

Unnamed Journal



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Despondency and whiskey

HOW to Tell us How Amazing We Are

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From the Editor

Welcome to the first issue of volume 4, dear reader. After a bit of hiatus, I am once again writing the forward for another issue of Unnamed Journal. It was either this, or candy-striping at the morgue, so I chose writing the forward.

We start this issue with a short story by Andrew Patrick called, *Blood was Every Color*. It's a story about a man frustrated released from captivity, trying to find his way through a country that has been torn apart by civil strife.

Alfred Underhill brings us two more chapters of *Ulysses & the Fugitive*. The tension is ratcheted up in these two chapters, as Nera and Ulysses are forced to confront the consequence of pursuit by both terrestrial and extraterrestrial forces.

Our third feature is a screed by Thomas Fitz about tomatoes. Man, Thomas REALLY doesn't like tomatoes. If you ever invite him over for a meal, leave raw tomatoes somewhere far away from his food.

Finally, closing up our issues is our fourth installment of *The Mediations of Caius Caligula*. No one said being Cesar was easy, but Caius was really intent on upping the challenge level for himself.

Alfred Underhill
Editor-in-Chief

BLOOD WAS EVERY COLOR

by Andrew Patrick

When Joe saw the sun for the first time in a long time it blinded his eyes. There was no ceremony to it. The bulls just got him out of his hole and walked him past the work rooms with the dripping pipes and past the boiler rooms where the men could not sweat enough to get the black off of them and past the iron door where the women were quartered. The bulls were oddly gentle - Joe didn't feel a cattle prod or even a rough hand the whole time - and that made him nervous.

A few months back, he had seen a man - Old Ephraim, the shits had called him, though that wasn't his real name - taken out to be executed. When they executed you, they took you out into the light, or so the old shits said. All Joe knew was that when he saw the bulls take Old Ephraim, they were kind, almost mannerly. Joe decided that meant something. If the bulls had it in them to let a man have a tiny shred of dignity before he was shot for reasons unknown to anyone, then that meant they were cruel as a matter of policy, and not because they especially enjoyed it. Sure, some of them might, and there had to be a tiny element of sadism in all of them, or else they couldn't do it, but for most of them, it was the job they did, and intimidation and hair triggers made the doing easier. But that wasn't all. There was something human in them as well. That was nice to know.

But it did little to decrease his fear. The lack of pain, the lack of taunts, all that fed the idea that he was going to be taken above and shot in the back of the head. He'd heard that was how it was done: small caliber load right into the spot where the skull and brain converged. He got that from Dev, who worked on the burial detail, who smoked cigarettes with guards sometimes, so Joe took him seriously. They had quiet conversations during stretch breaks over small smashed butts of tobacco, and they shared what they knew. It was what all the shits did.

But instead of going up the long dingy metal stairs to the outside, the bulls took Joe to a room off the central processing and sat him down in front of the Director. A man in a shiny leather coat and a black tie stood apart from the director's chair. He smoked and looked at Joe and said nothing.

The Director was fat and balding and had a white hat and a white jacket and an open pint of ill-smelling rotgut whiskey open on his desk. He eyed Joe as if he was considering what end to eat him from first.

"Name," said the Director.

"Joseph Bosley."

"Birth."

"3/15/1998"

The Director looked away and exhaled. "County and State."

"Harford, Maryland"

"Occupation."

Joe froze for a moment because he wanted to say "welder" since that was most of what he did here. But then he thought that the Director might mean what he did before the war. But he wasn't sure, and he didn't want to answer the wrong way, because the Director might consider that backtalk and the bulls might put him in the box or take him to the hole and kick him until he bled. So he froze but then he remembered that dawdling was sure punishment, too, so he went with his gut.

"I was a teacher."

The director clicked his tongue inside his mouth. "And then what were you?"

"Then ... the war happened."

"The war happened," said the director, with a malicious curve to the edge of his mouth. "What a way to put it. Like it was something in the weather, like a hurricane. Not like something people made. People like you."

Joe looked down.

"I reckon all you sons of bitches down here," said the Director, "think I'm a hateful bastard. I wonder if you know. I've made an effort -- Lord knows, I've made an effort -- to be a hateful bastard. But I wonder if you sons of bitches know why. I wonder if you know how much I hate your kind. I wonder if you know I wasn't always this way. Did you ever wonder what I did before the war?"

Joe didn't answer, but looked up at the man in the shiny leather coat, who was still smoking, and who returned Joe's gaze.

"Probably you don't care," continued the Director, "and I won't bore our guests with it now. But I'll tell you this: I was not a hateful bastard before the war. I was the soul of Christian charity before the war. I thought no ill of any man, nor of his color, nor creed, nor lack thereof. I did and thought as we were all supposed to do and think. To have a country."

"A country," said Joe.

The Director stood violently at Joe's words, and for a moment looked as if he would take him down to the box and beat him himself. But instead he turned away. "This man," the Director said, "represents the Commonwealth north of the river. As part of an agreement between our governments, he is facilitating exchange of persons held B.C.H., with an eye to establishing citizenships. You have been selected, Joe Bosley. You are leaving here. Now. Have you anything to say before you are remanded to this man's custody?"

Joe looked at the man in the leather coat again and said "What's his name?"

The man smirked at Joe and said "My name's Carter."

*

*

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And then the bulls pulled him out of the Director's office, and with Carter behind, walked him up the Silver Stairs out of the Pit. Joe had not permitted himself of ever walking up the Silver Stairs. Too much the consummation, devoutly to be wished, he'd decided. Better to embrace the likelihood of never seeing the sun again, he'd decided. Better to sweat under the ground and then lie still there. Let it all be over.

Thus, traversing these stairs, with bulls holding him by the elbows and shackles still round his wrists, felt entirely unreal. Nor did he experience the joy of release or of anticipation. He had been down too long, had become used to the parameters of this underground camp for Prisoners held Beyond Cessation of Hostilities in this Year of Our Lord, Twenty-Forty...what year was it again? Joe not only couldn't remember the year, he couldn't remember the last time he had remembered it. Like the rest of his life Before the War, it had ceased to matter.

And he was standing at the top of the stairs, and the bull on the left shoved the door violently, and the light flooded his eyes, stinging, shuddering. His face darted away, and he might have sought the safety of the darkness of the Pit if he had been free to do so, but the bulls still had him, so he stood wincing as they took off his cuffs and shoved him, staggering, into the fresh air. Then they went back down and closed the door behind him. They did not say a word as they did so.

Carter drew a blue pack of cigarettes from his coat, smacked them on his palm, unwound the cellophane strip, and let it dangle in the breeze. It floated away and was gone. Carter drew a smoke, lit it on a brushed-nickel Zippo, and offered it to Joe. While Joe took a drag off of it, he lit another. Then he said to Joe. "I've got five more stops to make before I turn back for the Commonwealth."

"How far is the Commonwealth?"

"Not far. The Susquehanna is where we'll cross over it. That's near where you're from, right?"

"Yeah."

"Afraid you won't find much there anymore. DMZ. I won't say that the area's depopulated, but a lot of the area is. On both sides of the river. It's the only way to keep the peace, I'm afraid."

Joe smoked his cigarette and absorbed what he was being told. I know what you're thinking, Carter was saying, You want to go look for your people. You need to wait. You need me to guide you. And Joe understood that it was true. But he read that Carter was telling it to him all the same. Something about spending years watching for the bulls and the Director, reading their faces, listening for what wasn't being said, made him read Carter in the same way. He wasn't suspicious, quite. But he was watching.

They finished smoking in the sunlight, standing on a gravel path among new growth on old trees. Then Joe said "Why me? There's a whole slew of prisoners in there. Why just me."

"Because we have a name for you," Carter said. "Because we had someone to trade for you, and someone in the Commonwealth wants you."

"Who?"

Carter shook his head. "This isn't the time or place. When we're far away from this shithole, you'll know what you need to. Let's go." They walked up the gravel path and when it spanned out to meet an actual road, he saw an old school bus painted green. The doors opened and he saw a man sitting at the driver's seat, looking out the front windshield. Joe looked at Carter, but Carter was already heading towards a large black SUV.

"You getting on the bus?" said the driver.

Joe got on the bus.

About half the seats were empty, so Joe took one midway through, paying no mind to the men around him. He sat down on the worn naugahyde seat and the bus rattled like its engine had large metallic wasps inside and then it moved. He looked out the window at the blue sky and a strange feeling came over him, a feeling of terrible wrong, like the world as he observed it was out of place and

he alone hove to the true axis. After a while he turned his face from the window, closed his eyes, and slept.

The bus' movements fell into a common drop and rhythm and Joe only opened his eyes when it stopped, and he could watch Carter alight from the black SUV and walk to other places, other camps. Some were open air and one had barbed wire but none was underground like the Pit. After each stop two or three and once as many as five men came out with him and Carter put them on the bus. Joe did not pay too much attention at each stop, because he felt strangely tired, with none of the joy and wonder at the wide world that he might have expected upon being free. He did not, for that matter, feel very free. So he would notice Carter going in and then coming out with men behind him and then he would close his eyes again so as not to meet anyone's face. He didn't want to know.

After dusk they crossed the river. Joe watched it underneath them and he thought of all the times he'd driven across it before the war and it seemed not to have changed, nor this time in which he was crossing it on a bus with strangers at all unconnected to any other time, when he'd been with those he'd loved. The bridge was still there. This meant something, and nothing.

The bus pulled over to the side of the highway and at a clearing that might have been a rest stop once it parked and the driver opened the door. Carter stepped up the stairs, cigarette still in hand, and looked out at the men. "We're here for the night," he said. "Food will be brought to you. You can find a shallow spot to piss if you like. Don't wander off."

"Can we get off the bus?" someone, who hadn't processed what he'd been told, asked. Carter didn't answer him and just got off.

So they got off the bus. It was dark. Some of them did go and piss and then they came back and got back on the bus. One or two stood on a rise and looked at the river, which flowed by slowly but somehow gave off the distant echo of a great roar. After a while they trickled back onto the bus. Joe

remained, and seeing Carter by the SUV with two other similarly dressed men, and seeing there weren't many others off the bus, he went to talk to Carter.

Carter was again smoking a cigarette, and had somehow procured a cup of coffee in a paper cup. No steam was rising from it, so Joe didn't know why he bothered.

"Food's not here yet," said Carter. The other two men locked eyes on Joe and said nothing.

"What's happening here?" said Joe

"Processing."

"Processing what?"

"Processing you. Checking you for communicable diseases and other things that might be of interest to the Commonwealth."

"And then what?"

Carter poured his coffee out on the ground. "Then you live."

"In the Commonwealth."

"Yeah. In the Commonwealth."

Just then lights came up, headlights on the Northeast. Three or four pairs. Joe gave Carter a fearful glare. Carter smiled. Joe thought of going back to the bus, but could see no point in it. He figured Carter would let him watch, for the sake of a cigarette friendship, before the end came. Or maybe he would shoot him first.

The headlights pulled up, and Joe saw some men get off the bus. They stepped off and away and they watched like characters in an old sci-fi movie, greeting beings from another world in the light. Others stayed on the trucks, peering out the windows as if they could do something if the fear in their guts, that they were being dragged out here to be shot for no good reason, became real, or maybe resigning themselves to that fact.

The headlights pulled off the road. Joe wanted to look at Carter but didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

A large truck and two SUV's parked, and men got out of the truck and started pulling out tables and coolers. They summoned the men from the bus and started lining them up. Two fat men greeted the ex-prisoners with warm smiles. One of them handed out a red cup to each and the other poured beer from a pitcher into it while others set up the mobile stoves.

"I told you there'd be food," Carter said.

* * *

They ate sausages and bread, cheese and apples and tarts, all fresh, all from farms, and they had some more beer and the silence among them melted away and they made small jokes about the food in the camps and they exchanged bits of news about what was going on in the world. Gradually as those in captivity longest and shortest met in the middle, a clear picture of the collapse of the United States of America into the War of the Six Nations emerged, and the lines on the map as they stood a few short years ago were connected with how they began. They talked about these events over their beers and sausages like amateur historians dispassionately organizing facts distant from their lives.

And then, one by one, they went into the tent for processing.

They asked the questions while a team of doctors examined him for signs of lice, lesions, scurvy, or anything else. They did not find anything but slight malnourishment and some minor injuries, including a cracked tooth that had been partially pulled. Name. DOB. Home. Profession before the war. Rank and serial number. Unit. Place of capture. The tone was calm and friendly, with none of the menace or threat of punishment that accompanied the same chat with the Director. Joe got the sense

that they were looking to figure out what he might need, not looking for a reason to find him unsuitable or suspect him. Naturally, this made him the more suspicious.

He was told that he was by virtue of birth a citizen of the Commonwealth of New England, that he would be enrolled in the Legion of Patriots, with accompanying Rights and Privileges, when he was settled on a homestead. They did not tell him what a homestead was, nor how he would get settled into one. But he had a status now. That was something.

The men on the bus were cheerful now, loquacious and serene. Life was good. The possibility of life having goodness, having light and food and pleasure and open air and beer and sausages came home to them and they were thirsty for it. Joe thought it was good to see, considering how sullen and silent they had all been, as only prisoners can be, on the bus. But he was not sharing it. He had no interest in it.

He was leaving. He started walking. If anyone noticed him leaving, they said nothing. He walked past the bus and to the highway and then across it and down the ditch where the sewer water flowed. He walked up another slope until he got to a copse of evergreens and then he looked back. No one was following him. The lights were still on but no sound from them came.

He decided Carter was an honest man, for a G-Man. Too bad. Joe had served his time. He walked into the copse of trees and through the brush and let the wildlife skitter away from him. He kept his eyes on the shadows and tried to avoid branches and he walked through the deep country dark and nothing touched him. Nothing noticed him. He walked until the dark enveloped him and he could no longer be certain he was going in a straight direction and then he sat down. Pretty soon he lay down and then after that the noise and the memories swirled around him and he very quietly cried himself to sleep.

He woke up around the time that the work bell would have roused him in the Pit. But there was no bell and not much other noise. Only the sound of birds from no particular place above him

reminding themselves that they existed. He stood and he hurt and he looked at the shadows of the trees and the direction of the light and he reckoned his bearing. While he was doing so, he saw a fawn and its mother moving through the brush some ways off. They may have seen him, but they could have just walked on for their own reasons. He started walking, too.

After an hour he came upon a dirt road, and then he followed that northward. He saw one or two pickup trucks go by but didn't really pay attention to them. After a while he came to a crossroads. He picked the far corner and he sat in it.

Finally, after most of the morning had passed a pickup truck came out of the northeasterly road and slowed to a halt by him. Joe watched it come. He kept his eyes low.

"Who you?" said a voice from the truck.

Joe looked at the face behind the wheel but it was shadowed. He said nothing.

The door of the truck opened. A fat man got out. He scowled at Joe. "Who you?" he said again.

"Nobody," said Joe.

"Nobody?" said the fat man.

Joe shook his head.

"Don't like nobodies."

"I don't like them either."

The fat man spat. "Where you from?"

"It ain't there anymore."

"Hmm."

Joe looked down the road. No one else was about. For miles, probably.

"That don't mean you need to be here," said the fat man.

Joe looked at him close. He had grey hair tending to white, and ratty clothes, and a dirty cap, and clean white teeth. Joe wondered how many of his people he'd lost in the War. Joe wondered if he ever wondered, or if he only saw as Joe saw: a torrent of blood, his and others' in every direction.

"Okay," said Joe. "I'll move on." And he stood up, and walked past the man, and past the open door on the truck. And the fat man said "Hey," and Joe couldn't tell whether it was hostile or friendly and he didn't bother to find out.

Instead, he swiftly turned and shoved the open door of the truck into the fat man, who fell over and tried to get up but Joe kicked him hard and felt his shoe crunch into the man's nose. And then he reached into the cab and grabbed a tire iron from behind the driver's seat and he swung it at the man's head and it connected and there was blood. Joe swung many times and the blood gathered and flew and it splattered and as Joe was doing it he wasn't really sure why except he knew in his bones that there wasn't time. He had no time.

When he stood up, he looked at his hands and felt regret and shame and sickness, not just for what he'd done but for the last five years and the time before that and the loss of everything by everyone. Unlike the men on the bus, he couldn't remember why he had been in the army or even what army it had been, much less why it had been fighting to kill other people who when he was born had all been Americans. He just knew that he no longer had a wife to go home to, or a son, but that somewhere in the Commonwealth there was a daughter he needed to find. He would not let the regret or the shame or the sickness deter him from this. There was nothing valid in any of it. As he got in the dead man's car and wiped his face he knew it would do no good. Wherever he went and whatever he saw was all the same.

The truck started up, and he turned it around to go the road north. **UJ**

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 13: An Unlikely Truce

By Alfred Underhill

"You three don't have long before the precinct sends around another squad car to check on these two," said Agent O'Flannery, his voice husky from Nera's choke minutes earlier. "We should get them outside and discuss our options."

Bewildered, Ulysses nodded toward the prone officers. "I don't suppose they know what's actually going on? What about you?"

"I bloody well hope someone knows what in the great arse-fuck of history is actually going on!" Giles interjected, his eyes bulging. "I need a logical fucking explanation for all this. Anymore weird shit happens and I'm jumping out the fucking window."

"That might be preferable to the truth of our present situation, Mr. Taylor. However, jumping out a window will do absolutely nothing to change the facts themselves," Agent O'Flannery said, his tone even. He stood up, swayed for a few seconds before steadyng himself, and then offered the three of them a summary of events that had led him to Ulysses's apartment . They listened in grim silence. "The thing is," said O'Flannery, "I remember everything that happened while that thing had control of me. As I mentioned earlier, there were five service members and one woman that looked similar to her," he pointed to Nera. "I get the feeling there are more, but I didn't see them. I don't know the full capabilities of their craft, but they can more than hold their own against an F-18." He paused for a moment. "Whatever the finer details of this situation may be, it looks like all of it hinges on these parasites."

Nera nodded. "You are correct. These creatures, the hyssopshebolith, attach themselves to a suitable host, which they use to achieve their ends. When they die, they look like this." She held up the fabric-like corpse and pointed to the one that wrapped her hair. "For some reason, my touch is lethal

to them. I only learned of this when it was time for me to become a host. I have been running and hiding ever since."

The agent nodded slightly. "That lines up with what I was told. That woman said something about finding 'The Destroyer'. I'm guessing that's you?"

Nera shook her head. "My name is Nera. I don't know why they would call me that." She glanced at Ulysses and Giles, and then looked at the floor. "It's very unfortunate that they have come to this planet to find me. I'm very sorry."

"Yeah well, I appreciate the sentiment. What makes this whole situation go from bad to worse was those things talking about how humans were suitable habitation. Sounded like they plan to add humans to their list of hosts, once they've killed you." Said O'Flannery.

"I wish I were surprised." Nera's gaze stayed downcast as she spoke.

"If I were you three, I would leave the state; the country if you can. That shouldn't be an issue for you," he said, facing Giles, whom seemed to be struggling to take in everything that was being said. Then he looked at Ulysses. "I don't know what kind of resources or options you two have, but I don't recommend staying here."

Ulysses nodded. "I suppose I ought to grab a few things to take with me now, so we can leave right after we carry these cops downstairs." He turned to Giles, "what should we do about your stuff?"

"I'll grab my passport and the essentials. I might try to come back for the rest of it before my flight, if possible. If we can't get back here in time, I guess I'll hope that you can ship it all to me later."

"Whatever you three need to do, I suggest you do it right now," said the agent staring intently at officer Jones who was beginning to stir on the floor.

Giles and Ulysses tore around the apartment gathering their things.

Officer Jones began murmuring and fluttering his eyes. Nera knelt by him. She placed her hand on his trachea and squeezed until he was still and silent again. Her eyes met O'Flannery's, who looked on in disapproval. She shrugged and made a face that said, what?

A moment later, Ulysses and Giles were done gathering what they needed. Ulysses looked down at the cops lying on his floor. "Okay, so we carry them down to the curb. Then what?"

"Then you take off, and I dial 911," said O'Flannery.

"All right," said Ulysses with a sigh. His stomach was tied up in knots and his skin was clammy with sweat. The young man couldn't be bothered to hide his uneasiness. Nera crushed Ulysses into a hug, then immediately had to loosen her embrace when he let out reflexive gasp for air.

"I'm so sorry, Ulysses," she said, with tears in her eyes. "It's all my fault this has happened. I'm going to do everything I can to keep things from getting worse." She reached down and grabbed Officer Jones, hoisting him onto her shoulder without so much as taking an extra breath. "Can you check outside?" She said to O'Flannery, whose look of alarm she ignored.

"Uh, yeah. Hold on," said the Agent. He opened the apartment door and stepped into the hall, checking both directions. "It's clear."

Nera stepped into the hall with the cop over her shoulder.

Giles and Ulysses looked at each other, then at Officer Washington on the floor.

"What say we let Mr. Special Agent hold our bags while we carry her down?" Said Giles.

"Yeah, good idea. Give me your stuff, I'll hand it off." Giles handed over his backpack and a small suitcase. Ulysses in turn gave his and Giles's bags to O'Flannery standing in the hallway. The agent looked perturbed, yet he took their bags without so much as a word.

"You can help carry her down, if you'd rather," said Ulysses, cocking his head and grimacing.

O'Flannery shook his head at the idea and configured the bags so he could carry them. "I'm going to go down first. You three wait for me to shout the all clear before coming down each set of stairs, okay?"

They nodded in response.

Ulysses and his Australian friend strained carrying the comatose cop down the flights of stairs, yet they dared not stop for a rest under the circumstances. The pauses waiting for the all clear were impossibly long. Such was the trip down the first few floors.

"Wait. Go back." O'Flannery said, motioning for them to fall back. Ulysses and Giles started moving the unconscious cop back up the stairs. Nera followed them silently, carrying officer Jones. They could hear O'Flannery talking to whoever was down below. Ulysses heard him say, "Could you stay there? I'll go check for you. Ulysses?" O'Flannery was calling from the landing a floor below, out of sight.

"Yeah? What's up?" Said the young man, trying to sound casual. Sweat ran down his back.

"You order some pizzas?"

"I did. Are they here?"

"Mm-hmm. Could you come down and pay for them?"

"Sure, just give me a second." He nodded to Giles and the two of them ascended the rest of the way to the next landing. They gently deposited officer Washington there. "I'll be back in a second. He can carry the pizzas too," Ulysses whispered, referring to O'Flannery. He smiled at Nera as he hurried past her, making his way down to the next floor.

"Hey." Said the pizza delivery guy looking annoyed yet resigned. "Thirty-eight, seventy-four." He was a middle-aged man in a t-shirt and cargo shorts. O'Flannery smiled and nodded to Ulysses, stepping out of the way of the stairs.

"Sorry about the wait," said Ulysses. He pulled three twenties out of his back pocket and handed them to the pizza guy. "Can I get fifteen back?"

The man nodded and handed over the pizzas, then gave Ulysses his change. "You fellas have a good one," he said half-heartedly. Then he began making his way down the stairs. Ulysses and the Agent stood their silently listening to the man's footsteps fade down into the stairwell, followed by the opening the exit door.

"Let's just give him a moment to get in his car," said O'Flannery. "Do you know if that place delivers to any of your neighbors?"

"I've only ever seen them here when I order, but I don't know."

"Okay, we'll just have to continue taking it nice and slow down these stairs."

"I guess we don't have a choice," said Ulysses. "Hey, uh, could you carry these too? I don't think I can manage carrying three pizzas and the cop at the same time."

The agent let out a long sigh. He switched Giles's suitcase to his other hand and held the stack of pizza boxes against his side. "Wait for the all clear," he said with a frown.

"Of course. Thank you," said Ulysses as he hurried back up the stairs to where Nera and Giles stood. He took up his position with Giles and began moving down toward O'Flannery, hauling the unconscious cop. When the agent saw them descending toward him, he made his way down to the next floor. They waited for the all clear and then proceeded down.

They continued in this way until they reached the exit. On the walkway outside, O'Flannery looked around for the better part of a minute before nodding to them through the exit door's window. Nera went first, carrying officer Jones. Once Giles and Ulysses were through the door, they laid down officer Washington next to officer Jones in the grass.

O'Flannery handed the pizzas to Ulysses, then set his and Giles's bags down. The agent seemed eager to dial 911, but Ulysses asked him to hold off for a few seconds when he noticed Nera staring off into the distance. He approached and touched her shoulder.

"What's up?" He said.

"I was...coming to terms with our situation," Nera said, without facing him. "I knew they were pursuing me, but I didn't expect them to endanger your people too. I assumed notua and humans were...different enough that the hyssopshebolith wouldn't be able to prey on you. I was wrong."

"You couldn't have known that," Ulysses said, putting his hand on her shoulder. Nera offered him a weak smile.

"It doesn't matter now; they're here." She said, as her gaze drifted from Ulysses, to Giles, to O'Flannery, and then toward the mountains. All of the warmth drained from her eyes. "They won't stop until I'm dead. If that happens...you humans probably won't last long."

"Yeah, we're all probably fucked if something happens to you. But Nera, we need to run right now so we can regroup. If we get arrested, it'll be really easy for these things to get to you."

"I understand that," Nera said. "I need to talk to him, then we can go." She walked over to the agent.

"Are we all set? Can I call 911 now?"

"Soon," Nera said, "first we need to talk."

"Spit it out."

"I want to face the hyssopshebolith. It seems like the only viable choice for my survival and the survival of your species."

O'Flannery rolled his eyes. "I don't know if you're the only viable choice. I think based on what I know now, I might be able to get some guys at the Pentagon to come up with a few options."

"Are there not still members of your military that are under their thrall? And you are uncertain how many of my people were present during your encounter in the desert? Or how many more of the parasites were with them?"

"Look, lady," said O'Flannery, the skin on his neck swelling where Nera had choked him. "You can do whatever you want. But even with as strong as you are, I don't see how you're going to succeed all by yourself. If there are more of your people along with those things, then I'd say that makes the odds decidedly not in your favor. But you do you." He held up his phone. "Right now though, I'm going to do me, and call 911. So you and your friends might want to get going." The agent dialed the number and waited for the operator to pick up.

"C'mon, Nera. Let's go. We'll figure out what next once we put some distance between ourselves and this place." Ulysses tried to keep his voice even, despite the mixture of adrenaline, hunger, fear, and exhaustion he felt. He gently grabbed her hand and began guiding her away. Giles followed them.

O'Flannery finished his call and watched them walking away. He cursed under his breath, then ran after them.

"Hey, wait!" He waived after the trio, who looked back at him with incredulity. O'Flannery caught up to them, reached into his pants pocket, and pulled out a card. He flipped it over and scrawled a phone number on it. "Take this. Call me if you find out anything else or decide to do something crazy, like trying to take the fight to these things."

Nera nodded once. She handed the card to Ulysses, who slipped it into his phone case. Then the three of them quickly walked away. O'Flannery went back to where the cops lay and waited for emergency services to show up.

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 14: Diner Conversation

By Alfred Underhill

Five days later, Giles, Nera, and Ulysses waited inside The Doughbox Diner in Sydney, Australia.

Not long after their arrival on the continent, the trio had contacted Jonathon O'Flannery. His plane had landed at Kingsford Smith airport hours earlier.

Giles fidgeted with a butter packet. "Right, so we should be seeing Mr. Special Agent any minute now, yes?" Ulysses nodded to him yet kept quiet. "So he gets here and we'll tell him about you two's little plan, and then we'll head back to my flat?"

"Uh-huh". Ulysses was tired; he was struggling to stay upright in his seat.

"Christ, mate, you look like shit. I mean, I can understand why. We'll need to find a way to get you fixed up a bit if you're going to keep on with your new girlfriend." Giles offered him a weak smile, and Ulysses flipped him the bird in response. The Australian chuckled, Nera smiled. "Now, now I know you've had very little sleep the past few days. I do think we should get you in to see a doctor, though. If nothing else, we'll make sure that Nera didn't actually break any of your ribs with one of her hugs."

Nera looked tenderly at Ulysses and stroked the side of his face. He feebly squeezed her leg in reassurance. "Perhaps you should go see a doctor, Ulysses," she said. "I'm trying to be more careful with my affection. I really hope I haven't injured you."

Ulysses waved his hand at her. "We can go find a doctor once we've met with Agent O'Flannery. Shouldn't be long. I'll be fine until then."

Giles shrugged at them. "Suit yourself. Just let me know when you want to go." He shifted in his seat. "I'll admit I'm a little surprised at how good it feels to be back." He paused for a moment, staring at some unseen spot. "Well, considering the circumstances, I guess it's actually not all that surprising. Glad I didn't end up on a no-fly list before I could get home. Thanks again for bringing the rest of my crap with you. I know waiting for me to finish flying here was tedious."

"You're welcome, Giles," Nera responded. Ulysses nodded in agreement.

"Thanks for putting us up. We'll get out of your hair before too long." Ulysses said.

"Not a problem," said Giles, followed by a sigh. "This whole situation is fucking bonkers. To be honest, part of me keeps waiting for the TV crew to show up and be like, 'gotcha!' I think I might actually prefer that to what's really happening, except for the part where we'd have to stop being friends due to the worst practical joke ever." Giles's smile was wry. His gaze settled onto the table's surface. "You're both welcome to stay with me for however long you're in town, but I have to go back to work on Tuesday. There's really no way I can keep on with you once you leave, so please don't ask." He paused again to look at them. "That said, if there's anything I can do from a distance to help once you're on your way, say the word. Honestly, I don't expect I'll be leaving this continent until I know how things have turned out for you two."

Ulysses and Nera nodded solemnly.

"We'll do our best," Ulysses said, "I am curious to see if O'Flannery has anything."

"I dunno, mate. I think Mr. Special Agent Yank might not have anything useful to offer you two. I'm sure he gets a lot of discretion for investigative work, but I doubt he can call in favors from the military within days. He'll probably have to go to meetings for months before anyone will actually take him seriously."

"You're not wrong, Mr. Taylor," said Agent O'Flannery.

Giles nearly leapt out of his seat. "Crikey! Don't fucking sneak up on me like that, you weird bastard!"

Jonathon O'Flannery wore blue jeans, a grey golf shirt, and a smug grin. He nodded to Ulysses and Nera as he took the seat next to Giles. "I take it you want to make some kind of move?"

"Straight to business, huh?" Said Ulysses.

"I'm sure you understand how urgent this situation is, Mr. --

"Just call me Ulysses. We're not in The Matrix, and you're not Agent Smith. Cut the stiff shirt crap already. It actually makes it harder for me to take you seriously."

"Fine," said O'Flannery in an even tone. "So, Ulysses, why am I here? What is your plan?"

"It's not my plan," he said, turning to Nera. "I'll let her explain."

Nera's expression was calm. She nodded, either to herself or O'Flannery. She reached down between her and Ulysses to produce the alien pelt she acquired in Ulysses's apartment. She put it on the table in front of her. "I've discovered that having two of these has improved my control of my vessel. I can also fly it faster than before."

"All right," O'Flannery said, studying the fabric before returning his gaze to Nera. "I suppose that does slightly improve our odds against their craft. Does your vessel have weapons of any kind?"

"No."

"Okay. Then this added speed and maneuverability will really only help us if we need to pursue them in one of their vessels. That still leaves the problems of how to neutralize their craft, and what to do about a face to face encounter with their superior numbers."

Nera nodded, her expression turning serious. "I have found that my cognitive and telepathic abilities have also improved."

"Telepathy?" said the agent, blinking rapidly. "What, like mind reading? What exactly are you talking about?"

"What you call telepathy is actually how I am communicating with you right now. The words you hear coming out of my mouth only sound and look like English because of a telepathic feedback loop. Here, I'll stop it for a moment." Nera continued speaking but her words were completely unintelligible. They belonged to a language unlike any found on Earth.

"What?"

"You see? The telepathy makes it possible for you to understand me. Everyone that's close enough to hear me inside this building will hear me speaking their language."

"I don't understand how that's possible. How does something like that even work?" O'Flannery was incredulous.

"We should probably stick to planning, yeah? You lot can discuss the finer points of telepathy later." Giles took a sip of his water.

O'Flannery frowned at Giles. "Of course you're right, Mr. Taylor."

Just then the server came by the group's table to check on them. She put a glass of water in front of the agent and asked what he wanted to order. O'Flannery requested a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee. The server repeated his order, then walked off toward the kitchen.

"So," said O'Flannery, "somehow these heightened abilities of yours will help you eliminate these parasites?"

"Not directly, but I should be able to detect them when they are near."

"That could help. How close are we talking?"

"I don't know," Nera said. "If they were inside this building or outside in the parking lot, I could sense them. Beyond that, I'm unsure. None are currently nearby."

"Hmm, well at least we've got a little bit of space for now." The server deposited O'Flannery's coffee on her way to check on her other tables. O'Flannery stirred his coffee a few times then took a tentative sip. "We'll need to talk more about what you can do, and how it would fit into some sort of plan of attack." He poured a creamer into his coffee and continued stirring.

"What about you?" Ulysses said. "I know it's only been a few days, but what have you come up with?"

"Well, I did put out feelers to try to find the compromised personnel; haven't heard anything yet." He sipped his coffee. "I am currently set to receive any and all alerts about fast-moving UFOs.

Believe it or not, there's a surprising amount of alerts for those. So far, only one has matched the profile of the ones where looking for, and I'm certain that was you two traveling to Australia. Am I right?"

"Yeah, that was us." Said Ulysses.

"Just so you know, for as fast as those things can move, they're still quite visible on radar. I wouldn't fly that thing unless absolutely necessary. Your craft and the others like it have already drawn the attention of the U.S. military and several of its allies. Probably some of our enemies too." The agent looked at the three frowning young people at the table before he continued. "Another thing to consider: your ship could easily be mistaken for an ICBM, or some other high-powered rocket carrying a nuclear payload, engaging in a preemptive strike. Do I need to spell out what that would mean?"

Giles and Ulysses shook their heads. Nera looked puzzled. Ulysses thought intently about the blinding flash and mushroom cloud caused by atomic weapons. He thought about both nuclear fallout and nuclear winter. Nera began to sweat.

"Sorry," Ulysses muttered, as he patted her leg.

"Well, aside from a rather stern warning about flying the UFO, what else do you have? We already knew most of that. Do you have any idea about how to fight these things?" Giles said.

"Our enemy is hidden and could easily stay that way. We don't know if they have access to the same information I'm getting. Now, if she can detect these things within proximity, that helps a little. But we don't know how far she can detect them from." O'Flannery drained the rest of his coffee. "So I think we have little to go on between the four of us right now. That alarms me. I think the longer it takes us to find and deal with these creatures, the more likely it is that more will show up."

"You're a cheerful bastard, aren't you, Mr. Special Agent?" Giles said.

Ulysses ignored Giles, and said, "Okay so, I'm interpreting what you're saying as, we either need to find a way to quickly detect where the parasites are or we need to find a way to lure them out of

hiding." He mostly succeeded in suppressing the rasp that had crept into his voice since he'd arrived in Australia.

"Those could be viable strategies," said the Agent. "We could also just wait for one of my sources to turn something up that we can use. The problem with waiting is that it isn't guaranteed anyone will ever get back to me. If they do get back to me, we have no way of knowing when or how useful whatever they might find will be." He sipped his water. "Based on what we currently know, if you're intent on trying to go after these creatures now, the best approach would be one that combines detection with luring them out."

"How would we do that?" Rasper Ulysses.

O'Flannery looked him in eye. "I don't think you'll like it, but here's my idea: I take Nera into custody. I write up a report about the investigation I've been tasked with that ends with her capture. My report will generate a lot of interest within the Pentagon and the intelligence community, which in turn, should prompt these critters to make a move."

"Should prompt them?" Ulysses said, his voice straining as he raised it. "How do we even know any of the people who have these parasites on them will find out about your report? What do we do if your report is buried and Nera is sent off to some Guantanamo-like place? What if while she's in custody, she's drugged up so she can't fight and these things come for her? What then?"

"My report will definitely generate interest if Nera's craft is also taken into custody," replied O'Flannery in his even tone. "A live extraterrestrial is a novelty to the U.S. Government. Certainly, there would be plenty of interest in studying her. However, I know for a fact that there would be a lot more interest in a brand new kind of technology. Especially one capable of flying faster than even our most advanced prototype drones. I'm willing to wager whatever systems that make up her craft could keep the R&D guys busy for years. This isn't the kind of thing any single government agency could keep a lid on forever. Word would get out, and then those things would try to make a move."

"You're right," said Ulysses. "I don't like it. I also don't think it'll work."

"When I was taken over by one of those...things, it was obvious that their primary focus is finding Nera. They believe she poses an existential threat to them. She's public enemy number one, as far as they're concerned." O'Flannery paused when the server came by and placed his sandwich in front of him. "We can use their fixation on her to our advantage in the short-term. But if this drags out too long, we actually have no idea what they'll do next to try to get her. One thing they won't do is give up and go home." He took a bite of his sandwich.

Ulysses began to argue, but Nera shushed him.

"He's right," she said.

"But Nera," said Ulysses, his voice hoarse, "even if this plan works and you manage to kill all the hyssopshebolith, you'll still be stuck in a government facility. If you hand over your ship, you won't be able to get away."

She put her hand on Ulysses's cheek and looked into his eyes. "There are many ways this plan could go wrong. Even if it goes right, I'll be trading enslavement for prison. I know these things. Yet despite them, what makes this plan worthwhile to me is the time we've had together, and my fear of the hyssopshebolith doing to your people what they have done to mine."

Tears welled up in Ulysses's eyes. "Then I'm going with you," he said.

"Come again? Are you mental?" Said Giles.

Ulysses wiped at his eyes, trying in vain to dry them. "Well?" he said looking at O'Flannery.

O'Flannery shrugged with his hands spread wide. "Suit yourself." **UJ**

Dear People Who Put Tomatoes on Every Goddamned Thing

Were you bullied as a child?

Do you have the kind of low self-esteem that leads you to ruin otherwise pleasant experiences with small touches of misery, in the forlorn hope that this will make you seem Deep to others?

Is your sole reason for being on Twitter so you can report people to their Trust and Security Soviet, or whatever the fuck their Star Chamber is called?

Do you own more than one waifu pillow?

Because I'm trying to understand why you keep persisting in adding bad food to good.

Tomatoes are repellent. I don't care if you agree or not. They're gross red fistulas of overripe flesh and vile liquid and I would rather have the inside of a cyst on a sandwich.

Ever see *Pink Flamingos*? You know the end, where Divine eats dog crap? That's me trying to eat a raw tomato. I hate them like I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee.

But that's not really the point. The point is, why do I have to get angry about it? Why do I have to police sandwiches and other food for tomatoes in the first place? Why are they the default?

Consider the hamburger. What is necessary to have a successful hamburger? Some properly cooked ground beef and an edible bun. Maybe some condiments if you're in the mood.

That's it. That's all a hamburger requires. Two things.

Now, let's say you like to mix your bovine products together, because you're not Jewish, or not Jewish enough to give a fuck about kosher law, and you have a slice of cheese on your hamburger. What's the term for that? Correct, a *cheeseburger*. And if you really want to let your arteries know where they stand, and you add a couple slices of bacon to the mix, what's that called? Right again, Chumley, a *bacon cheeseburger*. Do you notice the pattern?

When adding an element to the mix, the nomenclature changes accordingly. In this way, no one gets cheese or bacon on their hamburger without ordering it.

But for some fucking reason, despite never once in my born days ordering a *Tomato cheeseburger*, I keep finding the bleeding little death-chunks leaving snotty residues of themselves on perfectly good sandwiches. For some reason, we have been conditioned by the system to believe that a tomato is a *normal* thing to expect on a sandwich, and there's something wrong with you if you prefer not to have bitter pockets of seed goop soiling the flavor of good meat.

There is no good reading to ever have a tomato on a sandwich. None.

(By the way, if anyone has a problem with my conflating hamburgers and sandwiches, because you're of that species of dork that thinks the debate of sandwich ontology a breathtaking display of clever irony, I suggest you find a hobby that doesn't make you a waste of a human zygote. Like selling crack. Or lawn darts.)

And again, I don't care how much you like them. Some people like tomatoes so much they'll just eat one with a slice of mozzarella. So fucking what? Some people eat tripe. Some people eat pickled pig's feet. There's an entire European nation that thinks it proper to stuff sheep guts inside other sheep guts and bake it in an oven and ingest what comes out. In Southeast Asia they put dead cobras at the bottom of a bottle of whiskey and leave them there for no reason God can fathom. People eat weird stuff. Keep your weird stuff to yourself, and don't act like I'm the problem if I decline to eat your weird stuff.

Now some of you might be wondering "do you moan this much about finding unordered lettuce, or onions, on a burger?" The answer is no. Because lettuce has the decency to hang in the background, providing roughage and texture, not insisting upon itself, and onions, while a bit more obtrusive, are at least complimentary to the overall savoriness going on. Tomatoes are unable to be team players in this manner. They might hide in the lettuce for a bite, but soon they're going to let you know that this is

their sandwich and you're just eating it.

So again, if you really like that kind of mess in your food, I'm not one to stop you. Go live your best life.

But you can take the trouble to order it, not have it automatically provided for you at the expense of others.

What do I mean? I mean I've spent the last several decades asking lazy, dead-eyed short-order clerks to not put tomatoes on my sandwiches, only to have them ignore said requests because the vegetable Stalinists will not tolerate dissent (And everyone about to chime in that technically tomatoes are fruit, because their slimy spermatozoa are contained within their vile husks, congratulations on passing high school biology. But properly socialized humans ignore this technicality for the common heuristic that holds things of a sweet or tangy flavor to be fruits, while things savory and bitter to be vegetables. Tomatoes, which taste like the rotting interior of a gangrenous wound, are therefore vegetables. No one cares, nerds). I mean I've purchased cafeteria wraps whose nomenclature made no indication that a tomato was hiding inside, about to bukkake into my mouth. Have you, tomato-lovers, ever had to perform surgery on a wrap to make it palatable? Have you ever had to scrape quinoa off a husk of tomato, and try to get the hummus and the lettuce to gel back together after you've gone spelunking down the whole length of a spinach wrap to get rid of the thing you never ordered and had no reason to suspect was there, like some barbarous 19th century surgeon trying to save the life of a lesser-known gunshot President and only making the whole thing worse?

In point of fact, have you ever been inconvenienced by the lack of a tomato, ever? Is not a burger still a burger, without such?

Next I imagine some of you will ask me about all the various culinary forms tomatoes appear in. Do I hate Salsa? Do I hate pizza? Do I hate Spaghetti? DO I KNOW THAT HAS TOMATO IN IT? The answers to these questions are no, no, no, and DUH-DOY. Now watch as I stagger your puny minds with the paradox of how I can dislike something so intensely in its raw form and yet enjoy it when it has been

prepared. I explain this with the fact that I am a human, and humans typically eat cooked food, rather than just stuffing whatever root or piece of flesh into their maw, like a dog or Scarlet O'Hara. I don't like raw tomatoes. I also don't like raw potatoes. Or raw eggs. I don't dump raw flour into my mouth, add a shot of yeast and a spoonful of sugar and say I've got my carbs for the day. I mix them together and add water and other things and stir it and knead it and bake it and it becomes bread. So there's nothing inconsistent about finding tomatoes palatable after they've undergone admixture with elements that will substantively alter their flavor. And furthermore, DUH-DOY.

I honestly wish that I didn't have to get angry about this. I know, on some level, that I really don't. But I am weary to the bone with having tomatoes stuffed in my face by people who are incredulous that I don't enjoy them, and ask the same dense, irritating questions, like such is the only road home through the fog of their bafflement. I am not, and could never be, a vegetarian or vegan (every time something eats, something else dies), but I do sympathize with them, in that they're forever feeling called upon to defend themselves and their choices to the wider culture. Granted, some of them ask for it by trying to spread their weird food Gospel, but that's not me. I honestly do not care that other people like tomatoes. I honestly do not think any less of anyone for liking food that I do not like. Eat your tomatoes with pig's feet and tripe and Morel mushrooms and wash it down with cobra whiskey for all I care. Do you.

Just extend the same courtesy, and we can all live in a world where we get exactly what we want on food, and nothing more, and nobody at Hershey Park has to listen to grumpy tired dads swearing about the vegetable wraps again. **UJ**

Mediations of Caius Caligula IV

Moving from the affairs of Venus, we arrive in more Jovian climes, to the daily grind and toil of my days, the governorship of the Roman state. I would do well to enter some of the central facts of my reign as it began, and proceed therefrom to a general philosophy of government, that you may understand my choices.

I came to power, as I said, in my 25th year, hailed as the instrument of fortune by Senate and People alike. It tickles to think of it now. Well, not too much. The people still adore their Chick, and the legions are mostly loyal to the son of Germanicus. The Senate is different, but I expected nothing else. Tiberius was not the only one I observed as I grew to manhood.

In any case, my reign began with housecleaning. In my triumph I took the step that Tiberius was unwilling to take and named the month of September for my father Germanicus. I quite understood Tiberius' logic in refusing the offer at the beginning of his reign to have that month named for him - his riposte of "what will you do when you have thirteen Caesers?" is the closest he ever came to wit - but I would have been a poor son not to push Tiberius' wit aside.

I pushed his will aside in other matters. I have mentioned the reading of Livia's will. I also restored a great many exiles, not merely pardoning them but undoing their trial verdicts and restoring their fortunes. The various male prostitutes that Tiberius had allowed to flourish, not just on Capri but within the city, I expelled. Indeed, I went so far as to sentence some of them to death by drowning, only to relent on this point upon public entreaty. I published the breviary of the empire that Tiberius had allowed to lapse. I reviewed the equites and I added a fifth decurion of judges. I remitted the ducentesima (a cruel, squeezing tax, of the kind the people justly hate) and I restored the property of me whose lives were lost to fire.

Additionally, I have built. The Temple of Augustus, barely begun by Tiberius, I have finished, as I have the theater of Pompey, the walls of Syracuse. Canals have been started, and amphitheaters, and old palaces, Temples, cities, and the like have begun under my hand.

The common theme to these acts and labors is restoration. The restoration of law, and of property, and of morals, these are worthy acts of an emperor. They indicate a wish to have the world properly ordered, unified, and just under the gods. They are not merely administrative but political acts - designed to set a political tone, to aim not just at the comfort of the res publica but of a new and proper direction for it.

There is an absurdity in the previous statement. Did you catch it? The astute ones will have. If it does not appear to you within a few moments, please let it pass. I am not so cruel as I am reported.

The absurdity is thus: nothing new can ever be proper. What is proper to a thing is what accrues to it according to its nature, and its nature accrues according to its origin - to the point at which it becomes itself. Something new can only thus be contrary, or at best irrelevant, to this origin, and so to the nature of the thing. The new means disruption - destruction in miniature, then in maximum. This is all rather obvious.

So when I speak of a new and proper direction, I am actually speaking of the restoration of something very old. Something that existed at the foundation of the Roman State, but was cast aside, feebly replaced, and now restores itself like Theseus returning from the paths of the dead. I speak of the position held by Romulus himself. I speak of the monarchy.

The state is a thing. It functions well or badly, brings benefit or detriment to its target. It represents a vast people organized under a single name, a single law, a single principle of reality. It claims part of the earth and expends human lives to demonstrate these claims. It has its own internal needs and logic. And yet men will pretend it is abstract, some Platonic Form somehow quickening the embers of men's hearts. They will not have the state embodied by a single man, because they fear it's

physical reality. When the state in it's splendor walks before them, demanding their obeisance, some men rebel against the sublime terror they feel, and name it tyranny.

Tyranny is but government described by the targets of government. To a criminal, the laws are tyrannical, or perhaps the agents of the law. He is doing as his human reason would dictate, and the law tyrannizes him. So any government is tyranny.

Ah, but government has a purpose! A divinely-ordained purpose: to engender the res publica. So tyranny is government contrary to its just purpose. Just so. And then the issue becomes which God commands it. Let Neptune create a government, and it will favor the fisherman, Vulcan, the smiths, Venus, the prostitutes, etc. But I am the government, and I am the God, and so my will is the law. Thus it would be tyrannical of me not to butcher the Senators when they offend me.

Is not human reason amusing?

But this is not what Romans accept. Romans have disrupted their state in the name of liberty. They cast down the monarchy at the folly of a single rex. They did this that the Senate and People might govern themselves. Which led, in sufficient time, to Gaius Marius subverting the consulate to the military needs of the people and his own political needs, to Sulla doing the same, but more, to the Divine Julius compelling the absurdity of a Dictator Perpetuus, and the Divine Augustus creating the Principate to avoid his predecessor's fate. Which leads to me. Whom they bear, with seething abasement. They pretend to love me with greater and greater displays as if I am fooled by this. As if I cannot see the absurdity of them. If these were truly the leaders of a Republic of free Romans, I would not exist as I am. I know it and they know it.

But I will go deeper yet. I will disrupt the entire foundation of our so-called Republic, of the lie that exists at the center of it, and always has.

First, consider its rise. The Republic was built when Tarquin the Proud was overthrown. Now, I must admit that I cannot fault that act. Tarquin invited this when he conspired in the death of his own

father-in-law. And his rule was at best a muddle, and his act against the daughter of Brutus manifestly unjust. Not god nor man could complain at his downfall.

But what followed was a travesty. Instead of replacing Tarquin with Brutus, or any other man of worth and blood, instead they overthrew the principle of monarchy and unity, replacing it with division, yearly contention, endless arcane gabbling about this man's authority and that man's imperium, ever placing the needs of the state under their own wish to display a momentary, incremental superiority over others of their rank. It is a dullness beyond measure, even for me.

It is simple, really. A republic is supposed to exist for liberty. Yet a republic is a means of ruling over others, which denies liberty. Hence a republic is absurd.

Yet this is not all. For the Senators knew, knew in their bones the error of their choice. They knew that their system of Senates and Assemblies and magistracies would be ultimately insufficient to protect the state. They knew that true government, government that survives, does so on the principle of singularity, of unity. Hence the existence of dictators.

An emergency clause, of course. In time of need, of course. Yet the admission of it! When a king faces an emergency, he does not cease to be king. He may appoint new officers and grant them duties to please his will, but the crown remains his. A king who handed off power when the state most needed his direction would deserve to be overthrown and fed to pigs. How can a mere Senate hand this power off and then demand it's return?

No, the Famous Founders of the Famous Families knew that this Republic of fear was too weak to defend itself. Sooner or later, the need for monarchy - for one man to take upon himself the godhood of the state, if you will - asserts itself. Before, this assertion, there is the illusion of liberty. After this assertion the order of monarchy. But during the assertion, chaos and absurdity.

The comedies of my reign are the fruit of this absurdity. I have related the affairs of the unfortunate Potitius and Secundus - men who sought to be rewarded for not doing what they vowed

to do. Do not think that I was blind to the waste of sending to their deaths two otherwise decent, law-abiding Roman citizens of good (albeit plebeian) birth. But it was not I who created this waste, and to be fair, neither was it that of Potitius and Secundus. It was the Senators who insisted on this, who feign that the Republic exists while accepting my reign over them. If I were simply a king, worthy equites such as Potitius and Secundus could simply have begged boons from my hand, or performed service to my royal stature, and been rewarded as they merited. It would have been open and honest, respecting my august personage and their forthright loyalty. Instead, they felt obliged to go in for absurd lies to signal the illusion of merit, and I was forced to pull the rug out from under them. And still the senators will not understand.

It sickens the depth of my divine soul, this hidden monarchy, this illusion of a republic. I am the third generation of my family to rule. Do I rule because of my human achievements? What human achievements? Do I rule because I am trusted by the senators? Hilarious! No, I rule because of who and what I am: Caius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, the God of the Roman world. Yet I must pretend to be a mere Princeps Senatus, who happens to be Pontifex Maximus, who happens to be imperator with proconsular imperium. The senators who lick my boots for favor will not permit me a crown. Yet when I restored elections, they were aghast. Offended, that I should empower the rabble they think worthy of nothing but slaves. There's that for their love of liberty and tradition. They are swine in silks, nothing more. They deserve every humiliation I rain on them.

It would be so much easier if we could simply restore the monarchy. I would rule as a humble rex (and God, of course), guaranteeing to the senators and the people alike their due rights, acting without restraint to secure Rome and her imperium. But they will not have it. They will re-enact the stage-play Augustus wrote for them, again and again and again. How can they stand the monotony of it? How does the gulf between their words and their actions not rip their minds in twain?

The answer of course, lies in the fate of the Divine Julius. When they are not polishing my caligae with their tongues, they are conspiring against me. They believe that I can be contained by this. They believe that I do not see them coming. Of course I do! Even Tiberius saw them coming, which is why he grew sick of them and wandered off to Capri. They think themselves clever. Some of them even are. But when cleverness is expected, it no longer surprises, and without surprise, no conspiracy can be successful.

Hence, the more clever the conspiracy, the more boring it is to me. The elaborate ones, the ones that seek to silently build support among certain key persons, deemed powerful, are the worst. Imbeciles. You do not build support for a conspiracy; you conspire and then demand support for it afterwards. That is where Brutus and Cassius failed. They imagined that Rome was chafing to be free of the Divine Julius, and so assumed that the people would fall into their hands. No. They should have murdered everyone, Augustus included, and then either seized power in new elections or run off to exile.

But if they bungled the epilogue, at least they pulled off the main act. They kept it simple: A dozen senators with knives, a distraction, and a moment to strike. They even called themselves the Kill Caeser Club, openly and proudly, depending on the Divine Julius' magnanimity to prevent him taking them seriously. Fine cheek, that. It would never happen anymore. The senators are so cowed by the mere suspicion of criticism of the emperor that they have not the actual courage to openly defy one. If someone started having a Kill Caligula Club at their home, I would go and dine with them, and gladly. I might even apply for membership. Who could resist the temptation to break bread with the last honest men in Rome?"

It is the dishonesty I cannot abide, more than anything else. The lies and the duplicity, the fawning and the daggers. The obviousness of them! And the official lies are worst of all. Take the pretense that began my reign: that I would share power with my cousin Gemellus. Two emperors! As if

the principate can be treated like the consulate: one senior and one junior. One would think Tiberius, of all men, would have learned at Augustus' knee the lessons of the Triumvirates. I think on some level, he knew what I would do, but he was fond of Gemellus, the only son of his only son. I understand this. I too am a father.

Nevertheless, Gemellus had to die. Macro had to die. Silanus had to die. Not merely for their actions, their base betrayal of me, to whom they owed loyalty, but for what they were: falsehoods. Gemellus was a false emperor, Macro a false captain, Silanus a false senator. They were the reeking flowers of a political soil poisoned by the lie that, while it gave order and restraint in Augustus' time, has outlived its usefulness. So of course I had them tortured and killed (no, not Gemellus. He was kin to me, and a mere pawn. I had it done quickly), before my couch while I dined with others, critiquing the tribunes performance in a calm voice while I dispensed with the business of the state. I made them whom I spared, such as Agrippinilla, watch, and offered them wine. I wanted them to see and acknowledge the reality that they live under, that they may join me in Agamemnon's wish "One sovereign Lord, One King may there be."

Until then, they shall marvel, and I shall laugh. **UJ**