Jacob cared. Except the Chips Ahoy!. Leave the Chips Ahoy! alone.

A computerized bell dinged to mark someone's entry. Huh? Impossible. "Customer entering," said the booth's haunt

control, the voice-recognition software so named because it operated locations so well it made them feel haunted. Jacob's parents owned the station and had programmed the haunt control with Jacob's dad's gruff voice since that was enough to "remind" Jacob to "get back to work" whenever a "customer" "wanted a recharge." Wishful thinking, dad. (Jacob's dad liked finger quotes.) (Which he used frequently with liberal sarcasm.) (Especially when referring to his in-laws.)

Jacob stood—*whoa-oh*—and reeled from a lightheaded buzz brought on from apathetic inactivity and then sudden movement.

(And his in-laws' table manners. Ahem. "Table manners.")

"How can I...help you?" Jacob's sentence choked out when he saw the green-skinned Trioxidillian, who panicked into the rack of thruster lubricants as the l-door through which he'd entered dinged back into solidity. Huh. Trioxidillians rarely came to the city of Thunder Pass. And they never spilled several quarts of lube all over the stained linoleum tiles.

Jacob finished cracking his knuckles, savoring the last one since there was nothing else to do after. Boredom would set in again now like quicksand.

The Trioxidillian, calmer now that the l-door had reappeared, flattened the ruffles in his Intergalactic Protection military uniform, straightened his cross necklace, and approached the cash booth. "I'm looking for a Jacob Refensil." With more than his share of worry spots speckling his forehead

like green leopard print, he looked around to see if anyone else occupied the kiosk. Fat chance today.

The two Terrans who'd banged up the sign across the street were now on the Refensil lot, Yellow challenging the runaway recharge coil to a fistfight as it bucked back from him like a cobra waiting for an opportunity to snap.

"Don't worry. They're with me," the Trioxidillian said.

"That's unfortunate." All the energy Jacob rallied up to show his condolences resulted in a half smirk.

"You say that without knowing what he did to my mil-tran's navigation computer. Right now the mil-tran thinks we're visiting a sweat lodge. I didn't know hot sauce had that effect on guidance computers. Anyway, do you know where Mr. Refensil might be?"

Jacob pretended the lottery datasheets in the overhead display needed urgent organizing. He rifled through them. "You're looking at him."

Yellow now engaged in a bitter battle with that coil, which had twined around him like a boa constrictor preparing to feed. Red tore at it to loosen it.

The Trioxidillian offered a slow nod, opening his mouth but saying nothing as if to speak stealthily. He slipped another glance around the kiosk, so silently his eyes seemed to creak like a rusty gate. He reaffirmed no one else was here except that pigeon who'd retuned for ranch dressing to complement its chips. Satisfied, he leaned forward—and accidentally whacked his skull into the protective shield screen that separated

attendant from customer. He rubbed his bruised forehead. “You have the hyperability of self-replicating.”

Jacob stopped rifling. A lottery datasheet fell on his head. A cold zap whisked through him like a shockwave, an anxiety he hadn’t felt since his old crush, Mindy Purlex, unexpectedly popped by the station after he had finished servicing/losing to a civ-tran’s oil leak. His first inclination was to lie to the military man—*uh, hum, errr, ugh*—but his brain only offered a stammer. “Yyyyyeah. I might have—I mean, I guess—” He swallowed and assembled a thought. “I have the hyperability of self-*delusion*.”

Yeah. Nice one, brain. You can take the rest of the day off now.

Yellow walloped into the window behind the kiosk’s advertisement for Gecko Juice, a literal product name according to the ingredient list. Jacob jolted back—*yikes!*—but relaxed when he realized Yellow had only *cracked* the window. Red rushed over to tame the recharge coil off Yellow, which quivered like a threatened rattlesnake.

Jacob slowed his derailed breathing and turned back to the Trioxidillian. “Look, I haven’t done anything wrong since the last time one of my duplicates defecated in traffic. It’s been thirty-two days without a clone accident.” He pointed to a sign hanging by the l-door as proof. “That sign says I officially made it past a month. So if you’re here to arrest me for something, I can honestly say it was my evil twin, triplet, quadruplet, quintuplet.” He shrugged. “Or my cousin. He looks a lot like

me and suffers from kleptomania.” He eyed Yellow to see what that maniac was ruining now: everything.

“No, I’m looking for *you*. I’m Lieutenant Colonel Matross Legion of Intergalactic Protection”—he flashed an embossed badge so fast it could have been a backstage pass to a concert for all Jacob knew—“and I’m assembling a task force that comprises hyperabilitied individuals. I’m looking for someone with your...*gift*.” That last portentous word sounded as if this Legion had stamped it CONFIDENTIAL LEVEL B.

Jacob was intrigued, which he realized was a warm feeling that functioned as antidote to cold shock. “By ‘gift,’ you’re not talking about my unparalleled tendency to ruin Brussels sprouts. Are you?”

Ding. The l-door vaporized to dust. Yellow ducked his head in. “No Brusselly sprouty thingies! They makes me fart!”

Red wrenched him back out by the collar. “They’re good for you and they don’t make you fart.” The l-door reappeared. The coil attacked again, striking like a death adder that had finally gotten its opportunity.

Jacob’s eyes tracked Yellow as the coil snatched him away into the Refensil’s bank of four charging coils. “Holy personal property damage, whatever you’re talking about, keep me far, far, *far* away from that crocker.” He pointed a finger at Yellow.

His eyes found this Lieutenant Colonel Legion again. “But I’m listening,” he said with a raised eyebrow and intonation. He started cracking his knuckles again and noticed, in the lieutenant colonel’s curled lip, a hint of aversion at the

habit.

Lieutenant Colonel Legion placed his hands on the cash counter to lean in even closer, careful now to avoid that adversarial shield screen. “I can’t go into details, but Intergalactic Protection is assembling eight or nine hyperpeople to counter a united criminal front that, if unopposed, will cripple our galaxy. And for some reason destroy our best laundromats according to the guy in charge. I really don’t know what he has against Laundromats.” He sighed. “We need to start immediately, and if you come, you would relocate to IP’s main campus on Minerva. I understand that imposes a huge disruption to your life, but we have only two days—”

“Hey, mom?” Already talking on his gabber, the pea-sized communicator in his ear, Jacob raised a finger to put Lieutenant Colonel Legion on pause. The gabber had sprouted a mouthpiece and earpiece, and Jacob pressed the mouthpiece closer. “Yeah, I quit. Do you really need an answer why? Holy humdrum, mom, I’m so bored here, boredom sweat is leaking out of my boredom pores, for boredom’s sake. All of today, our only customer was a homeless guy, and he only stopped by to pee in our ice bin. No, mom, there’s no dental package in the universe you can offer to convince me to stay. See you at Thanksgiving. Oh, and one of our windows is cracked, but we got some hilarious security footage out of the deal. I gotta go.” He tapped a finger on his gabber to terminate the call, and the mouthpiece and earpiece retracted.

“I’m in.” He reached out to Lieutenant Colonel Legion

across the shield screen. It was unidirectional, allowing things to pass out the cash area but not in. The screen crackled as he pierced it, and static caressed his arm hairs like an electric lover. He grabbed Lieutenant Colonel Legion's calloused hand in his and forced a firm handshake. The lieutenant colonel looked dumbfounded.

Lieutenant Colonel Legion disengaged from his incredulity and reconnected with reality. "G-good. Okay. Good. And, yeah"—his eyes scanned the kiosk in a full circle—"we probably offer better dental than this place. We have tooth replacement."

"You say that without knowing what happened the last time one of those recharge coils jumped me by surprise." Jacob skittered away from the coil slapping the cracked window. "They're very cunning."

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

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