



# **Unnamed Journal**

**Gaius Caligula: On Women  
Cantilver Jones Lands Hard  
Breakdown**

**Ulysses & The Fugitive Ch. 8 & 9**

**Issue 15**

# Unnamed Journal

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# From the Publisher

Continuity is a most valuable asset when running a periodical. It creates expectations, which ensure interest. Our readers expect us to keep these issues coming, and they expect certain content from us. That is good. That is what matters.

It also creates workflow. At certain times in the month, we check on each other's work, collect it in editorial meetings, query it, send it round for comments, re-query it, get approval from stakeholders (the two guys outside the office who hold wooden stakes and shout about the color out of space or something. They're very persistent and they have good taste), then lit on fire and started over again. It's an organic process, but not without it's elements of ritual.

One of our rituals is serial novels and novellas. Our first one, *Void*, published in the last volume, was collected and published this past winter and is available on Amazon. Currently, we have two serials: *Ulysses and the Fugitive*, which gets better and better with each chapter, and *The Meditations of Caius Caligulia*, which is not published as regularly. *Ulysses* is up to chapter 9, now, and just missed having chapter 10 ready at the time of publication. *Caligulia* will probably end up taking longer than its namesake actually reigned. Such is the fitfulness of the Muse.

But we aren't just a testing-ground for indie-published novels, no sir. Let's put a stop to that rumor, right now. In addition, we have a few flights of lighter fare. In *Cantilever Jones Lands Hard*, we play around with space smuggling in the universe of *Chamber of Pain* from two issues ago. And *Breakdown*, written in second-person, shows us the danger of investigating Steve Martin albums that go bump in the night, and how to solve them with banjos.

Happy reading. There will be more.

Thomas Fitz  
**Publisher**



# The Meditations of Caius Caligulia

## Book III - Of Women

It occurs to me in this monograph that I have laid out the history of my family very neatly, and yet I have ignored one-half of it. This is a commonplace in families. Men are the public face, the names that are recorded in stone and carried on in blood. But to know the heart of any family, to know how it lives, one must know its women.

Unfortunately, I am less able to this, for precisely the same reason. The voices of women are not passed down. Any educated Roman may avail himself of the deed of Augustus, or of Tiberius, or of me. But who really knows the role that my great-grandmother Livia played? Some role, to be certain. Augustus would not have kept her around so long without her having earned it. But how she earned it is a mystery I was too young to know. There are those who say that she was the true master. Certainly the fact that her son succeeded to power can be no accident. But every wife claims to be the ruler of her husband, as every husband of the wife. Only they themselves can know the truth, if they. Leave Livia then to her mystery. She lived in it, and died in it. Of course I made a few poor jokes at her expense, giving, as it were, fire to the rumor of her ignoble birth (fathered by a decurion of Fundi, I believe). But this was all humor. I never believed it, and had she been alive, she would never have condescended to react to it. Besides, I gave out her will to be read at my accession, which Tiberius had suppressed. I was a better son to her than her own that day.

I can say little more of my grandmothers. Of Julia, Augustus' only child and mother of my mother, I know nothing but rumor, which I have learned to distrust. Her exploits have been exaggerated by enemies of the state, but I suspect a kernel of truth lie in them - that she was an unhappy person, who might have made a fine wife for an unambitious senator, but had been thrust by fate to a circle that nothing in her character prepared her for. Peace be upon her; I cannot think she deserved half of what she suffered.

Antonia, daughter of Marc Antony and my father's mother, I knew a little better. She was a Roman patrician of the old school, who raised her children to virtue. I cannot praise my father without acknowledging the role she, a widow, played in his upbringing. If she was disappointed in her daughter Livilla, my aunt, who conspired with Sejanus to murder her husband, Tiberius' son Drusus, what is that? The follies of children can only be held against their parents so far.

I suppose I ought to take a moment to speak more of Antonia's other son, the last man of his generation of our family, and indeed one of the last of our family, period: my uncle Claudius. Some may perceive a slight in me speaking of Claudius among the women, but he would take no umbrage at it. Claudius takes no umbrage of anything. There are few men on this earth for whom I have greater affection. From the moment of my father's death I remember him as the soul of kindness, who never ceased to offer our mother whatever she might need to help look after us. Those who mock his stutter and his limp and call him simple are no friends of mine.

This brings me to my mother. Of whom I cannot speak. Call it the weakness of my humanity, but the wound of her loss cannot, even now, express itself in words, only tears, and screams would then follow. I was brusque just now in dealing with my brothers, and I cannot in good conscience condemn Tiberius too harshly for disposing of them. Men dispose of their enemies. But my mother... no, I will not speak of that. To think of her prowling hell's lightless pools will break my man's heart asunder, and the time is not yet ripe for that.

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Gods bear heavy burdens.

Let us then speak of lighter topics, such as wives. I have had several, and enjoyed them all. Some of them were even my own. The first was Junia Claudia, daughter of Marcus Silanus, a caged peacock who chirped when Tiberius tossed him a fish. She was the sort of upright girl I have always valued, the kind around whom a man may take his rest. I will not pretend to be a doting husband, but I enjoyed her company and treated her with respect. I was surprised at how her death in childbirth affected me. To have by the marital act laid the seed of a wife's death was a moment of revelation for me.

Soon after this I took up with Ennia, the aforementioned wife of Macro. She was a woman of wisdom, a counselor and confidante as much as a lover. I will not, even now, approaching the fullness of my divinity, pretend to know if it was I who seduced her or she who laid in wait for me. Probably the latter. She knew, at any rate, how best to please me. I made a point to spare her the worst of her husband's downfall. She retained at least some of his property, and is now enjoying the frivolous life of a country widow. Many have had it worse.

I took another wife not long after I disposed of Macro and Junia's father. Her name was Livia Orestillia, and I did not care for her very much. She was pretty enough to merit my attention, but I did not want to marry her so much as I wanted to humiliate her intended bridegroom. The rumor has it that I stole her from her wedding day. That story makes me laugh, and it fairly bursts with divine inspiration, but the reality was much more prosaic. I simply visited Caius Calpurnius Piso on the night prior to his wedding and told him that I wish to marry his bride instead. Yes, Calpurnius Piso, the son of the fat miscreant who had poisoned my father. The son had none of the father's taste for blood and acquiesced to my every wish, offering to pay for the festivities. I of course accepted his gentlemanly offer. So the morrow found Livia Orestillia staring in shock as she married the Emperor instead! I could barely contain my laughter. She had interest neither in me nor in the role of Empress - this, more than any joke, would doubtless have offended my great-grandmother - and kept on with Piso now and then, which I cared nothing about. I sent her away soon after and gave Piso admission to the priests of the Arval Brethren. He remains grateful for his humiliation, and my father's shade can rest.

These are of course the formal, public affairs. I have had other women. Not countless, perhaps, but more than many a man. I respect decorum and generally keep my impromptu affairs to married women and widows. Widows I perhaps enjoy more. A woman on the cusp of the change, who has blossomed into understanding of the wicked world, and knows her place in it, without losing that flower of life that men call beauty, she can be a positive delight. But they are not as common as the poets will have us believe. Most widows become so long after they have passed into dignified matronliness, and are as desirable as a stone. But encountering that rare widow such as I have described is like an encounter with Venus herself. Worlds are moved.

Otherwise I content myself with other men's wives. Poor men's wives make fine diversion. Rich men's wives are always political acts. I comforted the wives of both Afranius and Secundus after their deaths. I did so with no illusion of secrecy. I wanted the Senatorial crows to see how it would be. So once I quashed their feeble conspiracies (more on that later), and rebuilt the residence on the Palatine Hill I of course invited the wives of my friends and consular Senators to share my quarters with me. How could they refuse?

I must not overstate my tyranny. Very often, it was I who had the difficult task of refusing. Too many times I was presented with a would-be adulteress and could practically see her husband standing behind her. It would have been less dishonest if the husband had simply offered his own arse instead (speaking of that, I did try a boy once. An actor from a troupe. I did not care for it. Claudius and I are alike in that).

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I will not say that I never had a virgin. One night, soon after I installed the wives and families of consular senators in the Palatine, one of the older daughters of Pomponius - Servillia was her name, appropriately enough - snuck into my quarters after Caesonia had gone to bed. She was fifteen and ripe for the plucking. I saw her game in a moment - currying favor, just like her father - but she made her eyes shine brightly, and the rest of her was comely. I took her maidenhead and let her lie with me until just before dawn, when I sent her away.

I knew it was a mistake of course, but sometimes I have a way of permitting myself mistakes. They are always instructive, and anyway the prerogative of a god.

The next night, of course, she came back. The guile was much reduced - a swooning childless replaced it. I had Tergestes, the chief of my German bodyguard, spank her and send her back to her mother, who punished her more severely for pestering the Emperor.

I let it be known that the next maiden who was seen out of her room after dark would be passed around the Praetorians. I knew a few Praetorians who would have leapt at the chance. But they were disappointed. Just to underline the point, I married young Servillia to a Prefect's son. He keeps her at home, and she gave him at least three of his own children.

Why did I not help myself to every little senator's daughter, to humiliate them? Because they might not have seen it that way. A fresh young *cunnus* was just one more commodity to purchase my favor. If the girls had been virtuous - as some of them were - seducing them might have served. Then again, it might not. Men avenge in their daughters what they tolerate in their wives.

I did enjoy several of the consular's wives. But not the ones who enthusiastically sought my favor. Rather, I looked for the ones who fiend for their husbands were filled with loneliness. I gave them my company and was nothing lest the a right noble gentleman. The ones immune to my charms went away with nothing more than a good meal in their bellies. Few were so gifted.

This cynicism benumbs me. Let me speak of Caesonia, mentioned in passing above. She was a widow, and virtuous as Junia had been. Well, almost as virtuous. She was pregnant by me when I married her. She is not beautiful, as men commonly think, but she has charms enough, and she has the right sort of humble birth to be astounded at her good fortune and find further ambition unthinkable. No Emperor has had a better wife. And she gave me the amusing little beast, Julia Drusilla, which vexes my ambitious sisters so.

The rumors of me and my sisters: hilarious things, they. I do not wonder at them. It is easier for the masses to imagine their rulers as beasts or gods than men like them. How many of our gods married their own sisters? Gods are above the rules of men. So I suppose if I had wanted to, I could have married all my sisters. But it never occurred to me to even do that until the rumors circulated. Which is a fact of intense interest to me. I do not, and never have, desired my sisters. I am rather boringly senatorial that way. It must be a vestige of my manly birth.

After all, most of my daily life is the life of a human. I sleep, I eat, I defecate. I retain this outward show as a connection to my task: to rule men, I live among them, as them. My divinity bursts out from this shell, yet the shell remains. For a time, anyway.

The rumor-mongers might have persuaded more than my enemies if they had at least been consistent. Not only do I not love, I can barely tolerate Livilla the Younger and Agrippinilla. The latter is only alive because of her blood relation

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to me right now. Her role in the great Conspiracy was known to me, and her ambition is repulsive. It makes me pity Tiberius the more, in truth.

It was Drusilla, my oldest sister, who I counted as a friend. She and I were close in age and felt our father's death the hardest. She was my counselor and advisor, one in whom I placed great trust. The other two are as unworthy of our mother as my brothers were of our father.

Drusilla's death did weight heavily upon me for that reason. Not since the death of my father and my mother had a particular human death seemed so enormous to me. I felt, for the first time in my life, truly alone in the world. And for a few nights I could not sleep, and wandered the hills calling out to the moon, daring Diana to prove herself worthy of my lost ones. But the pale goddess had no answer, which was answer enough.

The gods will not interfere. Jupiter himself stands aside, as he stands in me. Drusilla's friendship and love, like my father's goodness, like my mother's suffering, was just one more of the hecatomb that I am owed in sacrifice. I will have my sacrifice. I can do no other. **UJ**

# Ulysses and the Fugitive

by Alfred Underhill

## Chapter 8 - The First Night of Burning Man

The report sat in the passenger seat. He'd already read its contents a half-dozen times, yet he still shot it an apprehensive look. He sat in his car in the CIA headquarters' parking lot. He'd just assumed it was another practical joke when he received the dossier, but when the head of DHS requested a meeting he knew it was real.

Absently brushing the side of his buzz-cut head, he ran through the details:

1. NORAD confirmed the sighting of a UFO above the California desert;
2. A similar object was seen minutes later in South East Asia;
3. 48 hours later, several similar looking objects were seen hovering above the Nevada desert.

He looked at his watch and exhaled slowly. It was time. He threw the report into a folder and put it in his laptop bag. It had been a few years since he'd been inside this building. Outside the headquarters looked the same as he remembered it, yet inside, the CIA had apparently redecorated. Good for them, I guess, he mused. He walked to the front desk and checked-in, then waited to be called. He didn't have to wait long.

"Special Agent O'Flannery?"

"Yes," he said, standing up to shake hands.

"Maura DePace, pleasure to meet you. Please follow me."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ms. DePace lead him to an elevator. They ascended several floors, then she lead him down a handful of bland hallways toward a conference room. She swiped her fob to unlock the door and held it open so he could enter.

"Jonathon O'Flannery. How have you been?" The head of DHS stood as O'Flannery entered the room. The two men shook hands, then he was introduced to the rest of the attendees. With the exception of a lone NASA scientist, all of the assembled company worked for three-letter agencies or a branch of the military. After the introductions, he took a seat at the conference table.

"You've read the report?"

"Yes, sir. Several times. To be frank, I thought it was bullshit until you called this meeting." Everyone laughed or smiled at his candor.

"No doubt, no doubt," said the director. "We do get stuff like this from time to time. Usually it's just some under-slept pilot or a classified test flight. That sort of thing." The director sipped at his water.

"So, what are we looking at this time? More importantly, do we know who we're dealing with?" O'Flannery asked. He

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wasn't one for long preambles or setups. He wanted to know how much he was going to be asked to do.

"We don't know the answer to either of those questions," said the Air Force general.

"There hasn't been any chatter about something like this, as far as we can tell," said the NSA analyst.

"All we really have is what NORAD gave us and a few eyewitness accounts," said the CIA director, looking O'Flannery in the eyes. "The fact that those pieces of information square with each other piqued our interest. We don't know if this is a fluke, something the Russians or the Chinese are developing, or if this is the beginning of a trend or not. That's why we've asked you to come here today: we want you to investigate. We'd like you to start by traveling to the sighting locations to conduct interviews with the witnesses."

O'Flannery nodded. "Very well. I'll begin in Nevada?"

"That's the idea. From there, we'll fly you to Seim Reap. You'll have the usual embassy access and the Station Chief will share whatever resources he can."

"I'm leaving tonight?"

"That's not a problem is it?"

"No, sir. With our history, I expected as much."

"Very good, Jonathan," The director said, sliding him a packet. "Inside you'll find a short list of eyewitnesses as well as a list of contacts if you require assistance." O'Flannery paged through the slim packet. The list of agency and military contacts handily outnumbered the eyewitnesses. He nodded at all of it, then looked at the director, who said, "Your flight is in four hours. We'll update you if there are more incidents like these. Ms. DePace is outside; she'll show you out."

"Thank you, sir. I'll be in touch." He stood up and shook hands with everyone present, then walked out of the conference room.

\* \* \*

O'Flannery hated the desert heat. He went to Las Vegas once on vacation, but this was his first time in Reno. Everywhere in Vegas was air conditioned, and the same was true for Reno, but there was something he just didn't like about this city. The early September heat certainly didn't help, neither did being on a bullshit assignment that would probably net him a big fat goose egg. For his troubles, he could look forward to trading in the stifling dry heat of the desert for the stifling wet heat of the jungle when he got to Cambodia. He grimaced inside his rental car, AC on full blast.

O'Flannery flipped through his packet and glanced at the front of the home he'd just left. The witness statements from his first interview were worthless. His second interview, which he'd just finished, had yielded a grainy phone video of some glowing blobs and emphatic statements that the blobs were flying saucers. O'Flannery sighed. His well-trained skeptic's eye just didn't buy it. There was a far more earthly explanation for whatever lay at the center of this phenomena; he just hadn't found it yet. At least he got a copy of the video for his files. It was something he could show his superiors to demonstrate his due diligence. Two down, two to go, he thought.

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His phone rang. He didn't recognize the number, but it had the same exchange as some of his contacts in the Las Vegas field office.

"Jonathon O'Flannery," he said, answering the call.

"Hello? Agent O'Flannery?"

"Speaking."

"Sir, this is Collins from the branch office. We got a situation playing out right now near Lockwood. Could you head down there?"

O'Flannery gritted his teeth at the vague request. "Absolutely. Can you tell me exactly what kind of situation is playing out near Lockwood?"

"Three unidentified craft have been sighted in the airspace outside of Lockwood. The air force is about to engage and the national guard should be on site soon. We're coordinating our office's resources and personnel with the highway patrol. We expect to have agents and patrolmen there within the hour. I've sent you the GPS coordinates through secure text."

"I'm on my way." O'Flannery hung up. The sound of uncertainty in Collins' voice quickened his pulse. His phone buzzed to notify him of the coordinates. He clicked on them to start navigation and sped away.

\* \* \*

The trail of dark smoke was visible from miles away. O'Flannery had been going back and forth with Collins and whoever else he could reach on his contact list while he was driving. He almost ran off the road a few times. None of his contacts could reach anyone at the site. His pulse thudded so hard it blurred his vision.

He parked the car on the side of the road. This was as close as he could get to the site. He pulled his 9mm from beneath his jacket. He had it, two magazines, and his back-up .40 caliber. I should've requisitioned a long gun, he thought. Neither the guns he had nor the guns he wished for did anything to assuage the feeling of naked vulnerability that O'Flannery felt. He hated feeling like he wasn't in control of a situation. If he could just focus a little more on how much he hated feeling this afraid, maybe he could get angry enough to push through whatever situation he found outside.

O'Flannery stepped out of the car, holding his 9mm at the ready. He paused to scan the site through his binoculars. He could see two circular metallic objects surrounding by tanks and armored vehicles. Some personnel were standing by near some of the armored vehicles. Further away was the wreck of what looked like a fighter; it was the source of the smoke. What seemed odd was how still the whole scene looked. Nobody was moving. Everyone was just standing still, like they were frozen in place. The only thing that seemed to move was the smoke and fire from the downed plane. O'Flannery sucked his breath in through his teeth.

He got out his phone and tried calling Collins, but he had no signal. He squinted at his phone's screen through the glare of daylight. Waving the phone around and taking a few steps from his car didn't gain him any reception. They must've radioed in the call, he thought.



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"Well, fuck it," he said, and began picking his way toward the site.

Approaching an incident site like this without being able to identify himself was incredibly dangerous. If someone saw him before he could identify himself, they might just shoot him and figure out who he was later. O'Flannery felt like he had swallowed a cinder block. He kept moving slowly through the desert heat toward the nearest jeep, scanning constantly for someone who might spot him. As he neared the jeep he could hear it's engine idling, and the thrum of the nearest tank engine. Noticeably absent was the sound of voices, either live or broadcast over a radio. He could feel the hairs on his arms standing up and his sweat turned cold. Something was very wrong.

O'Flannery looked into the driver-side window of the jeep: empty. He looked around. Nobody was posted or patrolling to watch the perimeter. No one seemed to be inside the humvee nearby which was the next closest vehicle. Twenty yards away a soldier stood next to a tank, facing away from him. What the fuck is going on? What kind of operation is this? He thought to himself, walking over to the serviceman.

"Excuse me, soldier?" He said it tapping the man on the shoulder. "I'm special agent Jonathon O'Flannery. Can you tell me where your CO is? I need to be briefed on the situation here." O'Flannery had his badge in hand to show the grunt, but he didn't turn or acknowledge the special agent. O'Flannery stepped around to face the serviceman and saw the gaze of a man who was alive but not present.

"Soldier?" O'Flannery snapped his fingers in front of the man's face. He blinked, yet his eyes remained vacant. "What the hell is going on?" He said softly, looking at the soldier with concern. He looked to the tank. Whoever was inside was probably in the same state as the soldier outside. O'Flannery reached for his phone and saw that he still didn't have any service. He tried making a few calls anyway but none connected.

He checked the serviceman for a radio but found nothing. He went back to the jeep and got inside. There, he found a radio handset. Static crackled when he turned it on. The keys were in the ignition, so he turned it over and punched the AC. He began dialing through the channels on the radio, trying to find anything resembling chatter. Several minutes of searching yielded only uniform static.

"This is fucking Twilight Zone bullshit," O'Flannery mumbled under his breath. He glanced around the site from inside the jeep, but the scene outside was exactly as he had found it scant minutes ago. He looked around the interior of the vehicle for anything useful: notes, phones, guns, a flak jacket, but couldn't find anything worth commandeering.

He killed the engine. Something in his gut was telling him to leave. He could go back to his rental and drive until he had signal, then call for backup. Yeah, but you can't call for backup without more intel, O'Flannery thought. He wasn't an indecisive man nor one that scared easily, yet Jonathon O'Flannery stood frozen in fear in the heat of the desert. After a few heart beats in the eerie silence of the crash site, O'Flannery decided he'd use the jeep to do a quick drive around the edge of the site. He promised himself solemnly he'd get right the fuck out of dodge after his little recon drive. He turned the key in the ignition.

O'Flannery backed the jeep up and began driving the jeep around the perimeter of the site. He saw a soldier here and there standing by a tank or Jeep, each seemingly frozen in place like the one he tried to talk to.

Close to halfway around the site he could see the crash a bit better. Hopefully the pilot ejected, he thought, looking at the burning debris. Frightened as he was, O'Flannery knew he couldn't risk crossing the debris field; he'd have to double back to check the other side of the perimeter. Hanging a slow U-turn, he got a better look at the UFOs from

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his present angle. They looked just like the flying saucers in the B-movies he watched as kid, more like novelty campers than aircraft. He shook his head and began driving back around the way he came. For a moment, he thought he saw the tank turrets moving.

Getting closer to his starting point, O'Flannery's stomach fell away as he noticed that the tank turrets were moving. Specifically, they were beginning to track the path of the jeep he was driving.

"No, no, no, no!" he screamed, and began cursing. He gunned the engine and swerved in a wide arc away from the perimeter, then barreled toward the tank closest to where he'd gotten the jeep. His half-formed idea was to get close enough to the tank before it or any of the others could fire on him. He wasn't sure what he was going to do once he got to the tank in front of him.

He pulled up, then half-jumped, half-fell out of the jeep. He waved his arms over his head, shouting his own name and title as he watched the tank turrets converge on the jeep. O'Flannery had experienced several particularly unfortunate things in his lifetime, added to that list was standing next to an Abrahams tank firing a shell at pointblank range.

O'Flannery realized the sky took up the entirety of his field of vision.

It's pretty, not too hot either, he felt the words more than thought them. He was vaguely aware of a distant, high-pitched whine that reminded him of...something. He gazed absently at the sky, which was making him sleepy. Shock. I'm in shock, he thought. His brain squirmed with effort. He tried moving his eyes, wiggling his fingers and toes. All of these tiny motions felt laborious, complicated, and very far away. He kept trying.

"You are suitable habitation," said a voice he couldn't see; it was the only thing he could hear over the droning whine in his ears. What? Was all he could think in response.

"You are suitable habitation," the voice said again. Whoever was talking was doing it right into his brain. Brain damage, injury, O'Flannery thought.

"You will be healed," said the voice, "when we are inhabiting you. Now."

O'Flannery felt something warm on his torso but couldn't move to see it. The warmth was very pleasant and made his eyelids close. He was feeling good now. Feeling like he needed a rest.

## Chapter 9 - Returning to the Burn

Ulysses awoke with the sun. Nera still slept next to him. She'd kicked off the covers and was stretched out on her side facing him. Even asleep she looked tired. One of her ears poked out of her disheveled hair as she drew deep, slow breaths. Aww, she's adorable, Ulysses thought.

Nera's eyes snapped open as she let out a scream, interrupting Ulysses's reverie. It took a few seconds for recognition to dawn on her face, despite his attempts at comfort.

"You okay?"

"I...uh, yes. Sorry. That dream was very... realistic. I forgot where we were. It took me a moment to remember. "

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"Makes sense. I was a little confused when I woke up too. Can I get you anything?"

"Water, please."

Ulysses kissed Nera then got out of bed and fetched a bottle of water. She sat up and drank half the bottle, then stared off into space as their room grew brighter in the sunrise. Nera looked at him.

"What now?" She asked.

"I was going to ask you that. We definitely need to figure out our next step. I don't have enough money for another night at this hostel."

She looked at the window curtain. Ulysses put his hand on hers, prompting her turn to him with a weak smile. She leaned over and pecked him on the lips, then held his gaze.

"What do you think we should do?"

"Well," he said, "we could always just go back to the burn. You said that the playa dust you collected was enough to keep us from being detected. You could drop me off at the car, and I could meet you back at the burn. You could park your, uh, ship closer so we don't have to travel as far to pick it back up once Burning Man is over."

She nodded once at him. "I don't need to drop you off. We can carry the car back with my ship. That way we can leave the ship far enough away from the burn without either of us having to walk all the way back."

Ulysses grinned at her. "Done with walking around in the desert, huh? I dunno, Nera, you might not be cut out for the burner lifestyle." She cracked a smile and gently shoved him. "Ooh, I like a strong lady." Nera shoved him off the bed in response. They both laughed, and Ulysses picked himself up off the floor to sit next to her again. "In all seriousness, though, I think we've got solid plan."

"What should we tell Giles?"

"That's a good question," Ulysses said. "I don't know what we should tell him because I can't figure out what to say about any of this, about you. I mean, you do understand that this situation- our situation- is completely out of the ordinary, right? There is no recorded contact between humans and extraterrestrials in the history of this planet. Your ship's technology is completely unlike anything humans can make. So you and I are in a unique set of circumstances."

Nera frowned. "I'm sorry, Ulysses. I don't mean to be so much trouble."

"Don't apologize. You came here because you were just trying to survive. I can't fault you for that and nobody else should either. It's just that contact with life from anywhere other than this planet has never happened before. Can you understand why we need to keep this to ourselves, at least for now?"

"Yes, the national government would take my ship."

"Honey, they wouldn't just take your ship, they'd take you too. They'd take you and they'd never let you go. You would never be free again. Hell, they'd probably take me too, since we're...you know."

## Ulysses and the Fugitive 9

"Because we've had sexual intercourse?"

"Well, yeah, that's one reason. Probably. I think they'd take me because we're involved. Because we're together. They'd use me to get information out of you. "

"Together? Like a pair-bond?"

"Yes, like a pair-bond."

She smiled at him, tears welling up in her eyes. Instantly she crushed Ulysses to herself in a fierce embrace, kissing him. "Oh, Ulysses! I very much like that we've formed this bond. I can think of no other human I would want to share it with!"

"Nera, honey, I can't breathe," he weezed. She relaxed her arms and helped Ulysses sit up. After a few deep breathes and some sips of water, he looked at Nera whose face beamed at him.

"I must be the first of my people in generations that gets to chose whom they pair-bond with. The rest of my people have that choice made for them." Her expression turned sad.

"I'm sorry, Nera. I feel bad for your people. I think I'm really lucky to have met you, though. I want to try to help you adjust to life on Earth however best I can."

"I appreciate that, but I don't know how comfortable I can get with the hyssopshebolith searching for me. I doubt they'll leave this planet without finding me..."

Ulysses nodded solemnly at her. He didn't know what to say or do to improve Nera's lot. All he knew for sure was that he was falling for her. Slowly he reached for Nera and held her in his arms. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Let's get ourselves some breakfast and head back to Black Rock." He said, shifting to get up.

"Okay, but not yet," she smiled at him, holding his hand. "First, I need to develop an appetite." She guided his hand to rest between her thighs.

Ulysses smiled at her. "Oh okay, but only because you asked so nicely." His tone was exaggerated yet sincere.

She kissed him with such force his teeth hurt, yet Ulysses barely noticed. He wanted to push himself as hard as could to meet Nera's passion. He just hoped his body would take the strain.

\* \* \*

They arrived from Cambodia as quickly as they left. Ulysses felt relieved the rental car was exactly where they'd left it. Transporting the car using Nera's ship appeared effortless from inside of it, though he had no idea what the operation looked like to an outside observer. He hoped against hope that no one saw a UFO towing a convertible through the night sky. Of course, the flight after they had picked up the car only lasted mere seconds.

They hid Nera's saucer a few miles from the burn. Ulysses asked her to try bury the craft without a lightshow because

## Ulysses and the Fugitive 9

it was still dark in Nevada. She managed it, but not quietly. The earth shifted in waves around the saucer as it spun downward into the playa. Ulysses lost track of it once it was below the surface, but the cloud of dust the craft had generated made it hard to see anything. He could feel the saucer moving underground, and thought that he must be experiencing what's it's like to stand outside during an earthquake. Then the shaking stopped. Dust, rock, and earth poured into the hole created by the saucer. The ground wasn't level, but it had filled in far more than Ulysses expected. He shook his head hard, and made his way to the car. The ground settled. Ulysses turned the car over, put it in drive, and drove them back to Burning Man.

Black Rock City had not noticed the pair's absence nor their return. Back inside the burn, Ulysses went directly to the tent he shared with Giles. He stuck his head into the shade cloth covered pavilion and found it empty. Ulysses called out for his Australian friend but got no response. He unzipped the tent and beckoned for Nera to follow him.

"I think we really lucked out," said Ulysses opening his clothing bin. He selected a shirt and his other pair of jeans, then started changing his clothes.

"Why is that?" Nera asked, staring at him with confusion.

"Uh, let's see: the car was where we left it, without any sign of law enforcement; as far as we know, no one saw us grab the car; we hid your ship without anyone noticing and without having to walk miles back to the burn; we've been gone for about a day, and it's unlikely that anyone is the wiser, except maybe Giles, who's not even here right now. So in light of all that, I think we're pretty lucky." He punctuated the end of his sentence by pulling his t-shirt down and straightening it.

Nera smiled at him. "Are you sure we shouldn't tell Giles anything?"

"Yes," said Ulysses without hesitating. "If only you and I know the details about you and where you come from, life will be a lot simpler for both of us. Keeping things to ourselves will buy us time to come up with a longer-term plan."

"Okay," she said with a nod.

"Nera, I don't like it either, but I don't know what else to do right now. We've only got two more days left at the burn. Are you comfortable hanging out with me here and trying to have some fun until it's over?"

"I am," she smiled at him. "I like how you have fun."

"When we get back to my place in Denver, we can sort out a long term plan. Sound good?"

She nodded and leaned in to give him a kiss that loosened his front teeth.

"Honey, you keep kissing me like that and I won't have single tooth left in my head."

Nera blushed. "Sorry, I get excited and forget to be gentle. I don't want to hurt you." She held Ulysses hand delicately.

"It's all right, darling. I was exaggerating a little bit anyway. If you can hold back a little on my mouth, though, I would

## Ulysses and the Fugitive 9

appreciate it." He kissed Nera, who gently and enthusiastically reciprocated.

\* \* \*

Back on the playa, Nera had a renewed interest in the sights and sounds of the burn. She peppered Ulysses with questions about almost everything they came across: art installations, theme camps, The Man, The Temple, hair styles, makeup, music, and countless little things. Ulysses got a charge out of trying to answer each query, yet admitted when he didn't know.

After hours of renewed exploration, they returned to camp. A light inside the pavilion told them Giles was in camp. Nera looked at Ulysses, who nodded to her as they walked up to the entrance.

"Giles?"

"Oi, Lee! How the fuck are you? Haven't seen you all day." Giles' wasn't slurring his words but he was definitely slowed by drink. He looked at Ulysses with a grin that widened when he saw Nera entering the pavilion just behind his friend.

"I'm doing pretty good, thanks. Nera and I have just been paling around. Sorry we missed you earlier today."

"That's okay. I took pretty good care of meself." Giles laughed at his own statement. "Ooh, did you two find one of those camps with a shower? Neither of you look terribly crusty."

"Yeah, basically. We definitely availed ourselves of the conveniences built by others." Ulysses said.

"Where was it? I might try to give it a go tomorrow."

"Down by the RVs. Fair warning: I think we might have been some of the last ones in. The folks running the shower said they were running low on wash water."

"Balls! Ah, well. Maybe I'll wander around down there tomorrow anyway. See if someone else has got some agua to spare. That's how you say it, right? Agua? How's me accent?"

"Not bad. But I don't think you'll get a job interpreting at the U.N. just yet."

"Fuck off! My Spanish is perfect. las cortinas están en llamas. Or how about, el baño está ubicado en la parte superior de la tarántula? Both Ulysses and Nera giggled at Giles.

"Buddy, I don't know how to tell you this, but the drapes are, in fact, not on fire. We don't even have drapes in here. Nor do I know how to tell you that the bathroom is not located on top of the tarantula." He laughed. "Your accent did sound a bit better with those nonsense phrases, though."

"I could get a job teaching fucking Spanish in a week. Watch me. I'll do it just to spite you, Lee." Giles' eyes held a maniacal gleam.

"Yeah, well, I feel sorry for your students. Also, you'll have to tell me all about it because you'll be back in Sydney in a

week."

"Good fucking, riddance, eh?" Giles grimaced at Ulysses as he lit a cigarette.

"That's right, fuck off back to wombat country, you Aussie dick." Ulysses grinned at his friend. "Seriously, you know it's always a blast to hang with you. And I like that we can do our own shit too, and it's cool."

"Definitely," said Giles. He was too drunk to be guileful. "It's good times when we can hangout." He raised the empty beer can he clutched to toast. "That said, I think I'm going to have some agua and turn in."

"Before you fall down?"

"Fuck you."

"Good night, Giles."

"Night, Lee. Nera." He nodded to both of them as he moved out of the pavilion and into the tent. Ulysses and Nera waited until they heard Giles snoring before entering the tent themselves. They readied for sleep quietly. They curled up on the bedroll together in the dark. Both knew that they needed to come up with some kind of plan, but that would be later. Right now, they had two days left before they returned to the real world and its problems.

\* \* \*

The next day they spent wandering the burn again. They stopped by Sophie and Ron's bar camp to say hi at one point, but didn't hang out for a drink. That night, they watched The Man burn. Fire dancers spun fire with poi, fans, staves, whips, swords, and objects the three had trouble identifying. One guy even had a set of flaming crystal sticks. Ulysses and Nera held hands and cheered as the effigy burned. Giles whooped along with them. It was late before everyone retired for the evening.

Their last full day of the burn was quiet. Ulysses, Nera, and Giles were sleep deprived and hung-over. Ulysses let Giles know that they would need to drop Nera off in the desert on their way home, and that she would catch up to them later in Denver. Giles was incredulous at the plan, yet eventually stopped asking questions about it. Both he and Ulysses began prepping to leave by triaging what was left of their supplies and packing up nonessentials.

Later that night, they watched The Temple burn. Giles was the only one of the three that had written a message to be burned in the temple. It was just one word: fascism. Several onlookers nodded their approval. Hours later, the three of them stood with a subdued crowd to watch fire consume the temple, and with it, the psychic baggage of many of those assembled.

In the morning, they broke camp and packed up. Ulysses made sure Nera knew where he lived in Denver. They packed everything into the car and drove the young woman into the portion of the desert where Nera's saucer was buried. Ulysses kissed her goodbye, saying that he'd see her in Denver. And with that, Ulysses made his way to the highway. It was time for the real world. **UJ**



# Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

*by Al Kuhawliq*

The *Jones* slides out of hyperspace and I hear that "wop" in my inner ear that I always hear when that happens. It's so gentle that the first dozen times I wasn't even sure that I had heard anything. Then for a while I thought it was just my imagination. Truth be told, I'm still not certain it isn't my imagination. When you decide that a thing is true or not true, the mind tends to automatically focus on the information it needs to confirm it.

I ask inside my mind, *"Hey Norl, do you ever hear anything coming out of hyperspace?"*

I feel a tiny coiled lizard wiggle in my jacket pocket, and my mind's ear hears *"Rand, if you ever ask me that again, I will arrange to remove one of us by the first convenient airlock."*

I decided to take that as a yes.

I should know better, because Norl always curls up in my jacket pocket whenever anything hyperspace-related happens: in, out, during, it doesn't matter. There's a logical explanation for it, too - hyperspace tends to drag on those who are sensitive to the absurdity of it, who thinks too hard about what it means, who are generally sensitive mentally and emotionally. And no one is more sensitive than a psionic, even if it is a tiny lizard who will not hesitate to eat your food if you turn around.

*"I do not."*

"Report, Vin,"

"Current position mid-orbit above Zinzo-6. Imperial frigates sitting around like ducks watching a log, as usual."

"Interesting metaphor."

"Is it?"

"Ducks don't usually watch logs."

"I have no idea what ducks or logs are. I just follow programming."

Programming, they say. I think the nav-bots are so overloaded with information - they have to be - that any personality they start with turns into one of morose depression after long enough service. Then again, it might be that the programmers on *Ixus-2* are so morose from watching their creations take off while they sit where they are to joylessly code thought for the next batch of thinkums, that they can't help but put a little bit of their personality into the rational principles the bots draw from. Or maybe it's something else altogether.

*"Maybe it's something else..."* giggles Norl.

*"You aren't funny."*

## Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

The low-frequency hum of an imperial hailing bursts through my musing. I tap a button and open it, without really being in a rush. Being in a rush ruins everything.

"This is the Frigate *Fury*," says a voice on the sub-band com. "Identify yourself."

"This is the Freighter *Cantilever Jones*," I reply.

"*Cantilever Jones*, what is your registry?" asks the voice. They probably already have this, and they're just checking to see if I know it. Which makes sense. Can't expect them to recognize it in the depths of space. "Imperial merchant-auxiliary registry 590-EN-215," I say.

A moment passes and I have Vin slow us down. Again, there really isn't any rush. Besides, you should never risk getting too close to these gunships. Even if your papers are perfectly in order - as mine always are - you can never tell when they might decide to blow you back to stardust anyway, just to keep themselves in practice being heartless. It must be exhausting, having to work so hard at being assholes.

"*Cantilever Jones*, Are you Rand Thrax?" replies the voice.

"Yes, I am Rand Thrax." I could go into my personal commercial License, but they haven't asked for that yet. You don't want to seem too eager. They don't like eager. It stinks of liveliness.

"*Cantilever Jones*, Commercial License number?"

"74-3826524. Renewed 12 Stygius 498.587"

Another pause. I never know if they're checking or just trying to intimidate with silence. They're not mutually exclusive, honestly.

"*Cantilever Jones*, entry granted. Proceed to Spaceport Plural Beta, Docking Bay 17."

"Spaceport Plural Beta, Docking Bay 17. Understood."

There is no further response, which is fine. Boring conversation anyway.

The Jones cuts through the ionized pinkish Zinzoan clouds, giving off sparks that look like droplets of water on the pane of the cockpit before they burst out of existence. I'm told that occasionally the clouds clear to reveal an actual sight of the star Zinzo and a pale orange sky, but most of the time it's overcast and drizzly. Which is fine, as Zinzo is one of the uglier stars in this quadrant, and the glistening pink clouds are pretty.

"Bring us in soft, Vin," I say.

"Soft, right," he replies, and I almost think I hear him sigh, but that also just be the story I tell myself. We come in just east of Plural Beta, which is not a city that existed before the Zinzoans began this futile rebellion against the Emperor, so it's less a city than a hive of soldiers and support personnel. The land has been cleared of vegetation and the alternating yellow-red arc lights throughout are powered from a pit that's drilled down into geotherms feeding off the tectonic energy like a vast metallic parasite. It's a monument to what Stygius' armed forces can do and it's hideous to

## Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

look at.

"The hell without intermission," I intone solemnly to myself, so pronounced is my reaction.

*"Since when do you quote old Bindu texts?"* bubbles Norl in my mind.

*"When the damnation suits, wear it,"* I reply.

Vin execute a landing soft enough to keep babies asleep were there any aboard. I compliment his performance and he fixes me with his one baleful optic camera and then mutters something about readying the manifest. I stand and stretch and feel Norl at last uncoil and pick his way up my shoulder and take a friendly nip at my left earlobe. He does it every time and I barely notice it anymore, so I hope it's some esoteric reason and not vengeance at having subjected him to hyperspace again. The only thing worse than vengeance delayed is vengeance unnoticed.

I stretch out of my captain's chair and head for the personnel exit underneath the wings. I grab a dark brown scur-leather jacket and pull all zips and close all pockets. Then I unhook the strap on my lasgun and let it dangle at my hip, clinking slightly with each step. I know people in the line - smugglers of experience, even -- who think it the height of foolishness to wear a weapon in the sight of any Imperial officer. But my intuition and experience tells me that trained killers are not bothered by the sight of weapons or the bravura of one wearing them. It's the ones who feign innocence and harmlessness that arouses their suspicion and contempt, not necessarily in that order. It's the oldest and truest smuggler trick: look like you belong there, and people will assume you do.

So I don't make eye contact with the brooding tower of officiousness in a Legion Underofficer uniform, I just amble over and present my credentials and manifest, which he scans while I turn my back to admire my ship. The Jones is a T-111 SluTech Fighter-Bomber, one of the newer models to emerge from the shipyards of Goran-4, which is always a fun planet to visit if you like seeing dense virgin forests surrounding domed technopoli. CJ is shiny and cream-colored and still has that new ship smell (which is also built on Goran-4, and marketed to people who buy after-market ships from owners who have excellent service records, like me).

I look back over at the Underofficer "You gonna be long?"

*"Why are you taunting him?"* says Norl in my mind.

*"Curious about how tautable he is."*

*"The scar along his cheek says not very tautable."*

*"Please. This guy's a clerk. That scar's an affectation. He probably did it himself and rubbed salt into it."*

*"Next you'll be saying he castrated himself..."*

*"Nah. He's not the Deathguard type."*

*"I dunno, Rand. He kind of bothers me."*

I make it a habit to trust Norl's instincts - why have a psionic familiar if not to pay attention to his intuitions - so when

## Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

the guy calls me scum and barks a bunch of threatening noise at me I do not needle him further. I know it to be bluster, anyway. The Legions neither produce nor haul their material supports for themselves, but rely on third-party transports - bonded private captains like yours truly - to supply them with even their ammunition. It's a chaotic system that invites abuse, and they know it, but for some reason the Emperor likes it that way. So I just smile and say "The Emperor is just."

He glares at me like he'd like to rip my guts out with his little finger but he just hands my credential chip back to me and says "we'll begin unloading your cargo shortly. Do not leave the facility." And then he looks off in a perpendicular direction, and I am to consider myself dismissed.

So I find a convenient barrel to sit on as I wait for the real work to begin, smoking a stick of kalnash while locals with beaten eyes unload crate after crate of weapons and ammunition for the Legions under the watchful glare of the Underofficer. I observe him, looking at the naavies with predatory intent, and I decide that Norl is right: he's not just putting on a show of authority; he actually is a sadist. The crew avoids eye contact with him and scurries about quickly performing their tasks. I would be repulsed by it if it wasn't so obligatory. This is how people get used to tyranny. Then I notice one still looking around, albeit furtively, at his environment, rather than submissively eyeing the floor in front of him. I decide that this is the one I need to pay attention to, and crushing the butt of my kalnash stick on my heel, I walk back up to the *Jones'* exit ramp. The Underofficer pays me no mind. Once aboard, I wait by it for my contact to... well, make contact.

This happens in a few minutes. The aware fellow comes up from aft along the gangway and pulls down the brown cloth hood around his hair, which tumbles down around his shoulders in long tresses and reveals to me, along with a reappraisal of his figure and the features of his face, that he is not a he at all.

"You must be Harn. I'm unfamiliar with Zinzoan names, I took it for a man's."

"It is," she says, "and it isn't really mine."

"What's really yours?"

"Not today, Rand Thrax."

"So you know my name, but I can't know yours? Bit unfair."

She smirks and says "The Emperor is Just."

I smirk back.

"Where is it?" she says.

"Where is what?"

"What we paid you for."

"There are holding cells throughout. False walls and the like. I have it."

"And you have all of it?"

## Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

"Of course. At least a month's worth of medical supplies and high-quality disinfectant."

"Alcohol-based disinfectant?"

"Yes. As requested. Now where is my..."

Her voice grows with excitement "And the other thing?"

"The other thing," I take a step to her. She's pretty in a tight-bob, wiry kind of way. "I have that, too."

"Where?"

"Let's talk about my payment..."

Her eyes grow wide, and I see, for a moment, ferocity. "Where?!" she says.

*"Did you see that, Norl?"*

*"I did. Best not rattle this one, Rand. She's got Imperial-Induced-Trauma written all over her. If she has a family member above ground, I'd be very surprised."*

"Right here," I say, and from my inner jacket pocket pull a tubular vial of bluish liquid. This isn't medicine or anything else designed to keep anyone alive. It's a very dangerous substance called Calosil that is harvested from cloud-beasts on Eurna-7 and I don't know anything about how the harvesting takes place other than it's not a career for people concerned about longevity. It has a variety of industrial uses, none of which are really medical or military. She exhales when she sees it, rapt. "Is it pure?"

"As pure as you can get," I say. "Now about my money..."

"Leave it here," she says, eyes still on the vial. "When we're done unloading, you'll have a window of time before you're cleared for departure. Six hours, give or take. There's a canteen two blocks away where workers gather and soldiers don't. You'll be compensated there. Do you have a nav-bot?"

"Of course," I say. "And he can show you the hidden cargo. Just don't expect my level of charm."

She smirks again. "Make sure you leave that here,"

"I'm sure not walking around Plural Beta with it," I say. "I'll leave it in the cockpit. Sound good?"

"Sure," she says, but her body language indicates total disinterest coupled with a desire to flee. In fact, she nods to me and does just that.

*"I'm gonna learn her name."*

*"You're an idiot, Rand."*

## Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

*"That's Master Idiot to you."*

*"Oh of course, Master Idiot. Please forgive me, Master Idiot."*

*"What's your favorite part of hyperspace, Norl?"*

*"I hate you."*

I saunter back down the ramp very pleased with myself. The Underofficer is beating a worker with a cheap flash-whip and he seems to be pleased with how his day is turning out, too.

\* \* \*

I find the canteen via Norl's sense of smell. He says it's the only establishment that doesn't smell like iron and laundry. I'm not sure I know what he's talking about but we get to this place underneath a sign carved into some old piece of dry-rotted wood that says something in Zinzoan I can't understand but looks modest enough. Inside a handful of the same downcast bastards who were unloading my ship a moment before are now waxing merry and playing Oocarroo with their modest pay, cheering each victory and defeat with throated glee.

I wander over to a table and when a girl comes by and calls me "starman" I tell her I'll have the usual. She nods and wanders off and Norl crawls down my sleeve to my hand and nibbles at the wood of the table. I tell him not to eat it and call him a dope but he calls me a shriek that's apparently an unprintable insult in his lizard language and one or two Zinzoans look at us queer but we laugh inside our minds. The girl brings a mug of some kind of spice beer and a bowl of light fried snacks. Both taste okay.

A little while goes by and I see not-Harn slip through the door. I feel the impulse to wave her over but I suppress it. Rule One of Smuggling: Never act like you want to see anyone. I drink my beer and feed Norl a fried something and did not watch her come over.

She sits down and faces oblique from me and we wait for the girl to come by and she has the same as me and now Norl has two bowls to poach food from ("I am not poaching") and we pretend to make idle small talk and then she rubs her leg against mine.

"My boot," she says "You'll find it in there."

"Really?"

She scowls at me.

*"That was moderately kinky, Master Idiot."*

*"So it's not just me."*

*"Nothing is ever just you."*

## Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

I reach down and find her boot off and under me. I find a thin package containing what I assume is a credit scan drive. I kick the boot back over to her.

"We decided," she says, "That given the circumstances, a bonus was called for."

"Circumstances?" I say. "I flew in on an Imperial ammo charter. I was getting paid no matter what happens."

"I know."

"The Calosil was a finagle. A guy owed me a favor. I took no risk."

She shrugged. I looked over to see if anyone was watching us. No one appeared to be, which made me suddenly very paranoid.

*"Don't panic, Rand. There's something she's not saying."*

*"I know that, Norl. I'm waiting for her to tell me."*

*"You know what the best way to do that is?"*

"It sounds like," I said, "that there's something you're not telling me."

"Yeah," she said, "About that..." And from her belt she pulled a small detonator with a red button on top.

*"Oh no..."*

*"Oh no..."*

And as the explosion sounded from blocks away, causing drunk Zinzoans to fall drunkenly from their wooden chairs and mugs to fall from trays and girls to stagger against the bar, all I could think of was that if any part of Vin survived and was salvageable, there'd be no talking to him.

\* \* \*

The man who questions me while I'm sitting in an iron chair with sharp angles with my hands bound behind me with red steel handcuffs is not an Underofficer, nor is he imperial Legion. The all-black uniform would be giveaway enough, but even if he were naked I could tell by his eyes; redder than the ember of a dying star. This man is one of the Emperor's own Deathguard. That's how well the fight against the Zinzoan insurgency is going.

I was arrested in a foolish attempt to verify that the Cantilever Jones was as destroyed as it sounded. It was: scraps and shards of it could be found for blocks. Docking bays 15,16,17, and 18 were all out of commission. Naturally they picked me up. Who could have expected otherwise?

Still, the sight of the iridium blade hanging at his hip did not fill me with confidence. Even though I knew I was blameless - well, not entirely, but I certainly didn't blow up my own ship - I couldn't escape the notion that nothing I said was going to make any difference.



## Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

So I decided trying couldn't hurt.

"I didn't do this," I said.

He looked at me not with contempt or rage but with a kind of bemusement. This was both terrifying and a confirmation of my initial intuition. I was hosed.

"Whoever did this, I had nothing to do with. I am a freighter captain..."

"Not anymore," he said, with a voice like ash blowing in the wind.

"Not at present, but that brings me to my point. I have no motive to blow up my ship..."

"I don't think you did. But we found residue of disinfectant and Calisol everywhere."

"And...?"

"So you did have those things on board."

"I did."

"They weren't on your manifest."

"And since they weren't part of the charter here, they didn't have to be. The disinfectant, and Calisol, and a bunch of other medical supplies were for a private charter, to be delivered to some spice miners on Rakkis after I finished here."

"Any records of this charter?"

"The Transport Guild Bank. Which you can access via my ship's registry number."

"What about the Calisol?"

"What about it?"

"Transporting Calisol requires special permits. You have none."

"Transporting Calisol requires special permits for commercial licenses dated after 14 Stygius 499.062. I'm grandfathered in. I can transport it under a regular charter so long as the charter records it. You'll find that it does."

He leaned over and smiled and I very nearly wet myself. "You're full of answers, aren't you?" He said softly.

"Right answers do not satisfy wrong questions," I said.

"Ah," he said, "an educated man." And then he hit me across the face with what felt like an brick but was probably just the back of his hand. I landed hard on my side spitting blood and he stalked around me like a beast in a cage.

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Oh, well. It was worth a shot.

"I don't know if you really did anything at all, flyboy," came the ashen voice. "But I'm not going to leave the doubt in my mind unanswered."

And that's when Norl crawled out of my sleeve and gave a little cry that probably meant glorious blood-death in his lizard language but really just sounded like an squirmy squawk to us.

*"Norl, don't..."*

*"Shut your scum mouth, Master-Idiot..."*

And there followed a battle of arcane minds and wills between my tiny lizard familiar and this avatar of the Death-Emperor that I cannot really put into words. Call it a multi shading of the colors of thought. Call it spiritual toxic warfare. I just know that no one won, because a knock came at the door, and when the Deathguard was done listening to the message and cutting in half the messenger with his iridium blade, he stalked out of the room without a word. I was so surprised at this development that I did not even protest Norl slinking over to the dead man's body and feasting on his blood. I knew he needed it and wouldn't listen to me anyway. So I just lay there for a while. Soon a pair of Legion grunts came and undid my cuffs and hauled me up. The arm I landed on still hurt like hell but it wasn't broken, so I barely minded them shoving me along. I also didn't notice the first tree I walked by. Or the second. At the Third I wondered how we'd got out of Plural Beta so fast and then I saw a tower block covered with ivy and it somehow occurred to me that we hadn't.

"Is that yours?" said one of the grunts. I looked in the direction of his gaze and saw a T-111 SluTech Freighter-Bomber. Cream in color. Looked new.

I stared at it, and worked my jaw.

*"Say yes, Master Idiot."*

"Yes."

"Then get on it, and get it the hell out of here."

"The Emperor is just..." I said.

"What?" said the other grunt.

"Nothing," I said, and moved swiftly aboard. Once there I headed right for the cockpit and found an Ixus-built nav-bot, blue-gray in color, sitting sullenly in the co-pilot's chair.

"Vin?"

It turned its yellow optic sensor at me. "Took you long enough," it said.

"How..."

## Cantilever Jones Lands Hard

"*What say we get out of here, and he can explain it on the way...*"

"Right," I said, and sat down again. We were airborne in a matter of minutes, and below me Plural Beta was starting to look like a coral reef, popping with verdant vibrancy. It was like an algae bloom had exploded. I looked at Vin again.

"How...?"

It sighed. "Calisol is a multiplier. Put it in fuel, and it will extend the life of it. Put it on a structure, and it will double its load bearing. Aerosol it via an explosion, with an alcohol mixture, and it causes cells to rebuilt themselves on a basic level. The Cantilever rebuilt itself. And so did I."

"And the vegetation?"

"Same principle. Life only needs a kickstarting sometimes. The Zinzoan resistance never wanted your medicine. They just wanted to blow up some Calisol with an alcohol mixture and let the land eat their enemies' fortress."

"Brilliant."

"I suppose."

We broke the Zinzoan atmosphere just as the flash of fireworks below indicated some climactic battle taking place.

"So why'd they let you go?" asked Vin.

"Not sure. But that's Rule Two of Smuggling: Don't be Important enough to kill."

"Uh huh."

"*Say Rand...*" came Norl's voice.

"*What?*"

"*You never did get her name.*"

"*Not yet...*" I said in my mind, as the stars gathered around me. **UJ**

# Breakdown

*by Some Other Putz*

You wake with a start and you haven't been dreaming. That should concern you. When you have a nightmare, and you're frightened into wakefulness, that's easy to deal with. You just spend a few minutes reassuring yourself that the nightmare was only a nightmare, that you don't have to ransom your loved ones back from a deranged college acquaintance who has a key to your house and a hook hand. Reality restores itself and you go back to sleep.

But when you weren't dreaming, and you don't know why you're awake, because you don't remember the thing that woke you up, that is the definition of unsettling. Especially as your brain starts filling the gap with what you think you heard. Because it's never something that's threatening but rational, like a gunshot or a slammed door. It's always something absurd, like the phrase "Let's get small" snarled drunkenly outside your window, accompanied by a sick laugh.

Now, there are drunk people in your neighborhood. That is a thing that happens. There's a college not far away, and every now and again at two in the morning you hear idiots laughing because beer makes idiots think unfunny things are funny. It's not a big deal, and it's usually in the background. Part of your environment, but not your life.

This was different. Or maybe your mind just made you think it was different. But why would your mind do that to you? Why would your mind decide that 3:48 in the morning is a good time to twist whatever it heard that summoned you from sleep?

Double-check the clock again.

Yep, 3:48

There aren't any drunk college kids milling about making noise at 3:48. They're decently sleeping in their throw-up. Whatever you heard was not that. Whatever you heard was...

Was that it again?

Now your mind is arguing with itself as to whether it heard what it thinks it heard or whether it invented it. And your mind is not capable of judging this effectively. You look down at your wife but she is sleeping and you'll feel like an idiot for waking her up and scaring her, especially if it's nothing.

So you do that thing where you sit up in bed in the dark and you tune your ears to every noise. House settling. Wind in trees. Cat leaping from counter to floor. What in the hell does the cat do at this hour? There's nothing for it to do. Yet it's always doing something. The life of a cat must be this epic confusion when night falls. Does a cat understand "night"? Is it a concept? Or is a cat continually surprised by every sunset? Is that really sad, or...

Whoa.

You definitely heard it that time.

## Breakdown

You definitely heard a drunken raspy growl that sounded like the phrase "Let's get small."

This is not a fantasy; this is not your mind filling the gap between sleep and wakefulness. You heard it. You heard it like you're hearing your breathing right now. And that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. Because there's no reason that you should have heard that. Better a rabid raccoon in your bed than something this nonsensical. Nonsensical on your Netflix is a charming way to wile away the afternoon. Nonsensical outside at 3:49 in the morning? That's a shitty horror movie, starring you.

You give serious thought to waking your wife up. You cast it aside. You're the star of this shitty horror movie. You best find the plot. Gently, handling the sheets carefully, step out of your bed and into your slippers. Bedroom windows first. Scan the darkened horizon for forms out of place. Nothing. Stand there and let nothing continue to be nothing for a while. Let the nothing reassure you. Nothing is what you were doing just five minutes ago. That's where you want to get back to. And that thought reminds you that you should be in bed. And you suddenly feel like you should be in bed. But your brain won't allow for that until it has found a thing that's saying "Let's get small". Something must be made to fit the pattern.

Walk out of the bedroom and into the empty guest room. Peel back the curtains. There, under a streetlight, is a man who looks very drunk, standing awkwardly like his spinal column no longer properly functions. He is wearing a white suit, and you can't quite see his face because he's wearing something odd on his head. It looks like a novelty hat of some kind. Almost like...

...An arrow?

No. That can't be. That...

You walk downstairs in something of a hurry, not bothering to be silent for your wife's sake. If she wakes up and finds you, and finds this, so be it. Grab your phone off the charging pad downstairs. You're going to need it. You're going to need to take a video and call the cops, in that order.

Check the window again to make sure he's still there before you open the door (also check to make sure there's no one else. There isn't. Decide that doesn't make it freakier). He is. And he hasn't moved. He's still swaying there, sickly like a battered tree in a gale. And yes, you can easily draw inference between this and every zombie movie you've seen. But somehow, this arouses your curiosity more than your terror. You're starting to think this is more mystery than horror.

Still, let's be safe. You have a baseball bat on the shelf in your front closet. It got stuffed there when you moved in. You haven't touched it since. Pull it down. Heft it firmly to feel the confidence in it's dense head-bashing, bone-breaking wood.

Open your door, thankful you had the foresight to put slippers on. Gently close it behind you unlocked.

"Let's get small" the man in the white suit says.

That answers that.

Don't say hello yet. Don't say anything. Don't give yourself away or interact. Study its habits. He's just standing there,

## Breakdown

hasn't made anything that would appear to be a voluntary movement. You get a few steps closer, feeling the bad in your right hand, reminding yourself to let it stay just loose enough so that you can swing it if you need to. You don't want to be the guy that gets eaten when this guy transforms into a were-bear or whatever. You are not going to get within striking distance. Just looking distance.

It's definitely a man. It's definitely wearing a white polyester three-piece suit, white shoes, and a dark shirt with the collar open. And yes, that is a joke-store arrow-through-the-head thing he's wearing. On his head. Like a bad stand-up comedian from the ...

"Let's get Small!" he says, louder this time, like he's trying to shake something loose from inside himself. And you remember the phrase now. It was a bit. A stand-up comedy bit. You remember it now.

"Small!" it shouts, and lunges at you. This is a good time to notice that its mouth is full of dagger teeth, pointed like a shark's. You swing the bat one-handed, manage to connect with its head and it staggers. You drop back, let go of your phone and put two hands on the bat this time. It doesn't even occur to you to run away.

It opens its flytrap mouth like something alien thing shedding a man skin and just when it's about to lunge again, you both hear it.

A banjo.

And you recognize the tune, and it isn't "Dueling Banjos". The thing's hostile action ceases almost immediately, as if the banjo was a beacon call. Its horrible mouth starts to close. You keep your stance.

The banjo plays again, and the name of the tune comes to you. It's "Way Down Upon the Swamp." You almost start humming it. You almost start humming a tune plinked on a banjo played by an unseen being while a monster from the outer dark that was trying to eat you a second ago is soothed by it. Just let that sink in.

On second thought, don't.

Better to just pivot out of the way as the thing moves with sickly curved steps towards the sound of the banjo. This way you can see where the music is coming from. And off in the murk, you can see the figure of another man, about the same height, with a banjo in his hands. He's wearing a light blue comfortable sweater and sensible work pants. His hair is white.

The thing sidles closer to him, drool and incomprehensible sibilants sliding out of its maw. You stand with your bat at the ready, but your tension has receded. You still watch it like a snake, prepared for it to double back. It doesn't. It just gets closer.

And then, the man with the banjo hits a stop cord, and starts fast-picking the banjo. You know this tune, too. Everyone knows this one. It's "Foggy Mountain Breakdown". Immediately the thing reacts like a shot of pure meth has been shoved into its veins, assuming it has them. With an unholy shriek it charges the man, who keeps playing the tune. Your eyes get big and you start running, too, but the man with the banjo doesn't move and you won't make it in time. the thing is on him.

And the lights under reality flash, and when you're done recoiling, the thing is gone. Only the man with the banjo is there. He sighs lightly, notices you. And just as you recognize him, he smiles, proffers a hand and says "Hi. Steve

## Breakdown

Martin. Sorry about the noise."

Yup. That Steve Martin. Father of the Bride Steve Martin. The Jerk Steve Martin. "A Wild And Crazy Guy" Steve Martin. The guy that put on a prosthetic nose to do a modern retelling of Cyrano de Bergerac with Daryl Hannah, and made you believe it. And he's standing there on your street with a banjo, having just slayed a demon beast, and he's apologizing. To you.

Don't be rude, shake the man's hand.

"What was...?"

"...That?" he says, unruffled. "Oh, just an interdimensional hiccup. Did you notice that it was wearing an arrow on its head and shouting 'Let's get small'?"

"Yeah," you say, thankful that someone is affirming your perception.

"That was one of my routines. One of my albums, really. Back when I had those. I do miss it sometimes, if I'm being honest, but it was a bit of a cage. I couldn't still be doing that. It would stop being funny."

"Sure," you say, as if this conversation makes sense.

"I don't often get a *Let's Get Small*. Mostly it's stuff from the *Wild and Crazy Guy* album. Lot of King Tut. If I had a nickel for every one of those I've had to deal with, I'll tell you... Wow. Once it was *Comedy is Not Pretty*. It really made me regret going drag for that cover. Not that I'm judging mind, but... I did not have the face for that. Really didn't."

You nod, mouth agape. "I think my dad had that album."

He nods, still friendly. "The material on it is pretty good. "Googlephonics," especially. I don't know how I got the "Drop Thumb Medley" instrumental on it. I guess I had clout. That cover though. Yikes."

You're still nodding. Stop nodding. You like like a schmuck.

"Okay," he says, "let me keep this simple. I sometimes emit monstrous versions of myself - you can call them demonic if that helps you - and they run around freaking people out until I can catch them. Once they enter contact with me, they re-integrate with my reality. No harm, no foul."

"Why?"

"There was a ceremony at a midnight crossroads involving Earl Scruggs. I'd rather not get into it if you don't mind."

"Oh... Okay."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it."

Pause.

He smiles again. "Well, sorry again for the trouble. I'll be on my way now." Shake his hand again, watch him with his



## Breakdown

banjo head merrily down the street.

After he gets ten paces, say "Steve?"

He turns. "Yeah?"

"I liked Pure Drivel better than Cruel Shoes. The material was better developed and more satisfying."

"Why, thanks so much! That's always nice to hear. Good night."

"Good night."

Watch him as he walks off into the now-quiet night. Take a deep breath and go inside. You hear the cat jumping from counter to floor for some reason and you lock the door behind you and you go back upstairs and get back into bed. Your wife stirs. "What's going on?" she mumbles.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

And then you're ready for any dream that should come. **UJ**