

foreign
devil.



Volume One of the Latelian Cycle

by lee bond

Foreign Devil:

The Latelian Cycle Volume One

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Kindle Edition

Planet Tenerek Meets the Mercenary Captain Garth Nickels, Formerly of Special Services

Jerszak Senfell loved driving his bus through the bustling metropolis of Tenerek's main city, Arturii. It was an easy route, and most of the people who caught his bus did so every day the whole year through. He'd made some good, solid friendships with the men and women who rode his route. He'd even met his future wife during a shift and against regulations, had asked her to marry him while stopped at the long red light. She'd said yes, of course, and the entire bus had cheered him on.

What a wonderful day that'd been. Just about the best day Jerszak could ever remember. The bus driver -a little long in the tooth, a little gray in the hair, a little round in the belly- was holding on to that day with feverish attention. He hoped it'd keep him sane.

Today was nothing like that day.

Today, against regulations, Jerszak wasn't even driving his own bus.

Today, a blue-eyed black haired maniac in a long coat was driving his bus and with such reckless abandon. It was a miracle the vehicle was still *working*.

"Y'know, Jerry ... I can call you Jerry, right? Y'know, Jerry, this whole thing is seriously fucked up."

Jerry winced as the driver started angling the bus towards oncoming traffic. Instinct said the man was going to try and take the corner onto Lefz, but it was less than fifty feet away and they were traveling nearly a hundred miles an hour. For some reason that boggled Jerry's mind, his kidnapper was insisting that he follow the *route*, even though it seemed to be making escape from the police force right behind them more than a little difficult.

Jerry swallowed nervously and redoubled his grip on the bars. He didn't know what the word 'fucked' meant, but it was easy to guess. "I ... yes ... taking me hostage is ... is fucked up."

The driver did something complicated involving all the brakes, the gear shifter and the steering wheel and against all rational thought and odds, the lumbering hulk that was the bus made an amazingly graceful turn onto Lefz, whereupon they picked up speed once more. He howled with laughter as a slew of brilliant purple police cars slammed into one another. "This? The hostage thing? No, that's not the fucked up thing, Jerry. That's normal. No, the fucked up thing is *this future*. It's all wrong. Like, completely and totally wrong."

Jerszak -who actually found he was thinking of himself as Jerry- frowned. "The ... the future? I ... that doesn't make sense." He was a bus driver, which meant that on slow days, or on days when nobody felt like talking, he had ample time for *thought*. Jerry was by no means a philosopher, but he'd been known to have a deep thought or two.

The rearview mirror showed the cops had reoriented and were back on the hunt. Jerry continued. "How can our future be wrong? How can you even know what the future is? *Who are you?*"

The blue-eyed maniac blinked. "Where are my manners? I've taken you hostage,

we're about to get into some pretty heavy shit here and I haven't even told you who I am. My name, Jerry Seinfeld, is Garth N'Chalez, formerly a Mercenary Captain for The Special Services Branch of Trinity's Military Engine."

Though he'd been terrified from the moment Garth had politely informed him he and his bus was being taken hostage, Jerry was now absolutely *petrified*. He knew about Special Services. Everyone did. Special Services was the worst best-kept secret in all of Trinityspace; home of criminals, the insane and people who lived only to kill or die on planets on the other side of the impenetrable Cordon, soldiers who worked in SpecSer were *legends*. They did things and went places they couldn't talk about.

Jerry stared at the thick hand shoved in his direction, trying as he did so to forget that his captor was now driving the bus with his *knees*. "Garth N... Nc ...?"

Garth sighed. No one anywhere could pronounce his name. "Nickels. Okay? Just ... Nickels is fine. *Jesus*."

Jerry took Garth's hand in his own because it seemed like that was what the man wanted. He did it for another reason too: hopefully it'd get him to put his hands back on the wheel. The bus driver had the distinct feeling that his captor was doing his best not to squeeze too hard, for which he was grateful; Garth's hand felt as hard as steel.

Garth smiled sunnily. "Awesome. Now. I didn't say *our* future. I said *this* future. Viewed from the outside looking in, everything that is, um, *everything*—like *right now*—is totally one hundred percent incorrect." He looked in the rearview mirror. Six cop cars trailed their bus and one was trying to make its way beside them, presumably to shoot out the tires or shoot through the door. Not very sporting.

Against better judgment, Jerry opened his mouth. "That would make it the present, then."

"Ahah!" Garth pointed a finger at the roof and abruptly lost control of the bus. It swerved to the left. The driver of the cop car sneaking its way up overreacted to the sudden motion and veered off into the side of a building. "You'd think so, right?" Garth grabbed hold of the wheel with both hands and started angling to make another high-speed turn.

"The present isn't the present?" Whoever Garth Nickels was, he seemed to have a very tenuous grasp on time. "What is it then?"

Then, because they were going to take the turn onto Bliiru at roughly a hundred fifty miles per hour, Jerry shut his eyes.

There followed a solid thirty seconds of cursing, crashing and squealing of tires. Jerry had never heard the word 'fuck' before today, but in those thirty seconds of testicle-shrinking terror he heard something on the order of seven thousand different ways of using it in a sentence, *some* of them requiring no additional words at all. A few more car crash sounds reached his ears and Jerry hoped that the policemen in those vehicles were okay.

"You can open your eyes, Jerry." Garth waved when the driver did so. He cocked his head to one side, thoughtfully. "Can I trust you?"

"Sorry?" Jerry ignored the fact that Garth was driving with his knees again. The man seemed capable of driving with any part of his body, and with far greater skill than someone who'd used the same vehicle every day for the last fifteen years.

"Can I trust you? I mean, people talk to you all day long, right? Do you blab all the stuff they say to your wife the moment you get home, or do you keep it to yourself?"

At that moment, Jerry saw in Garth's brilliant blue eyes an absolute need to talk to someone. For the rest of his days, Jerszak Senfell would remember wondering how any one human being could seem to be so alone in the middle of a police chase, or how, while *being* so alone, he could be having so much fun. "Absolutely, Garth. You can trust me."

"Cool." Garth nodded, satisfied. Then more firmly, "Cool. Okay. So. I was born something like thirty thousand years ago on a small blue-green planet called 'Earth'. For some reason I can't remember or even fucking understand, I put myself into suspended animation. I got woken up ten years ago, and even though I remember shit-all about the past, I can tell you with absolute clarity that this whole future is *broken*. You ever hear of a show called The Jetsons? No? It was a cartoon for kids, but in it, they had spaceships that could fold up into suitcases! Where are *those*, Jerry? We're thirty thousand years into the *future*, man. How come we don't have warp drive, Jerry? TV shows from my time had guys in glittering onesies traveling all over everywhere at Warp 10 and damn me if there's no reason we don't have that! Explain to me why there haven't been any significant advances in anything in *ever*, Jerry! Oh," Garth grinned sheepishly, "and um, I should warn you. Knowledge of my interment for thirty thousand years and, uh, my rank and previous association with Special Services is bound under Trinity Law and anyone announcing anything I say to anyone is, um, punishable by an awful lot of things that are detrimental to breathing. I can recite the applicable statutes, if you like."

Jerry automatically filed most of what Garth had just said away as the ramblings of a madman, choosing to focus on the one –to his mind- salient aspect of the man's rant. "You ..." he whispered quietly, "you have to know why. *Everyone* knows why."

Garth looked again the rearview mirror. "These guys are effing persistent, man." He shook his head. "Say it, Jerry. Say it out loud. Don't be afraid. Trinity isn't here and isn't going to hurt you."

"The ... The *Dark Ages*."

Garth slammed on the breaks, yanked hard on the wheel, howling with laughter as the massive bus spun in a perfect hundred-eighty degree arc. He frowned apologetically as, at the tail end of the spin, the rear of his commandeered bus whacked a series of parked cars into motion. "Exactly, Jerry. *The Dark Ages*. A 'universal and unpredictable event' that sweeps across all of fucking creation, slamming everyone and everything back to, well, the goddamn *Dark Ages*!"

Throwing the bus into motion, Garth drove back the way they'd just come, waving cheerily at the stunned police officers.

Jerry wanted to weep but adrenalin and terror were keeping him mercilessly focused. Not only was he being held captive by a bona fide SpecSer madman, he was dealing with ... he couldn't even think of the right words. The Dark Ages, and the dread you felt ... it was just something you learned to deal with. Focusing on it as Garth Nickels seemed to have done was ... unwise. He opened his mouth to say something, but Garth interrupted.

"It doesn't make sense, Jerry! I've been on hundreds of planets in thousands of systems across both Trinityspace *and* The Cordon. I've seen things you can't imagine and done things you would swear were impossible. We have Quantum Tunnels that connect solar systems hundreds of trillions of light years apart. We have artificially

intelligent minds running everything everywhere –*not* counting Trinity - and we have spread ourselves to virtually every corner of existence. Did you know that, right now, the Trinity AI has more than eight hundred Offworld species of sentient being contained within It's own domain? *Eight hundred!*"

"What does...?"

Garth rammed a police car out of the way as he interrupted Jerry. "Does this have to do with anything? It's The Trinity Fucking AI, Jerry! It's been in control of humanity and your expansion for *thirty thousand years*. It has the power and ability to create something like The Cordon, a massive intergalactic *wall* that keeps ravening hordes of mutated humans and ... and talking cockroaches from wandering around messing our shit up. It has *Enforcers* under It's control, and those guys can conquer solar systems all on their own and they don't even have to pack a lunch! It can keep *aliens* with *alien technology* from leaving their *own solar systems* without permission and it can't stop these Dark Ages? It can do anything It wants!"

"The ... The Trinity AI is affected by The Dark Ages too. It says so." Jerry winced as Garth drove another three cop cars off the road.

"Jerry, don't go wobbly on me here. Think about it. I can accept the fact that these Ages happen. The evidence is overwhelming. I can even accept that Trinity prevents entire realms of scientific exploration from occurring to help forestall a coming Age because even though I hate the machine mind with a passion, It is nevertheless instrumental in keeping everyone breathing. If It were affected by The Dark Ages as badly as individual solar systems and planets are, we wouldn't have made it past that first one. Did you know that *after* a Dark Age, whole bunches of *old* tech that used to work *don't* anymore? How does that make sense? It doesn't! Know what else doesn't make sense?"

"I ... I ..." Jerry pointed out the front window. Policemen were standing on either side of the road with guns drawn.

"Don't mind them, Jerry. Tenerekian standard-issue revolvers lack punching power. Your bus is bullet-proof." Garth flipped a couple cops the bird and kept on driving. "*Microchips*, Jerry. *Microchips* thirty thousand years into the future don't make any sense. This whole future doesn't make any sense. Hell, me driving a bus and talking to you is weird. After this long, everyone everywhere should be talking balls of light or, uh, well ... not needing a goddamn bus to get to work."

"I get it now." Jerry announced suddenly. "You're being chased because of your views on the Trinity AI and The Dark Ages! You're an agitator aren't you? The Trinity AI wants to silence you! Don't you know that talking about Dark Ages like this incites riots and panic in the streets? I've read stories about whole planets being swept up in anti-Age riots and hysteria. You should ... you should give up."

"Haha, what? No, man, Trinity loves me. First rate soldier, me. Did all kinds of fucked up shit for that machine mind. Trinity wouldn't do anything to me unless I, like, wandered talking about Gorensworld or Tannhauser's Gate ... shit ... forget I said that. I didn't say that. I was talking about the weather."

Jerry whimpered. "Then what ... why ... why are the police chasing you?"

"Oh that." Garth shrugged. "No clue. Some cop pulled a gun on me about an hour ago and told me I was under arrest. I punched him out and ran away. Cue antics with stolen bus. This is fun, isn't it? We're having fun, right? I mean, I bet you never knew

you could drive your bus this fast, right? And you're learning about how the future is broken, so that's got to count as *interesting*, at the very least."

Jerry pointed out the window with a trembling finger.

"Well shit. Your bus isn't bulletproof against machine guns, Jerry." Garth shrugged. "I wonder what I did wrong. You probably wanna get off." To oblige his unwilling guest, he drove up and pulled to a complete halt at the closest available bus stop.

Jerry got off as quickly as he could, turning to watch as Garth Nickels, ex-Mercenary Captain formerly of Special Services, sped up and basically aimed the bus at the squadron of machinegun wielding police officers.

The explosion was quite impressive. Pale and trembling, Jerry sat on the bench and waited for the police to come to him. While he did this, the ex-bus driver thought on what he was going to say. He certainly had no intention of mentioning anything that Garth had *actually said*; Jerry had little doubt revealing word one of what'd come out of the man's mouth would see him locked up forever.

Xxx

Garth sat and waited politely for the arresting officers to finish putting out the fire, humming the theme song to 'The Greatest American Hero' under his breath. He was out of sorts. He knew it. Ever since winning free of Special Services, ever since deciding to ... do what he was going to try and do ... he wasn't feeling right in the head. The urges pushing him forward were ... overwhelming.

A cop in a bright purple suit warily approached him, handcuffs at the ready. Garth rose and waited for the cop to stop crying. When all the tears were done, the ex-SpecSer turned around and laced his hands behind his back. "Look, man, I can't cuff myself. Let's get this over with."

Backed by fifty cops armed with machineguns and rocket launchers, the arresting officer stepped forward and put the cuffs on.

"You guys owe me a new jacket." Garth grouched as he let himself be put into a paddy wagon. "This one is burned because you blew that bus up around my ears."

Booking

“Name?”

“Garth N’Chalez.” Garth tried not to frown, but he could feel it happening. He could literally *feel* the duty officer gearing up to pronounce his name. “Spell it Nickels, pal, save yourself the brain ache.”

The duty officer looked down his nose at the hostage-taking bus stealer. “What sort of human are you?”

In the very beginning of his time in this ‘brand new world’ of thirty thousand years in the future, Garth had found himself taking offense at the question, thinking that it was some sort of weird future-insult on par with ‘what’re you, an asshole?’. This far in the future, though, it was a legitimate question. With genetic modification and enhancements and tinkering and thirty millennia of evolution under the old biological belt, there were more types of humanity out there than there were novelty ice cream flavors.

“Um.” Garth scrunched his lips up thoughtfully. “Technically cyborg. And no one’s said anything about my new coat yet. I got that some time ago. It’s been through a lot, but no one ever blew a bus up on it before today. I’d really like someone to get me a replacement.”

“How can you ‘technically’ be a cyborg?” the duty officer demanded incredulously. “You either are or aren’t. Besides, cyborgs aren’t human.”

“Well,” Garth replied seriously, “I say I’m technically a cyborg because I’m as strong and as fast as one but I don’t have any cyborg parts.”

“That makes you a modified human being.”

“It would ...” Garth admitted hesitantly, leaning on the counter, “except I haven’t had any mods, either. Weirdest thing.”

“Off the counter.” The duty officer snapped. “I don’t have a field for ‘technically cyborg’ or ‘modified unmodified human’.”

Garth stepped back from the counter. “Hey, pal, *you* guys chased *me* around the city, blowing up buses and stuff, not the other way around. Ask these guys. They’ll tell you.”

‘These guys’ were the officers who’d lost the draw to bring him into the police station for processing. They were as quiet as church mice because they’d gotten into a long discussion on the nature of reality and how their personal realities were going to be vastly affected by the lack of new long coats being acquired for wrongfully arrested citizens going about their days.

“I have all that information here.” The duty officer flicked a hand at a stack of papers. “What I don’t have, and what is most disturbing, is anything remotely resembling information on who you are and how you got on this planet. You’re supposed to have those documents with you at all times. In addition to arresting you for disturbing the peace, kidnapping, reckless driving, willful destruction of property and a whole list of other crimes, you’re being charged with illegal entrance onto the planet.”

“Is that even a thing?” Garth demanded. “That last part. It sounds made up.”

The duty officer took a deep breath. “It is a ‘thing’, and it is very serious. Can’t have the wrong sort of people on this planet.” He pointed a finger at the bus-napper.

“Once we find out who you are, we’re going to charge you and prosecute you for all those crimes and anything else we can discover.”

“Hey, don’t put me in lockup, okay?” Garth let the policemen shift him down the hallway. “I’m not looking to get involved here. Guys in lockup are all ‘I’m a big bad criminal and I want your seat and get out of my face and what are you in here for’. Just drop me in an interrogation room and everything’ll be cool. Sound like a plan?”

“Shut your face.”

Lockup

“You ever hear of a thing called ‘Historical Services?’” Garth, leaning up against the bars of the communal prison cell, looked at his captive audience. “Steve? Steve. Historical Services? Ever hear of it?”

“My ... my name isn’t Steve. It’s Seteven.” Seteven, head between the bars, did his best to stop drooling bloody spittle on the floor. The police didn’t like it when people spat. It was a fineable offense.

Seteven –who found himself thinking of himself as Steve against his will- didn’t know what’d happened. One minute he’d been amusing himself bothering the new guy by following him around the cell doing the usual ‘that’s my spot, too’ gag. The next minute, he was watching as the new guy started bending the bars of the cell, making a gap big enough for head. After that, it was hazy, but he suspected that the new guy was responsible for bending the bars back into shape after his head had been jammed through the hole.

“Close enough for horseshoes and war, Steve. Historical Services. Know it?”

“What’s a horseshoes?” Steve asked, trying to pull the bars apart. Steve wasn’t a slouch when it came to upper body strength, oh no; he worked out four days a week. It helped when you were stronger than the people who owed you money. They didn’t budge. The new guy, who’d introduced himself as Garth Nickels, had bent them like they were made of paper.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’, Steve.” Garth sighed. In all his travels, he’d run across less than a dozen people who knew what function Historical Services performed for the Trinity AI and of that number, *not one of them* had been ... *interrogated* for a full solar year by one of their representatives. “I’m going to tell you a story. Jump in with questions, comments, that sort of thing. It’ll be fun. Oh. Uh. Before we get started, anything I tell you is triple-dog-dare-you secret. If you tell anyone what I say, Trinity will send some Enforcers over and they’ll fuck your shit up pretty bad. Are we cool?”

“You ... y-you don’t have to tell me anything, sir, that’s fine. I’ll just ... I’ll just sit –stand- here and wait quietly.” Steve let another stretch of bloody spittle fall from his mouth. He was beginning to think he’d made a big mistake.

“Ahhh.” Garth clapped Steve on the back. “Where’s the fun in that? Anyway, Historical Services is a group of people who work for The Trinity AI directly. *Their* job is to fly around Trinityspace looking for ancient relics. Sort of like Indiana Jones, except with spaceships and laser guns. Only they’re not looking to take the stuff they find back to museums so everyone can ooh and ahh. They’re looking for this stuff because ninety percent of the time, it seems that the things you guys leave lying around is detrimental to the very fabric of the universe. I hear tell they find junk like

thousand foot tall robots capable of eating planets and giant mutated bugs that can fly through space and nanotech manufactories and they disappear them. For Human Safety.”

“That sounds nice.” Steve whispered. He wasn’t sure, but it felt like the bars were closing in, getting tighter. “So their job is to protect us.”

Garth nodded assiduously. “Totally. A lot of the deadly dangerous crap they destroy comes from the middle parts of a Dark Age. It seems that when The Trinity AI is busy trying to bootstrap It’s domain back from the dawn of time, everyone gets it into their heads that they want to try and build black hole cannons and time travel. Most of the time that kind of stupid gets *itself* dead, but sometimes not. So yes, Historical Services adjutants protect you all from yourselves. Do you know what *else* they do when they don’t have anything better to do?”

Steve started praying. He hadn’t done it in a long, long time, but the words of his lapsed faith came screaming back as if he’d never stopped going to church. He mumbled the prayers, hoping against hope that whatever it was that Historical Services did, it had *nothing to do* with Garth Nickels.

Garth grinned. “I can tell you’re excited to hear this, so let me paint the picture. Tynedale/Fujihara ... you know them, right? I mean, I know you guys are all Voss_Uderhell over here on Tenerek, but you know Tynedale/Fujihara. Everyone knows them. Anyways. Just over eleven years ago, this particular Conglomerate was busy hollowing out an old almost-planet by the name of Pluto way out there in the original System of Man. Don’t be ashamed if you’ve never heard of it. So all these miners and whatnot are whanging away gutting Pluto for some reason. No one ever told me why they were doing it, when all of a sudden BAM!”

Steve flinched as Garth hit the bars with an open palm. He wasn’t going to cry. “Bam?” he whispered.

“Bam.” Garth agreed cordially. “This mother-huge drill slams into a *ship*, Steve. A ship, in the middle of a planet. Ask the obvious question.”

Steve didn’t want to do anything of the sort. “Why didn’t they know it was there to begin with?”

“You, friend, are a *genius*.” Garth scratched the back of his neck. “They didn’t know it was there because it was *invisible*. Tynedale/Fujihara is a really seriously huge Conglomerate, right? Number two in all of Trinityspace, mostly. They obviously scanned the planet all the way through a whole bunch of times, right? I mean, they’re not going to get halfway done before they start looking for stuff that might slow them down, are they? These big ‘gloms live and die by their profit margins, so when they undertake a huge mining operation like this one, they’re going to do their due diligence. Guess what happened *next*?”

“His... Historical Services?”

Garth looked sideways at Steve. “Are you sure you’re a criminal? You seem to be pretty smart.”

“I am a criminal, sir. I promise.”

Laughter erupted out of Garth’s mouth. “You might not want to say that too loudly, man. We’re in a prison cell here. Don’t admit to anything you don’t need to.”

Steve, who was now looking *forward* to actual jail time if for no other reason than it might prolong his life for a few extra days once the Enforcers started looking for

him, shrugged. He was a captive audience and against better judgment, he was curious to see where his cellmate fit into this disjointed tale of ancient ships and big Conglomerates. Steve couldn't think of anything to say, at least nothing that would get Garth to stay quiet, so ... he just stood there, head stuck forever between the bars.

"Now Steve, one of the big things Historical Services does, when they're not busy crushing ancient and deadly secrets, is fundamental to the continuation of the Human species." Garth put a hand up to his mouth and stage-whispered, "At least, that's what they say. Trinity doesn't give a rat's ass."

Woodenly, Steve asked, "What's a ratsass?"

"You're saying it wrong ... what? No. Forget it. The thing these adjutants do, Steve, is they try to discover where it all went wrong. These guys want to understand how these Dark Ages operate." Garth was enjoying himself, though admittedly it was at the expense of other people; technically the things he was talking about *were* very seriously top secret, but realistically, not one of the people he'd blabbed systemic secrets to were going to run out into the streets. Once upon a time Jerry Seinfeld had driven for a Tenerekian senator. No worries that the bus driver would tell anyone anything remotely worrisome.

The same could be said for Steve, only for drastically different reasons; criminals on Tenerek were notoriously close-lipped. They had to be, with how often the political climate changed in the system. Friends and allies could become enemies and worse with each new political voted into office.

Short of bribing everyone in the known Universe to be quiet, there was no better system to start his ... his quest. Even Trinity would be hard pressed to get the stoic Tenerekians to give up what they knew.

Something clicked in Steve's head. "Are you going to talk about The Dark Ages?" he asked woefully.

"Already covered that, pal." Garth clapped a friendly hand on Steve's shoulder. The relief the criminal felt was a living thing. "Anyways. Invisible ships, Historical Adjutants, The Dark Ages and me."

"Please don't ask what those three things have in common." Steve struggled to pull his head out through the bars and failed spectacularly. He was beginning to regret all that time in the gym. His *neck* was almost as big as the gap between each bar, let alone his ears.

Garth tilted his head to one side. "Are you cheating?" He looked around the room. "Nah, I'm fucking with you, Steve. I'm leading you down a rose-covered path. Or something. The ship Tynedale/Fujihara miners found buried deep inside Pluto was ... *is* ... a mystery, man, for great big motherhuge reasons. First, invisible, right? There's no tech around today that can do that, and Trinity's allegedly been trying for about a zillion years. Second, that collision with a kilometer-wide drill bit probably should've destroyed the ship and anything inside right away. I mean, it's a drill bit designed to hollow out planets. What's a ship compared to that? Third, fancy-dancy geological surveys determined that the ship dug it's way inside Pluto thirty thousand years ago. Four, analysis of the ship design indicated in very strong terms that *Man* built the thing. *Think about that!* A ship, built by man, thirty thousand years ago, one capable of flying to Pluto when all the crappy evidence points to them barely being able to leave the planet! All that had the Historical Adjutant hotter than the sun, I can tell *you*. Now,

I've got a bonus round question for you, buddy: what are ships *for*?"

Mind whirling with the various factors uttered by Garth, Steve wanted nothing more than to crawl through the bars, find his arresting officer and admit to all the crimes he'd ever perpetrated. At this point, he was willing to confess to stealing money from his grandmother if only it would get him away from Garth Nickels. The man wasn't simply talking about things that people should never hear. If he was putting the pieces together properly, Steve was horrifyingly certain Garth *himself* was something you should never ever know about.

"C'mon, buddy! This is easy! What are ships for?"

Maybe he could just strangle himself on the bars until he passed out. Steve licked his lips and answered. "For carrying people."

"Sweet." Garth nodded. "Yes, for carrying people. And this ancient ship possessed of technology thousands of years in advance of anything *currently available* held within its bowels fifteen men and woman from the literal dawn of time. Fifteen men and women from hundreds of years before the first Dark Age, from before the First Great Exodus of Man, from before the rise of The Trinity AI, from before The Cordon, from ... from *before it all went wrong*. The Adjutant in charge of determining the safety of the machinery and the identities of the ... well, of the time-travelers ... was a friendly guy named Kant Ingrams. Well, I say friendly, but really, he wasn't. Friendly. At all. Actually, he was a massive dick. You're probably thinking this has a happy ending, right? You're thinking Kant Ingrams discovered, through casual interviews with the people and by reverse engineering the ship, answers to The Dark Ages and we won't have anything to worry about ever again, right?"

"I'm thinking about screaming for help, actually." Steve answered quite readily. "But since you ask, no, I don't think anything like that."

Garth nodded, refusing to dwell on his specific memories of his time with Kant. Even still, after ten solid years in Special Services and doing horrible things in the name of Trinity's Plans, thinking about that thin, odious bastard got him righteously pissed off. "Yeah, nothing like that happened. See, we couldn't *remember anything important!* Hell, we didn't even know why we were in the ship in the first fucking place. And that motherfucker questioned us day in and day out *forever*. Kept us apart. Refused to let us talk to anyone but him. He asked us question after question after question, Steve. What city were we from? Who were our governmental leaders? Who were our enemies? How was the ship built? What technology was behind the metals? How did we survive thirty thousand years of slumber and why couldn't they find any signs of the devices used to keep us asleep for that long?"

Garth paused for a moment, sadly aware that he'd started shout-whispering into Steve's ear. He took a deep breath. "Guess what I remembered?"

"N-n-none of those things?"

"Got it in one, dude." Garth took another deep breath. "I remember every television show I ever watched. And movies, too. And every single song recorded from, if you can believe this shit, from 1950 onward. Every book, every comic, every pointless little thing in the entire world back then." He tapped his left temple. "I am a walking Pop Culture Encyclopedia for a race of humans that doesn't even *exist* anymore. Not a single thing about enemies, rulers, nothing of 'historical value'."

"Wh-what about the others?" Steve asked. He was getting comfortable, now.

Garth ruffed off a shrug. “No clue. Kant never said what they did or didn’t remember. He wasn’t ... chatty. Then he started in with questions about genetic manipulation, DNA alteration, cyborg implants, but again, I didn’t know shit. He got more and more frenzied, Steve. Dear old Kant Ingrams was losing his mind because he had –*literally*– the greatest mystery in the entire known history of the Universe in front of him and he wasn’t getting any answers at all. His own AI minds were telling him that we weren’t lying, that we had amnesia, amnesia no doubt caused by the prohibitively long time spent asleep. He argued that our very boringness, our absolute lack of anything strange or bizarre, coupled with our amnesia, meant that we were lying through our teeth and that we were, like, an advance guard of super-soldiers looking to conquer the Universe. *I* kept telling him I was more interested in recreating all the episodes of *Lost* in holographic video, but he didn’t believe me.”

Steve, who’d never heard of Historical Services or Kant Ingrams before, felt he nevertheless understood how being beaten at every turn over something so important could affect a man’s mood. The Dark Ages was something that affected everyone, and if there was a ‘cure’ out there, well, no price was too large. “This Ingrams person probably didn’t like that too much, did he?”

“Indeed, Steve,” Garth put his back against the bars, “he did not. Pressure from Tynedale/Fujihara,” the ex-SpecSer nodded at Steve’s chuckle over the Conglomerate’s growing rage, “to finish up, Trinity’s own admonitions that me and the rest of the crew were complete morons and a few other things drove the man ... desperate. I won’t say balls-out insane or anything. I don’t think the guy ever raised his voice. But no, yeah, he went apeshit. Started talking about dissection and brain removal. You believe that? Guess what happened *then*?”

“Um.” They’d pretty much reached the end of Steve’s imaginative rope; held hostage by an official Trinity Services representative, no doubt in an extremely secure facility, *should have ended* with all fifteen of them drawn, quartered, dissected and put under microscopes.

That wasn’t the case, though. The grim truth he was in a holding cell with a man strong enough to bend metal bars as though they were warm dough. Something wasn’t adding up. Either Kant Ingrams had been right about the sleepers and a hidden agenda or Garth Nickels had been through some severely radical changes since finding his way free from Kant Ingrams.

Garth sighed. “The other fourteen people broke out, Steve. Simultaneously and without having ever spoken to one another for the entire year. When I say at the same time, I literally mean that. Fourteen doors to fourteen cells were pried off, popped open, or kicked in at precisely the same moment. Trinity Investigators were kind enough to tell me that much. Then, because I guess my cellmates were serious people who were also big fat liars, they proceeded to escape. Or, uh, *almost*. They destroyed 75% of the mining facility, killed or maimed pretty much everyone they could find and made a beeline right for the launch bays where all the shuttles were held.”

The story was too fantastic to believe. “What about you?”

“Me?” Garth held a hand to his chest. “I was in my cell doing pushups. No joke. And reliving the Monster Gods of Rock Tour in my head. There was this artist called Rob Zombie ... dude ... so awesome. So, so awesome. So there I am, push-upping and, uh, ‘listening’ to ‘Creatures of the Wheel’ and looking forward to ‘The Devil’s

Rejects' when BAM!"

Steve didn't flinch as much when Garth hit the bars this time. He'd been waiting for it. "Bam?" he asked weakly, wondering why none of the guards had come around to pester them. It was something Tenerekian guards loved to do, but they hadn't shown their ugly purple-clad asses in more than half an hour.

"Bam." Garth replied. "Someone pulled my door off. Right off!"

"But ... but ... but ..." Since he couldn't get the words out, Steve tried to gesture at his current predicament.

"Oh, well, sure. *Now* it's no big deal. But, dude, this was ten years ago. Ten years ago I was like, some guy. Whole different guy now. I'm way lots stronger now."

"So you all escaped." Personally speaking, the thought of fourteen other people even remotely similar to Garth Nickels roaming the depths of space looking to tell their stories to anyone who'd listen was perversely terrifying.

Garth laughed bitterly. "Hah. No. No, I was the only one to 'escape'. Everyone else got killed seriously dead by automated base defense systems. Took ... took a lot of doing. The ... damage was extensive." Thinking back to those moments was like watching a television show; the memories were terribly surreal, and he still didn't have any real answers as to what'd happened. Nor was his story all that truthful. As chatty as he was feeling, there were some lies he wasn't about to dispel, least of all because the truth might make its way back to The Trinity AI.

No one anywhere in the entire Universe knew that he wasn't the only survivor. Two others had made it out of the Pluto Mining Facility. One, a woman calling herself Lisa Laughlin, had dematerialized in front of his eyes. The other, a flame-haired angry person impolite enough to refuse the common courtesy of giving up his name, had first tried to kill him stone cold dead with an attempt at chopping his head off and had then basically jumped into outer space.

Since Investigators hadn't asked him –the sole survivor- why anyone would be so desperate as to leap into the vacuum of space without a suit, the only assumption was that the red-haired would-be murderer had done something as impossible as Lisa and her amazing teleportation trick.

Garth knew no one had come up with new information; only a decade had passed, and if Investigators had discovered anything ... different ... about what'd happened that fateful day, the ex-SpecSer had vanishingly few doubts that they'd track him down and make him spill his guts.

And he knew so much more about Lisa Laughlin now. So very much. It did him no good to think about what she'd become, so he pushed thoughts of the young woman from his mind.

The cell had grown chillingly quiet with Garth's introspection. Steve, eager to fill the air with noise, broke through the man's reverie. "So what happened then?"

Garth blinked, shook his head clear of Lisa and the implications of her impossible existence. "Do you have any idea what happens when you piss off an entire Conglomerate, Steve? I mean, I know you're a Voss_Uderhell system and I hear some pretty fucked up stories about them, but really, they're a baby compared to Tynedale/Fujihara."

"I ... I've worked for Voss_Uderhell. In Collections." Ever eager to make money doing less than savory work, Steve would never go back to working for the 'baby'

Conglomerate unless his situation became a million times worse than it already was; system-spanning business enterprises played by rules so bloody and vicious that actual criminals shivered and looked the other way. An entity like Tynedale/Fujihara, spread across *hundreds* of systems within Trinity's domain ... there were rumors that Collections for the EuroJapanese Conglomerate had foreclosed on entire planets, displacing the citizens to 'somewhere else' before strip-mining everything of value and moving on to the next world.

"So you're getting the picture." In addition to being seriously underpowered in terms of transforming spaceships and warp drive and talking balls of light, this brave new future he'd been enduring for a decade was relentlessly mercantile.

"D-debt accrual." Steve tried to grasp at the concept of owing an entity like Tynedale/Fujihara money and failed. "What did you have to pay them for?"

"*Everything.*" Garth snapped contritely. "From lost time and missed bonuses to battery replacement for their weapons and corpse removal and every goddamn thing in between. *Hundreds of millions of dollars*, Steve. Even though my Trinity-sponsored representative proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that I hadn't been responsible for the breakout or any of the damages, I was still 'a part of the group originating from inside the ship' and therefore financially responsible all the same. It didn't even matter one of my own 'people' had tried to chop my fucking head off."

When someone owed Voss_Uderhell a thousand dollars, they sent someone out every day as a reminder of that debt. They weren't even pressured for the money; debt collectors talked about the weather or a new movie because you couldn't get water from a stone. They only bothered with money questions when automatic trackers monitoring bank accounts detected reasonable activity. *Then* it was all about the money. Things could turn very nasty, very quickly, then.

Steve had never heard of anyone owing *any* Conglomerate –even a lowly planet-bound one, let alone one of the Big Three- anything remotely approaching that dollar value. From his short time with Voss_Uderhell, Steve knew that a million dollars was the cap. Anything more than that and the accountants began urging for a pound of flesh approach; a paltry number of regular men and women could come across that much in their lifetimes, and so if it became obvious repayment wasn't going to happen, it became about *reputation* and *fear*.

Hundreds of millions! That was ... impossible. It was the unlikeliest story that Steve had ever heard in his life, and as a man who'd spent most of that life in the Tenerekian criminal underground, he'd heard just about every kind of a story a person would tell. Invisible ships, disappearing women, men jumping into space and vanishing ... it was a fairy tale.

Except ... except the man standing next to him was no imaginary being. Six foot one with black hair and eyes so blue they seemed to glow, Garth Nickels was very, very real. As were the emotions he was feeling; Steve was no rocket scientist, but he was fairly adept at reading people. It was a skill you picked up in Collections.

Either Garth Nickels was the most amiable psychopath living in his own dream world or he really had come from thirty thousand years ago and had –somehow-managed to pay off Tynedale/Fujihara.

Garth chuckled. "He gets it." He said this offhandedly, to an invisible third party.

"What did they do?"

“Ohhhh,” Garth yawned, “well, Tynedale/Fujihara wanted me for ... research. Certain elements of the escape attempt made their way to TF scientists, see, and suddenly everyone was very keen on the nature of genetics even though Kant and his machines –some of the best equipment in the Universe- had failed to prove anything beyond some basic enhancements. They were willing to waive the whole damn cost as the price of doing business if Trinity would let them, ahem, ‘plumb the depths of this mystery as only a Conglomerate devoted to scientific exploration can’.”

Steve furrowed his brow. “What’s that mean?”

“They wanted to cut me open, pal. Grind me into paste and sift through my brains in search of answers. Don’t forget: humans possessing a technology so far in advance of today’s benchmarks that Quantum Tunnels look like a sideshow parlor trick built that ship and everything in it. Oh, their reasoning was sound enough. If today’s machinery could barely even prove there was a *ship* plugged into their scanners, the possibility that *we* were just as weird wasn’t just *high*, it was *certifiable*.”

“But that didn’t happen.” Garth’s tale was interesting. Steve decided it was probably a complete and total lie, but it was interesting nonetheless. There were just too many improbabilities.

Garth laughed. “Hah. No. Trinity told them to go screw. Said ‘owing to the extreme nature of this ancient human’s abilities in warfare, he is needed elsewhere’. Then It threw me into Special Services where I ... oh, hey, officer, what’s up?”

Officer Markum stared fish eyed at Seteven for a long, wordless moment. Tilting his head back and forth and switching between his ‘old friend’ Seteven and Garth Nickels, Markum tried to reconstruct the events leading up to the Tenerekian having his head shoved through the bars. Then he went up to the bars and put one of his hands between two to measure the distance. Scrunching his face up thoughtfully, Markum looked at Garth. “Did you do this?”

“What, bend the bars like that?” Garth took a step back, amazed that anyone would even imagine such a thing. “Those are, like, *really thick*.”

Markum looked at Seteven, who was extremely red in the face. It was apparent their lifetime criminal didn’t realize that he was very close to hypoxic shock; the bars on were pressed very tightly against either side of his neck. “Did you do this to yourself, Seteven?”

Steve laughed and tried to shake his head. “Call me Steve.”

Garth saw that the officer was more interested in jib-jabbing with Steve and wanted to draw the conversation back to him, so he rudely interrupted by slapping a friendly hand on Steve’s back and talking very loudly. “Hey, so, are you here to give me my new jacket or what?”

Officer Markum narrowed his eyes at Garth Nickels. “No. We’re still having a difficult time finding any Trinity documents supporting your claims. I’m here to move you to an interrogation cell.”

“I could totally solve your problems...” Garth smiled brightly when the officer quirked an eyebrow. “But legally I’m not allowed to. Take me to the interrogation room. And when you finally *do* find out who I am, I want a new jacket. And an apology. You guys blew a bus up on me.”

Markum opened the cell door and motioned for Garth to move out. “Don’t try anything funny, Nickels. You won’t get out of here alive.”

Steve, who'd been feeling weirdly for the last few minutes, burst out laughing.

Garth rolled his eyes at Steve. "I know, right? Oh, hey, what we talked about? Total secret, right?"

"Absolutely." Steve tried to take a deep breath and couldn't. Spots appeared before his eyes. "You should tell someone to get me free, Officer Markum. I don't feel so well."

"Don't worry Set- Steve, we'll take good care of you." Officer Markum took up a position behind Garth, hand on his sidearm. "What did you talk about?"

Garth laced his fingers behind his back and started walking. "About this black car I once had. It could talk. Together, we solved crimes for this small company called Knight Industries. I had the most amazing hair. Oh yes, and an *awesome* jacket..."

Interrogation Room

“You guys know what the difference between interrogation rooms and bathrooms are?” Garth smiled pleasantly at the two officers standing on either side of the door. As with every other Tenerekian officer, they were dressed in the absolute worst color purple a human being should ever wear. Since most Tenerekian men fell heavier to the Indonesian side of their IndoRussian heritage, they were almost always terribly sallow, which definitely did not work with *puce*.

The guards, Rikvell and Markase, exchanged glances and said nothing. They’d been informed that there was a very high chance that the man they were babysitting was very dangerous and that they shouldn’t listen to a thing he said.

Squinting a bit to read the nametags embroidered onto the officers’ jumpsuits, Garth automatically shortened their names as he always did. Rikvell and Markase. “Richie, Mark, I’m not divulging systemic secrets here. It’s a simple question: What is the difference between a bathroom and an interrogation room?”

Richie risked another glance at Mark, who was staring resolutely at their images in the one-way mirror on the opposite wall. “What? What’s the difference?”

“And Richie wins the award for actually being interesting! Hooray. Mark, sorry, you’re the weakest link. Goodbye.” Garth made crowd-cheering noises for a moment before continuing. “Nothing. There are no differences whatsoever.”

Richie stepped forward. “There are so.”

“Look,” Garth countered with an easy smile, “take away this one-way mirror, the cameras in the ceiling, the intentionally uncomfortable chair –which, by the way, is making my ass hurt like a soprano choir boy’s rear end, congratulations- and you guys and all that’s left is a room designed for *pure functionality*. Sure, fine, one is designed to remove waste and the other is built to terrify people into spilling all their secrets, but really, 99% of the people you bring in here are probably *human* waste to begin with. Hah! Hey, that actually made sense. Go me.”

Richie looked over his shoulder at Mark, who was stilling pretending he was alone in the room. Their captive, self-identified as Garth Nickels, was busy making weird cheering noises with his mouth. “Been in a lot of these kinds of rooms?”

Garth nodded industriously. “Loads of them. On both sides of the glass, too.”

Mark watched Richie sit down opposite Garth. “Don’t do it, Rikvell. There are better ways to get promoted.”

Richie nodded. “Probably, but how often do you get a chance? We’re gearing up for another policy-shift in four months. If I’m not above this pay grade by then, it’s another two years. I’ve got to risk it.”

“Fortune favors the bold.” Garth grinned.

“Exactly.” Richie nodded, ignoring Mark’s grunt of disgust. In the mirror, he watched his friend leave the room. There wasn’t going to be too much time to get anything interesting; Markase was happy where he was, so was undoubtedly on his way to get the Chief. “So you’re what, a mercenary, then? A ... what do they call it these days, a ‘fixer’.”

“Fixer. Haha. That’s funny.” Garth shook his head, then changed his mind, throwing in kind of a half nod. “Sort of, now that I think about it. Well, I used to be. Yeah, I spent a lot of time in rooms like this, like I said. Usually waiting for my team

to finish blowing the shit out of something or someone. Occasionally I got to stand on the other side of the glass.”

“Do you know why we arrested you?” This was a tricky question, because as far as he’d been able to look, *no one* in the precinct had a clear answer. There were plenty of *theories*.

“I dunno. I mean, I’m pretty sure I didn’t do anything wrong.” Garth admitted this honestly enough. The last thing he’d done before suddenly being chased by cops was buy a spaceship. It was one of the reasons he’d come to Tenerek in the first place. The last time he’d been in this system had been well over six years ago, hunting down some illegally obtained Hammer missiles. Cue one Garigtch Porfol, sometimes ship-dealer oftentimes stupidly unlucky weapons dealer; always on the lookout for deals and dangerous weapons, Gary’d put his feelers out hoping to entice the possessor of the Hammer missiles, unfortunately drawing the attention of the SpecSer team.

Rather than arrest Gary for attempting to purchase the missiles, Garth –who’d found the guy way ahead of the rest of his team- had cut Gary loose with the warning that he might come back one day looking for a deal. Gary, not a complete loser, had agreed, thinking the terrifying SpecSer would return looking for guns and ammo.

Suffice to say, the slender, seedy arms dealer had been pleasantly surprised to sell Garth a *ship*.

Richie smiled easily, just like they taught in training. “If you didn’t do anything wrong, why would we arrest you?” Richie raised a hand. “It doesn’t matter. Even if you didn’t do anything wrong when you were approached by that first officer, the ensuing chase through the downtown core caused innumerable damages to both vehicles and officers.”

“Hey man, I got a really solidly defined sense of self-preservation.” Garth retorted indignantly. “It’s not my fault your guys started *shooting at me*.”

“When we go from a simple stop-and-talk to a mad dash through a city in a stolen bus –complete with kidnap victim- the response does tend to escalate. If you haven’t done anything wrong, why would you run like that?”

“Okay, look, see ... I don’t really *know* if I did anything wrong. It’s an assumption. And don’t say anything about making asses out of you and me or I’ll punch your lights out. If I *did* do something illegal, it was in front of people who aren’t gonna say anything to anyone. It’s how this planet works.”

“So you *did* do something illegal.” Richie countered.

Garth went to throw his hands up in the air, grunting when his restraints prevented the motion. “Never said that. Said I *might’ve*. Great big difference.”

Richie nodded. “True enough, true. You seem very unhurt for having a bus blown up around you.”

“Resilient, me.”

“You don’t seem overly bothered by all of this, sir. You are in a lot of trouble.”

“Meh.” Garth said with a casual air. “I’m used to it. I’m used to being treated with suspicion, doubt, and paranoia. Being the awesome expert I am in the fine arts of infiltration, dissemination, and espionage, I’ve spent an awful lot of time in rooms just like this one, answering the same tiring questions over and over again while supremely freaked out governments, gangsters, or businessmen tried to figure out just what the hell was going to happen, how bad it was all going to be when it was over, and why

I'd done 'it' in the first place."

"And?" Richie asked, curious.

"Oh. Well. As they always found out, sooner or later the answer *always* involved explosions and was *always* worse than imaginable. Fun stuff, really."

Richie couldn't believe his ears. "Are you saying you're a terrorist?"

"Wait, what?" Garth frowned. "How do you get to terrorist from what I just said? Are you sure you're a real cop? You don't jump to terrorist from that. You could go to 'spy' just as quickly. I could be a spy."

"Are you a spy?"

"If I was, I couldn't *tell* you." Garth rolled his eyes. "You're not a real cop. You don't even know why you arrested me."

"Do you know why we arrested you?" Richie was well aware that it was the second time he'd asked the question, but talking to Garth was ... difficult. The man *seemed* like he was lying all the time.

"I've given that a lot of thought, actually. I mean, I've been in this cop shop for, like, three hours and twenty-two minutes. Gives a guy a long time to think." Garth licked his lips. "Are you sure you want to know what I think?"

Richie surreptitiously checked his watch. Without checking the logbooks for absolute verification, Garth's count on the time seemed eerily accurate. "Amaze me."

"At first, I thought it was Tynedale/Fujihara looking to kill me. Again." Garth almost laughed at the look of absolute terror that bolted across Richie's face. "I mean, paying them off after ten years was probably really upsetting, especially since the interest on Debt Accrual of several hundred million dollars was a *lot*. Their accountants were probably hoping to collect on me until the Heat Death of the Universe."

Richie realized he'd made a huge mistake but there wasn't anything he could do about it now; with Markase out of the room, he was stuck until someone returned. "Go on."

"Yeah, they tried once upon a long time ago to just kill me outright but that totally, totally failed. Cost them more than the original Debt I 'owed' them only this time they couldn't sling the damages back so they just sort of gave up." Garth shuddered for a long moment. He did his best not to think about Gorensworld at all, but it cropped up at the oddest and most inopportune moments. "Anyways, yeah, I was totally thinking it was them until I remembered this whole system is a Voss_Uderhell enterprise. Except it *can't* be them."

"Why ... why not?" Tynedale/Fujihara was so much bigger than Voss_Uderhell it wasn't even funny. The EuroJapanese Conglomerate was easily three times as big as the IndoRussian one. If they wanted to, they could easily crush any company ships in the system. Richie could barely wrap his head around Garth's easy admittance of a Debt Accrual reaching 'several hundred million dollars' *or* his apparent *victory* in paying them *back* and his reported ability to survive their direct efforts at killing him.

"They're really not allowed to try and kill me anymore. After I beat them like a red-headed stepchild around ten years ago, Trinity told them to lay off." Garth laughed every time he thought of Tynedale/Fujihara being smacked around so hard by The Trinity AI. Though he hated the machine mind quite a bit, he nevertheless found massive amusement at a systemic Conglomerate being treated like an unruly child.