Phantasma

Grace Wright

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/all_honors

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Rights Statement

COPYRIGHT
Phantasma

Grace Wright
Submitted for Honors in English
The University at Albany, SUNY
Directed by Ineke Murakami
Second Reader: Elliot Tetreault
29 April 2024
**Table of Contents**

**List of Illustrations** 3

**Introduction** “Our everlasting farewell take”: A Queer Retelling of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* 4

*Caesar*

  - Imagining a Queer Ides 5
  - Let’s Talk Genre 7
  - Queer Studies & the Renaissance 8
  - Why Does Everything Have to be Gay Nowadays? 10
  - Caesar in a Doublet 12
  - *Phantasma’s* Plutarch 14
  - The End…? 15

**Prologue** Wherefore Rejoice? 18

  **Act I**: Veni

  **Scene I** “This man is now become a god” 30

  **Act II**: Vidi

  **Scene I** “When all the sway of earth shakes like a thing unfirm” 56
  **Scene II** “Like wrath in death and envy afterwards” 63
  **Scene III** “Set a huge mountain ‘tween my heart and tongue.” 90

**Bibliography** 103
List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Jean-Léon Gérôme, The Death of Caesar. 1859-1867, The Walters Art Museum.

Figure 2. Byam Shaw. Julius Caesar, a set of seven original drawings. 1900, Folger Shakespeare Library.

Figure 3. Achilles Bandaging Patroclus. 500 BC, Altes Museum.

Figure 4. Our Flag Means Death. 2022, HBO Max.

Figure 5. Unknown. Sir Walter Raleigh. 1588, National Portrait Gallery.

Figure 6. Sampson Low. Portia, Wife of Brutus. 1896, Folger Shakespeare Library.

Figure 7. Great Performances: Julius Caesar. 2019, Donmar Warehouse.

Figure 8. Edward II. 1991, Abolitionist Futures.

Figure 9. Olympic Theater. Edmund Tearle and Company in Julius Caesar. 1892, Folger Shakespeare Library.
“Our everlasting farewell take”: A Queer Retelling of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*

“How many ages hence

Shall this our lofty scene be acted over

*In states unborn and accents yet unknown!*” *(Act 3.1.124-6)*

With his feet soaked in the rich blood of the slaughtered Julius Caesar, Gaius Cassius giddily imagines the fame of himself and his conspirators. He paints an image of himself standing over Caesar, knife drawn—a knife that would fall, over and over and over throughout the following centuries. It would fall on crisp white paper, on wide flickering screens, on high school stages. Just by writing that line, Shakespeare offers an answer to Cassius’s question. He takes a long existing historical account and confronts the audience with it, forcing them to be complicit with the crime just by wanting to hear it. Marcus Brutus’s disturbed reply of “How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport” adds another layer of guilt onto this heavy moment, exposing a cycle of bloodshed that would continue with every iteration of his story. Scholars and viewers alike have debated whether there is a true “hero” in *Julius Caesar*, and this scene following Caesar’s murder lays all of those conditions bare for us to see. Yet the fascination with Caesar’s murder did not begin or end with Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*—in fact, it blossomed.

![Image](image-url)
This project, titled *Phantasma*, can be described as a queer retelling of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, in which Brutus is the central focus. It will interrogate the question of what draws readers back to that fateful day at the Roman Senate time and time again. It will also question what drew Shakespeare and his audience to it, as well as deconstruct the nuances of his recreation. The narrative will be greatly influenced by the structure of Shakespeare’s play, but will take on new forms as scenes are added in places where Brutus would ordinarily be “offstage”. Using queer theory as well as a balance between Renaissance cultural studies and Roman historical accounts, the story will be a combination of Shakespeare’s interpretation of the story of Julius Caesar (and of Brutus), as well as the reality of what Roman civilization was like for the living, breathing figures that took action on that Ides of March. The narrative form will allow me to interrogate the dynamics of gender and sexuality that functioned between Caesar, Cassius, and Brutus.

**Imagining a Queer Ides**

A key influence on my piece is Eve Sedgwick’s examinations of homosocial relationships that appear in literature throughout history, drawing from previous research done by Rene Girard in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. I am most interested in Sedgwick’s analysis of how competition and rivalry between men is distributed through and delineated by an eroticized desire for power. More specifically, the ways men become entangled in homosocial and homoerotic relationships as they attempt to navigate their social and political identities. Because of this, their identities become complex, taking on a “slipperiness” of identification with
traditionally gendered roles that include a weaker, feminized expressor of one man’s dominance. The struggle for dominance, Sedgwick argues, makes male homosexuality, the consuming love or hate between men, “a necessary structuring term for male heterosexual empowerment.” (105). Male homosocial relationships become conduits for men like Brutus to achieve his desired power—even if that drives him to violence.

How does this relationship look in *Julius Caesar*? Depending on the part of the play you are looking at, I believe Caesar, Brutus, and Cassius are at various points of these homosocial relationships. Cassius, in Act I, expresses his resentment for Caesar’s rise to power, something that gets in the way of Cassius rising through the political ranks. In a clever act of manipulation, Cassius takes on the more “feminized” role that Sedgwick finds necessary for asserting masculine dominance. I find that Virginia Woolf has a rather interesting way of summarizing this idea: “Whatever may be their use in civilized society, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge.” (36). For a short time, Cassius gives Brutus this “enlargement” by literally acting as his mirror, or “glass”, so that Brutus can “modestly discover [himself]”, an action that works because, after all, who doesn’t like to be complimented (1.2.74-6)? Essentially, Cassius tells Brutus what he wants to hear, which evokes affection and strengthens a tactical, if not eroticized, homosocial relationship between the two.

Brutus and Cassius fear their own inferiority. They fear irrelevance. They are already deep in homosocial relationships with the men around them, but when the common enemy of the extremely masculine, powerful Caesar comes along, the relationships take one step further. Sedgwick establishes that these homosocial relationships do not always need to cross over into
the homosexual. This is perhaps the reason her work has inspired this project so deeply. Her theories of sexuality and power opened the door for me to cross that line, where the sheer pressure of Roman manhood strips men of their true reason. The desire to be loved, to be seen, and to see yourself, creates a unique, charged intimacy between the characters, even as we see their relationships crumble around them through their actions.

Coppelia Kahn took Sedgwick’s analysis even further, introducing the concept of emulation that explores homosocial relationships without an explicit female figure. Kahn explains that “Emulation (from Latin aemulari: “to rival”) is the central motif of the Greco-Roman heroic tradition called the agon, that ‘zero-sum game’ of rivalry through which the hero wins his name by pitting himself against his likeness or equal in contests of courage and strength.” (271). In a brilliant reading of masculinity and politics in Julius Caesar, Kahn states that using “the mythos of the Republic” that guides the conspirators, “Shakespeare grounds virtus—Roman manhood—in a specific political ideology, one that both constitutes and fractures its male subjects” (272). This fracturing of male subjects is what I am most interested in, for my focus on Brutus entails an exploration of his emotional state as well as his political one. The pressure to live up to his lineage as well as be a successful politician blinds him to the consequences of his actions, leaving him completely open to Cassius’s seductions. In addition, his intimate but fragile relationship with Caesar throws him into a deep crisis, in which Caesar becomes the victim. These dynamics of masculine power are vital to Phantasma’s homosocial themes, since desire and power are inextricably linked.

Let’s Talk Genre

My project, as I define it, is a historical fiction retelling of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar through a queer lens. What sets it apart from the original source is that it is told through the first-
person perspective of Marcus Brutus, a perspective that allows for an exploration of his internal emotions and motivations. In recent years, a new genre of historical fiction has been rising, in which authors write retellings of—most often—classical myths. Madeline Miller has been at the forefront of this movement with *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, and others such as *Elektra* (Saint) and *Clytemnestra* (Casati) reflect a general interest in the Homeric poems. Most importantly, these retellings are done through a lens that may not be entirely new to the story, but ultimately shifts the focus of the story onto underrepresented characters (Patroclus in Achilles’ story, Circe in Odysseus’ story). What the historical fiction genre has seen recently is the use of interventions of sexuality, gender, and race. *Phantasma* will not only have an emphasis on the homosocial relationships between Brutus, Cassius, and Caesar, but will go a step further to interrogate the systems of masculine violence that exist both in Shakespeare and Brutus’s time (and, arguably, in our own), which are driven by the desire for and attraction of power.

**Queer Studies & the Renaissance**

Sedgwick’s work is also extremely relevant to the Renaissance critics that I am examining, as scholars such as Alan Bray address a male homosocial identity that Shakespeare would have been aware of at the time of writing *Julius Caesar*. More specifically, he addresses the ambiguity and anxiety within which homosocial relationships existed. There was an underlying anxiety about anything that challenged the expectations of political or social norms. Once homosocial relationships moved into the realm of (often public) homoerotic affection, they
became a threat to the heteronormative and powerful early modern patriarchy. This could have led to sodomy charges, which Bray discusses, and though he asserts that they did occur, “We see in them rather the unwelcome difficulty the Elizabethans had in drawing a dividing line between those gestures of closeness among men that they desired so much and those they feared.” (54). It is this anxiety that disrupts political power–if the masculine and homosocial system of politics is threatened by, say, homoerotic favoritism between master and servant, then power is not being distributed as a patriarchy demands. It is at this pressure point of homosocial relationships that I find Shakespeare building the dynamics between men in *Julius Caesar*. Favoritism and power imbalance create anxiety within the conspirators about the future of Rome and, more accurately, their future as politicians.

Scholars approaching the idea of queerness in the Renaissance often offer a “disclaimer” of sorts, one that I think is important enough to mention here. What they–and I–are discussing should not be limited to terms such as “gay” or “straight”. Those are not only rather new in the scheme of history, but also limit our understanding of sexuality within the period of the Renaissance. Homoerotic desire, as Alan Bray puts it, “was not conceived of as part of the created order at all; it was part of its dissolution. And as such it was not a sexuality in its own right, but existed as a potential for confusion and disorder in one undivided sexuality.” (24). In other words, queerness was a site not just of sexual expression, but of potential social division. This is why I believe there is so much homoerotic potential in *Julius Caesar*. It is a play ripe with anxiety and discomfort, filled with men fighting–and seducing–one another for power. Brutus’s social and emotional pressures disrupt the very political foundation of Rome, shining light on how quickly personal ambitions and desires can cause destruction.
Why Does Everything Have to be Gay Nowadays?

Sitting in an undergraduate course, I heard someone describe an interpretation of *The Iliad* as “pigeon holing” characters into specific categories (specifically, a non-heteronormative depiction of Achilles and Patroclus). The argument made was that there were complicated, multifaceted emotions that went into relationships such as the complex characters of Greek soldiers, and labeling them as “gay” devalued those emotions. It caused me to pause for a moment–was my project not an exploration of ancient Roman identities, of queerness amongst masculine figures? Was I forcing Brutus into a category that limited him and our understanding of him?

I took a step back from the project and organized my thoughts: why was I exploring this? What was in it for me, and for the people that would read it? This process brought me back to my original love of Shakespeare and the queer joy I felt while reading his plays. It was where I was introduced to tender male relationships and crossdressing women. It did not limit my understanding of them–it expanded it.

My intention is not to shove Brutus and Cassius into certain roles and identities–any project with that goal overlooks the value of individuality. But I did not entirely disagree with my classmate–in fact, those intense, complex emotions were exactly what I was focusing on. My queer analysis and adaptation intends to use those emotions and expand upon them, making them intentionally difficult to nail down to one specific category of gender or class. Shakespeare’s literature is not a stranger to loving same-sex relationships, and I merely aim to interrogate what one of those relationships could be expressing, for Shakespeare’s time as well as our own. The compelling elements of *Julius Caesar’s* cast can only be seen through a different lens–what if we look beyond Brutus’s honor and loyalty to his tangled emotions?
Alexis Lothian writes about queer expression through interaction with literature, and the effects it can have on individuals (especially younger individuals). Her work emphasizes what I hope to achieve with *Phantasma*, best exemplified in her discussion of fandoms: “The term ‘fandom’ named a shared space as well as an affective relationship. To be in fandom can mean to participate in a collective conversation organized not around any given media text but through the practices of transformative engagement with cultural production.” (231). In other words, fans of a piece of art transform it in order to engage with it—becoming a completely unique, unifying experience. That transfers to queer experiences, as queer individuals can see themselves represented in their favorite media, even if they are not explicitly queer. Lothian explains how this is not only important for communities to bond together, but for queer futures to be imagined.

The 2022 romantic comedy *Our Flag Means Death* became a talking point in queer communities when it was released. Viewers emphasized the shock they experienced when the relationship between the two main characters, Ed and Stede, became romantic—rather than the queerbaiting that viewers of heteronormative media were so accustomed to. In response to this, creator David Jenkins stated, “We’re steeped in bromances, too — where bromance is the language of two guys together [on screen]. Take Butch Cassidy and Sundance. If you add one extra reaction shot into that movie, it’s a love story because it’s all already there…And that can happen. But they can also actually be in love. We can do that.” (IndieWire). Jenkins goes on to express the
shock he felt in response to the audience’s anxiety about queerbaiting. I am not, of course, implying that Shakespeare was queerbaiting (a term that can be slippery at times), but am focusing more on Jenkins’ sentiment of “But they can also actually be in love. We can do that”. What was most important about the show for queer audiences was that they felt represented on the screen, allowing them to build a community around that. So, a queer lens does not exist to, as some may say, “pigeon hole” characters or people into identities. It is the exact opposite. Queerness exists to create possibilities, to expand the ways in which we understand characters and each other.

**Caesar in a Doublet**

One of the best-known moments of *Julius Caesar* anachronism is when the clock chimes to signal the early morning of the Ides of March. To readers, this anachronism can be frustrating, especially if they are expecting a “pure” representation of Roman culture. What is a clock doing in Ancient Rome? Shakespeare was not seeking to perfectly mimic Plutarch’s recordings (and he makes, in some areas, substantial changes) because he was writing for his period. In 1558, Elizabeth I took over the monarchy from her sister–she was an unmarried, unknowable figure of power to the English people. By 1599, the first staging of *Julius Caesar* was put on in the Globe. Both historical moments reflected the anxiety in the public, an anxiety that revolved around the instability of political and military power. Shakespeare wasn’t explicitly depicting Elizabethan England in *Julius Caesar*, but he was planting the seeds of reflection. If an onlooker in the audience saw Caesar “pluck me ope his doublet”–a doublet
startlingly similar to their own—the lines of their personal lives and the life of Caesar could begin to melt together (1.2.276-7).

It is not historically proven that Caesar ever uttered the classic line “Et tu, Brute”, yet that is the part of the play that is most quoted—even by people that have not consumed the play in any form. This subversion of norms is perhaps what draws many fans of Shakespeare to his plays (and, during the period, excited patrons of the Globe). That being said, this project follows in that very same vein. In some areas, I have strengthened the sense of Roman lifestyle and setting, such as architecture and clothing (Julius Caesar, believe it or not, was not wearing a doublet). In others, I have remained loyal to Shakespeare’s anachronisms, not just to honor what I find to be a brilliant display of commentary, but to remind the readers that, like Shakespeare did with Caesar’s story, this project is a recreation. This means that beyond these two aspects of storytelling, I will be introducing new moments and context to the play as, at least I believe, all honest reproductions should. Some of those features are worth touching on briefly.

A part of understanding anachronism in Shakespeare is understanding the history of Rome as well as England. I felt that a balance between the two was important to strengthening the setting and motivations of the story. Understanding Brutus’s life was essential to understanding him as a character and as a human being with human motivations. Kathryn Tempest’s biography Brutus was an important source for me, as well as various texts that discussed the informative letters of Cicero (Freeman Sacharoff, Sedley). Likewise it was important to understand the homosocial and political culture that Shakespeare was writing in. The goal of this was to create an
enriching world that could exist as something entirely new, without being limited to the Shakespearean source.

Portia is an important example of my own intervention. Her depiction is often emotional; she acts as the devoted wife to Brutus, the love that leaves him with guilt and pain at the end of the play. Yet Shakespeare also, in the smallest glimpses, shows us her bright intelligence. Daughter to Cato, husband to Brutus, she demands respect. I always felt that her time was cut too short. For that reason, my Portia follows the same path as Shakespeare’s, but she does not go peacefully. Through her interactions with Brutus, I drew out the suffocation of her situation as a woman. Without the political influence of her husband, she is left to be the voice of reason to a world of men driven by a hunger for glory. Blinded by his own desire, Brutus is unable to understand her plight, and he is ultimately her downfall because of this.

*Phantasma’s Plutarch*

Just as Shakespeare drew some of his great inspirations from Plutarch, I drew from the media surrounding me. And there is a lot of it when it comes to Julius Caesar. It makes deciding which iteration of the play to watch almost daunting. Phyllida Lloyd’s production of *Julius Caesar* with the Donmar Warehouse was one of my primary film inspirations. With an all-female cast and a play-within-a play setting of a women’s prison, the production breathed new life into *Julius Caesar*. It drew connections between our own political climate and that of the play, as well as reflecting the deep bonds that can form in states of imprisonment. It really

Fig. 7. Great Performances: Julius Caesar. 2019, Donmar Warehouse
explored the dangers of rhetoric that are so embedded into my retelling of the play, particularly between Brutus and Cassius as the conspiracy is cleverly crafted.

Derek Jarman’s *Edward II* was another strong influence. It took the homoerotic undertones of Marlowe’s work and formed it into a haunting, gory, sensual recreation. Jarman turned Edward’s agonized charge against Mortimer’s army into a queer rights protest—Edward’s army carrying posters reading “Gay desire is not a crime” and “stop violence against lesbians and gay men”, while Mortimer’s army was equipped with riot gear and batons. Jarman’s interpretation of the play revealed to me the possibility that exists within historical retellings: the potential of a queer voice in Marlowe and Shakespeare’s time that could speak to our own contemporary anxieties and passions. It showed me how important it was for art to be used with purpose, especially if that purpose was giving space for queer voices to speak.

**The End…?**

I would like to conclude with a brief description of what is to come. The project as a whole consists of five Acts. Acts One and Two are a part of this portion of the project, including a prologue that is completely original to Shakespeare’s play. For an understanding of the project in its entirety, I will take a moment to map out the remaining three Acts.

Act 3 can be considered the height of the play; in the very first scene, Caesar is killed by the conspirators. Fearful of the consequences, the conspirators flee to the hills to recoup, where Cassius must snap Brutus out of his shock. Once the mobs have calmed enough, Brutus and
Cassius deliver speeches to the masses. Brutus’s speech is overflowing with confidence, a true sign of his rhetoric—but it is perhaps too rehearsed, too drenched in his growing confidence. He leaves Mark Antony to give his speech and returns home to Portia, who is not as convinced that victory has been won. While preparing for political action, Brutus is interrupted by Cassius, who claims that the mobs have lost control from Antony’s speech and are attempting to kill the conspirators. Brutus makes the fateful decision to flee Rome, leaving Portia behind despite her protests.

Act 4 takes a bit of a time jump. Embroiled in civil war, we are thrown into the middle of Brutus’s military camp. It has been a horrific few months as he has worked to fend off the armies of the new Triumvirate: Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus. Yet something else seems to be troubling him: the arrival of his co-conspirator and lover, Cassius, to his camp. The two men retreat to Brutus’s tent to discuss matters of war, quickly devolving into a domestic fight over their treatment of one another. They are able to resolve the fight and embrace. Brutus reveals that Portia has taken her own life, but cannot grieve her as they begin their preparations for meeting Antony at Philippi. Unable to sleep, Brutus is confronted with the ghost of Caesar. He is so frightened by it that he seeks out Cassius, who soothes him enough to get them both to sleep.

Act 5 begins with a brief nightmare of Brutus, who sees the image of Caesar distorted and bloody, whispering words to him. When he awakes they prepare for battle and meet Antony and his crew out on the battlefield, where the men have an exchange of insults. No one relents, so they have battles with one another throughout the day. Just when it seems they will lose, Brutus overtakes...
Octavius’s legion and claims the crown of victory. He rushes to go tell Cassius, only to find him dead by his own sword. Brutus is devastated, but he must make one last stand the next day of battle. When victory feels impossible, he begs his servant Lucius to help him take his own life. In his dying breaths, Brutus declares that the spirit of Caesar can once again rest.
Prologue: *Wherefore Rejoice?*

*Pharsalus, Greece, 9 August 48 BC*

Rot, you are divinity.

The mind, I thought for a long time, was the way to win a war. The most tactical was the victor. I have had soldiers scoff at me for this idea; they believed brute force would lead them to success. *Victory*. A false word. I had been in enough battles, seen enough blood, to know it was not real. It was something we spoke over maps, something generals shouted at the front lines. Not something that ever became realized, because when split open victory smells of rot–of sour innards, festering with maggots. The scent is a god, demanding a sacrifice, intoxicating the heads and hearts of men, pushing them for more, more, *more*. More blood, more money, more power. More death, more burials, more shame, more victory.

Rot, you reek of victory.

I knew that was how we had ended up at Pharsalus. How I had, once again, strapped my armor on to march against my brothers. The armor sat heavy on my shoulders, twenty additional pounds of hot edges digging into my flesh. It did not make me feel larger–the opposite, in fact–and when the helmet was eased over my ears, the metallic echo of the world around me felt ghostly. It was as if I was marching through a field of the dead, where the soldiers clashing together were merely phantoms of their past selves, trapped in this eternal battle.

How long had it been since the civil war began? I could not tell. I was not sure it had ever really ended.. I was not sure my feet had ever left this muddy battleground.

“Hold rank! Do not break!” I shouted. My words bounced around inside my helmet. We were struggling to keep our line; I had known before we even entered that battlefield that Caesar’s forces would overwhelm us, but the loss of our formation signed our death contract. I
kept shouting for the men to rally, but my voice was mist to the battlefield, a dispersion of noiseless presence over unmastered chaos.

From behind, a body collided with me. It sent me staggering forward. I tried to balance myself, but their momentum continued and I crashed to the ground. I only just managed to drop my sword to keep from impaling myself on it before my head slammed into the mud. The metal of my helmet collided with my skull, sending reverberations through my entire body. I felt a weight land on my back, then roll to the side with a thud, but the pain coursing through my skull immobilized me. I blinked against the spots forming in my gaze, trying to make out my surroundings, searching for a threat. The battlefield sounded distant. The crash of shields and bodies hovered along the horizon, but it was a dream. I could not focus on it. I could only look at the man collapsed beside me, flat on his back. His helmet was gone, but I could not tell if I recognized him. If he was one of ours. Or one of Caesar’s.

It could have been the blood on his face, or the haziness of my mind, but all I could focus on was his eyes. Ordinary eyes, dark and nondescript—but they were trained on me, and for a breath we held each other’s gazes. In that breath, I saw it all. I saw the shudder of relief at the sight of me—another soldier of Pompey, another Roman, another man?—the twinkle of hope, and then I saw it get swallowed completely by a wild, primordial fear.

Then the sword impaled his throat. His eyes bulged and he made a desperate choking sound, his body twitching underneath the blood. I could not tell if he was choking on the blade or his own blood pouring into his mouth. I could not look away. It felt wrong, to break the gaze we had, as he held it through his thrashing, through the sword being yanked free from his flesh, through the soft whimpers that escaped his lips. And then, after the eternity of a single moment, he went completely still—eyes, frozen forever in agony and terror.
Rot, you kiss my eyelids and tell me to rest my head in your hands.

A hand grabbed my shoulder, jerking me upright. I was momentarily stunned from being torn from the dead soldier’s gaze; my hand searched desperately for my sword beside me. The soldier standing over me, sword raised, had a vile grin on his face. A man of war, plagued by hunger.

“Wait!”

An arm cut across the soldier, stopping him from driving his blade downward.

“What is this?” he cried angrily.

The soldier that had stopped him stepped forward. He stood over me with his hands on his hips, expression grim. I knew a seasoned general when I saw one. His authority was clear when the other soldier lowered his sword, despite his scowl.

“This is Marcus Brutus, is it not?” the general asked. He looked to me for a reply, but I could not speak. I did not dare move, but dread was beginning to flow through my body.

The general nodded despite my lack of reply. He positioned himself in front of me, as if his body would protect me from the rest of the battle. “We were given strict orders from Caesar. If we see Brutus on the battlefield, bring no harm to him. So that makes you our friend, Marcus Brutus.”

My entire body ran cold, dread washing from my head downwards until I was flooded with it. Caesar. Caesar had asked for my protection. Could it be a trick? I did not know Caesar to be such a low and cruel trickster. I also did not know what could have driven him to make such an order, especially since I had sided against him in this war. By those facts, we were enemies. I fought for the Republic, for Rome. Not for Pompey, and not for Caesar.
“He told us to bring you back to camp if you wish to join his cause,” the general said, examining me with his unremitting gaze. “If you refuse, we are to leave you be. So, will you come with us, Marcus Brutus?”

There it was. The deal. The invitation. As the words came from his mouth, I realized that I had always been expecting it, deep down. Maybe even hoping for it. I had chosen Pompey on my own free will, on my own values, but Caesar wanted me on his side. That had to mean something. But I had made my decision; to change sides now would be a statement. There would be men that I was sure would follow me in this decision, and men that would be infuriated by it.

The great Julius Caesar, conqueror of Gaul, wanted me to return to him. It had been some time since I had seen him. Since we had spoken about philosophy, and poetry, and Rome together. Since I had heard his laugh, since he had watched me speak at the Senate, since he had invited me to join his side in this civil war. I would never forget how he had invoked my father’s name. *To avenge those like M. Brutus, victims of Pompey’s reign of terror.*

What Caesar had not taken into account was that it was the lack of *res publica* that killed my father, not just a singular violent man. Pompey would always be my enemy, always be my father’s executioner, but at that moment, he had not been the threat to our liberty. Caesar was. Caesar and his hunger for more. Caesar and his promises of positions, of fame, of praise. As Rome had watched their fragile alliance of the Triumvirate crumble after the death of Crassus, I had quietly prepared myself for the eventual choosing of sides. The only right choice for the Republic had been Caesar.

Yet Caesar was the only man I knew that could make rot kneel before him and pray.

“Well, soldier?” the general asked. He extended his hand, an offering.
I knew Pompey’s forces were dwindling. It was only a matter of time before Caesar’s forces overran us. Caesar had good intentions for Rome, I felt that deep in my soul. Perhaps with my guidance…maybe we could create something even better. A Republic wealthier and more powerful than any before it. There was something in me that Caesar wanted on his side.

I took the general’s hand and allowed him to heave me to my feet. I lifted my sword from the ground and returned it to my belt, feeling much lighter than before.

“Men, Romans,” I said, “take me to Caesar.”

The tent was filled to the brim with war maps and swords laid out for sharpening. It was a reckless organization, one that only Caesar could accomplish. He could not help it; he was a whirlwind that must disrupt everything he passed. Everything teetered on the edge of chaos and disruption around Caesar.

When I entered, a group of men were surrounding the war table at the center. There they were placing marks on a large, yellowed map, indicating enemy camps, supply chains, allied forces. Some of them clutched letters in their hands—possibly written by fellow soldiers of Caesar, or possibly letters interrupted between enemy camps. Enemy. Was that what I was calling Pompey now? Had that not been what I had always called him, since the day he slaughtered my father? The only difference now was that I no longer had to follow his orders for the sake of my country. Still, it was unsettling to return to a scene such as Caesar’s tent, one filled with men I had turned my back on in joining Pompey. It was a familiar sight, yet I could not help but feel the weight of the circumstances as the men lifted their gazes to me; yes, it was familiar, but I was not welcome just yet. I would have to earn my place and my pardon. The men watching me knew that as well as I did, and for that reason they gazed at me with contempt.
At the head of the table stood Julius Caesar, the light of the lamps creating dark shadows across his strong cheekbones. He was not in armor, but in his leisurely clothes, the toga wrapped around his frame clinging to his muscular arms. He lifted his head with an expression of a father, ready to chastise his children for playing in his study. Then his eyes met mine, and he slowly lowered the map he held in his hands.

“Men,” he said, his voice cool and even. “You are dismissed.”

The Roman to his right looked at him in surprise. “Caesar–”

“You are dismissed. Do not make me say it again.”

A moment passed where the men looked at one another, but they did not risk more than a glance before collecting their letters and exiting the tent. As they passed, many of them cast me sideways glances, and I sensed a recognition in the silent confrontation. I knew some of them, and I was sure some of them knew me. We had chosen different sides of a war.

“You may go as well.” Caesar said, addressing the soldiers that had escorted me in. They both saluted and exited without question, pulling the tent flap closed tightly behind them.

“Brutus. Come forward.”

My instinct was to hesitate at a command such as that, but my body betrayed me. Fear and awe had taught me from a young age to obey Caesar’s commands, even as I had grown. I wanted to be angry with myself as I approached the table, but I could not. All I could do was let the defeat seep into my bones and obey, at least until I knew I had his trust again.

“Do not be afraid, Brutus,” Caesar said with a warm laugh, “I mean what I said. I wish you no harm. Did they treat you well?”

I stopped before him, folding my hands behind my back. “Yes, Caesar.”

“Good, good…”
Caesar rounded the table and stopped just before it, leaning back on it to gaze at me. His eyes sparkled with what almost seemed to be glee. He moved his body with the ease of a prop at his disposal. Despite the ease of it, his shoulders still vibrated with the power of a soldier, trained to kill.

In that moment, he could have been looking into my very soul, and I would have been helpless to stop it. And yet I would have been grateful to be known so well by another.

“Your mother has been quite worried about you, Brutus,” Caesar said, “I told her that you would come when the time was right, but she insisted I take action. I am sure you understand the hysteria of women.”

I swallowed, tensing at the mention of my mother. One of Caesar’s many lovers. Another lovely face he could control, another body he could consume in the shadows while everyone whispered about it in the light.

“Is my mother here?” I asked softly.

“No, but she is nearby. In the city. Do not worry, she is safe and healthy. Can I say the same for you, Brutus?”

I inhaled. “Yes, Caesar.”

“That is good news. Come, Brutus. Kneel before me. Let me look at your handsome face.”

Shakily, I lowered myself to the ground. My knees sunk into the dirt, and I lifted my gaze to Caesar. He smiled down at me.

“Do not be afraid, Brutus. You are a good and valuable friend to me,” he reached out, brushing his fingers against my cheek. “You are truly the image of Rome. So honorable. So intelligent. A valiant orator. I always enjoy watching you at the Senate.”
“I only speak what I believe to be just.” I said softly. There was a tightness in my throat, but I could not tell from what. It made it difficult to speak.

Caesar just laughed. “Of course you do, Brutus. Is that not what we all do?” he drew his fingers over the top of my ear, sending a chill down my back. “I am glad you have returned. You belong with me, Brutus.”

I lowered my head, training my eyes on the spot between Caesar’s feet. “I thank you for your forgiveness, Caesar.” I whispered.

“What was that, boy?”

I swallowed. “I thank you for your forgiveness.”

There was a pause, then Caesar’s hand cupped my chin. It was a firm grip—it did not hurt, but if I had tried to pull away from it, I had a feeling that it actually might. He lifted my head so my gaze met his, and he held me there in his iron grip. His expression, for the briefest of moments, was not kind or warm. It appeared as if a mask had been removed, replaced by an unfamiliar, twisted smile. The glimmer in his eyes was full of malice and hunger. He was a beast ready to devour me, and I, the prey, felt a tremble pass through me. Yet it was not entirely fear. It was something else.

I was being cut open, my insides laid bare before the altar of Caesar’s worship, so he could see all of my weaknesses and all of my strengths, and from my entrails divine my future. I was at the mercy of what he saw in me, of something more powerful than I. Something more profound.

Julius Caesar, devourer of men. Would it hurt to be consumed by his sharp canines, to be torn to shreds underneath his talons? Or would it free me, and make me truly real for the very
first time? The memory of the man from Pharsalus flashed through my mind—his wild, fearful eyes. He, too, had been an animal for the slaughter. He had not survived the feast.

“Say it again, Brutus.” Caesar crooned. And because I wanted to survive, and to thrive, and to learn how to protect myself from my natural predators, I spoke clearly the next time.

“Thank you for your generous forgiveness, Caesar.”

Caesar held me there for another moment, then released me and extended a hand. Weakly, I took it, allowing him to lift me back to my feet. He clasped my shoulder as I faced him. His mask had slipped back on; the easiness of his smile made me question whether that hunger had ever actually been there. Had I imagined it? Was my fear misplaced?

No, I knew that look. He looked hungry no longer, only because his appetite had been satiated for the time. He had had his fill, and I was left with the scraps.

“It is good to have you home, Brutus. With you, I think we might just win this war.”

I bowed my head slightly, but did not break eye contact. “I hope to help where I can. Anything to repay your kindness.”

Caesar chuckled. He slid his arm around my shoulders and guided me towards the exit of the tent. “Do not worry about payment, Brutus. Your company is enough to soothe my anxieties. Here, I would like you to meet my current generals.”

We exited the tent, and I was immediately struck with the noise of the camp. Voices in hectic conversations over fires, weapons scraping against stones for sharpening, animals squealing in fear of the coming night. Caesar’s miniature empire.

“I do not want you to be worried, Brutus,” Caesar said, clapping a hand on the back of my neck to guide me forward. “I am not sure what Pompey did with you, but I have something in mind for you already. Something I think you will excel at.”
I looked at him expectantly. It was true that I had not been a general in Pompey’s army, but I had often been asked to weigh in on matters of strategy and politics. A moment of anxiety flooded through me as I imagined what jobs Caesar could subject me to, if he wanted.

“You worry too much, Brutus,” Caesar chuckled, as if he understood my thoughts just from my expression. “I have a job for you which requires what you do best: talk. There have been quite a few rumors spreading about others defecting from Pompey—I want them on my side, just like I wanted you to return.”

As he spoke, we passed a group of men standing over a fire roasting an animal. They spoke loudly and boisterously, as if they had something to celebrate. And maybe they did. They were not the ones who fell as Pharsalus.

“I would like you to go to them,” Caesar continued, “and convince them that they are welcome back, so long as they are willing to follow me. Then you report back to me, and we can discuss the circumstances of their pardons,” Caesar paused, turning towards me to place his hand to his heart. “You see, Brutus, unlike Pompey, I am a man of mercy. We are all Romans, after all.”

“What men do you have in mind?” I asked, folding my hands in front of myself. Finally, something that felt tangible to me was being offered. I was well acquainted with oration. If it was convincing Caesar needed me do in order to secure my place within his circle, then it was convincing that I would do.

“Well, I have an inkling that more will come once they hear your name in the wind,” Caesar replied with a thin smile, “but for now, I would like to focus on a handful. Servius Sulpicus Rufus has remained out of reach for some time. Marcus Marcellus appears to be on the
move as well—he may be a difficult case for even you, Brutus. Oh, and, of course, your brother-in-law, Gaius Cassius.”

A rush of excitement flowed through me at that name. A familiar name, one that did not bring me any anxiety or conflict. Like me, Cassius had chosen the side of Pompey, the side of the Republic. He had been a constant figure in the entirety of my life, but the war had left us separated. Our correspondence had been limited the past few months, but I could always trust in Cassius’s unwavering morals. To have him by my side in Caesar’s campaign would be an immense relief.

Caesar laughed again, nodding in approval. “I knew you would appreciate the task. I trust that you will not fail me, Brutus. Our best course of action to a better Rome is one in which we are united.”

I nodded in return. “Of course, Caesar.”

I did not say anything else. I did not mention how Caesar’s vision for Rome might not align with many others. His better Rome may truly be one united, but what would the people be united under? A Republic, or a King?

“Come now, Brutus. I have one more thing to ask of you before I send you on your way.” Caesar said.

We walked further through the camp until we reached a large red tent, guarded by two soldiers. They both nodded to Caesar as we entered, the tent flap whipping in the wind behind us. This tent was filled with men, all in armor, pouring over tables of maps. They stopped their discussions when we walked in, eyes training on us.

“Caesar?” I said, unsure of what else to do.
Caesar released me and turned, sweeping a dramatic arm towards the men. “This is my counsel. I would like you to become a member of it, and advise me in this ongoing battle with Pompey. I have always valued your opinion.”

“I…”

“And, after all, I have a question that I think you have the answer to.”

I took a deep breath. I was not unaccustomed to having many eyes on me, or to speaking to large crowds. My speeches in courts were well known, even if I had not won all of my cases. But it was one thing to speak about what I believed in, what I was passionate about. It was another thing entirely to speak to a pack of ravenous hounds, watching me with keen gazes.

If I did this, it would solidify me as one of Caesar’s. Another of his properties. Then his plan would have worked. His protection, for my counsel. A strategic movement of his game pieces. I could not help but be in awe of it. His influence, his power, his cunning. It was clear he would do whatever he could to win this war. Whoever got in his way would be struck down, made weak and inferior.

Caesar had taught me when I was younger. He had guided me. He was offering me a solution, here and now. I just had to answer this question correctly. I just had to give him what he wanted, and I would love to see another day. Then, maybe, I could make a difference. I could protect my family, and my Republic. For Rome.

All it took was obedience.

“Anything, Caesar.” I said.

Julius Caesar, standing in all of his glory before me, smiled a kind, loving smile. “It is an easy request for you,” he said gently. “All I need is for you to tell me where Pompey is going next.”
Act I: Veni

Scene I: “This man is now become a god”

Rome, Italy, 15 February 44 BC, Lupercalia

“Peace, ho, Caesar speaks!”

The street was an explosion of noise, fanfare and cheers, of shoulders driving into one another, a competition of devotion. Roman citizens, stumbling over one another just to get a look at him; reaching out their hands, fingers desperate for his touch.

Hail Caesar, our savior! Hail Caesar! Caesar!

Hysterical, they screamed it. Women were weeping amongst the crowd, his name a prayer between their lips. The men stood with straight backs, hoping he saw them as soldiers, not just shoemakers and carpenters.

The second we entered the city, the stone streets were swarmed with these adorers, like rats fleeing a sinking ship. Except they weren’t fleeing; they were embracing it, this end. An end to a war, a long, agonizing war. First, the death of Pompey. Then the recent suicide of Cato, the last defender of Pompey’s cause. And all of the countless deaths in between—deaths of soldiers, friends, Romans. So many lives had been lost to reach the end of this civil war. And now we were here, celebrating Caesar’s return with Lupercalia. It almost seemed like divine convenience for him to return on a holiday such as this one. One where we were to celebrate rebirth and fertility, growth and creation. Many Romans probably saw this as a hopeful correlation between the two, a sign for Caesar’s future in Rome. I, however, could not stop thinking about the origins of the festival—the beginning reign of Rome’s first king Romulus.

Yes, the festival was one for new beginnings. But I was not sure the Romans celebrating knew exactly which beginning they were actually facing upon Caesar’s return. I could tell just by
the exhausted relief of the peoples’ cries how they wished to be liberated from turmoil, removed from darkness by this golden savior.  *Caesar! Welcome home, Caesar!*

Yes, home. Home at last. The Mighty Caesar, returning to Rome victorious. The streets were his, the walls were his, the people were his, the sky was his, the earth was his, the world as we knew it was his. Caesar, the conqueror.

“Peace, ho, Caesar speaks!” Casca shouted again, but his voice was lost to the chaos. I had been watching his lithe figure snake through the procession as we marched, joining the conversations without the other participants realizing. He unsettled people with those wide, unblinking eyes of his, and seemed to leave everyone he spoke with exasperated.

When Casca saw that his words didn’t land, he leapt onto the fountain we passed, raising an arm in the air. “Peace, ho! Caesar *speaks!*”

The crowd fell silent almost instantaneously, as if Casca’s words had finally aligned with the sight of Caesar stopping beside the fountain. Hushed whispers hissed through the air, but it was so quiet compared to before that I could hear the soft chuckle leave Caesar’s lips, even from my position at the back of the procession.

He spoke loudly and clearly, his voice echoing throughout the street: “Nonsense, Casca, I merely wanted to speak to my wife.”

Even though he was on lower ground, Caesar somehow looked larger than Casca. Broader, firmer in every sense; he made the act of gazing upwards feel powerful. That was the might of Caesar, after all. To fill up the space he enters and make it his own, make it burn with his greatness, and hope that he didn’t turn it to cinders in the process.
This day, however, was not for flames. Instead, Caesar clasped Casca on the shoulder and pulled him down from the fountain, embracing him as a comrade. When they separated, Caesar gestured towards the procession.

“Calphurnia, my love.”

I had watched Calphurnia get lost in the procession of shimmering armor and creamy robes, desperate eyes pleading with Caesar to remain close. Caesar had barely noticed her, and without his guidance she had stood no chance against the men around her, each one as eager as the last to get close to the great Julius Caesar, foaming at the mouth like dogs hungering for a slab of steak. For a moment, I had considered intervening to help her, but that was not my purpose. I had learned to observe, not intervene. That was what Caesar needed from me; that much had become evident after the first few weeks after abandoning Pompey. I knew I was one of the reasons Caesar had been able to track Pompey to Egypt. He asked me my thoughts, and of course I knew what options Pompey had had by then. It only took some deduction to decide he would go to Egypt, where he had connections. Still, nothing could have prepared us for what we found there. I could still see the massacred bodies, the empty, lifeless eyes of Pompey’s lonely head. I could still hear Caesar’s sobs of disgust. I still had to watch as Caesar entangled himself with that princess, even when I urged him to return home.

So no more intervening. Intervention meant nothing when it came to Caesar’s desire. I kept to my original purpose, the purpose he loved me for: to observe, to understand, and at last to return to him with answers. With a plan. It was always that same question: What do you think, Brutus?

There were moments where I wanted to answer truthfully. I think, Caesar, that your smile is radiant. I think you use it like a weapon; it draws blood when you are thirsting. I think the
laurels on your golden brow deceive you and your desire. I think you find yourself a God, satiated by the praise of the masses. I often wonder what would happen to you if they one day stopped loving you. Would you still be immortalized? Solidify to stone, or turn to ash? Or simply stop being?

Caesar, the victor, Caesar, the general, Caesar, the ruler. Or Caesar, the unknown?

“Here, my lord.” Calphurnnia said, appearing from between Marullus and Flavius. Her voice was a gentle breeze compared to the vicious winds of the crowd. Her cheeks were pink from the excitement, her long brown curls framing her face in a haze. She had always appeared too soft to be against all of Caesar’s sharp edges.

“Wonderful. Antonius! Come here, my man!” Caesar called over his shoulder. The shout wasn’t necessary. Mark Antony was never far from Caesar’s shoulder. He merely spun from his greeting of the crowd, turning to Caesar with an eager, hungry look in his eyes. His cheeks were as red as Calphurnia’s, but I had no doubt in my mind that his were red with drinks of revelry rather than female modesty.

“Caesar, my lord!” Antony shouted, shoving his way between Caesar and Casca. Casca stumbled to the side while Antony took hold of Caesar’s face and kissed him messily. “Hail Caesar!” he cried, earning a round of cheers. It was an act that only Mark Antony could get away with. Since joining Caesar’s camp all those months ago, it had become clear that Caesar found amusement in Antony’s boldness. The expression of joy that crossed his face when Antony entered the scene was evidence enough. How easily Antony had won his affections; all it had taken was some noise-making, some drunken songs, and a heavy-hand with a sword.
“Come forward, Antonius, and touch Calphurnia before your race,” Caesar directed Antony towards his wife. “It is known to be good luck to touch such a beautiful woman before competition.”

Antony grinned, broad and lazy. He knew he could get whatever he wanted with its charm, with the handsome lines of his golden face. Women, fame, attention. It was all his with that smile. But I knew what it really was, even if Caesar wouldn’t acknowledge it: A guard dog baring its fangs.

“Let it be known!” Antony shouted to the crowd, “that when Caesar says ‘Do this, Antonius’, it is done!”

The crowd erupted into cheers as Antony extended an arm for Calphurnia. She cast a tentative glance in Caesar’s direction, but he had already moved on to greeting Cicero. I noted the reluctance in her eyes as she slipped her arm in with Antony’s.

“On we march to the games!” Antony cheered. Behind me, I heard a low scoff. I didn’t need to look to see who it was, because I would know that sound anywhere, but I did anyway, if only to gaze upon a good friend.

Gaius Cassius scowled back at me. He stood against a nearby shop door, arms folded across his broad chest—the chest of a soldier, one that rivaled Caesar in many ways. I raised an eyebrow in questioning, which merely earned an irritated grunt in reply. I was considering joining him on the outskirts of the celebration, until a voice close to my ear startled my thoughts back to the matter at hand.

“Caesar!”

It was childlike, frail, but somehow pierced through the cacophony; if someone else had said Caesar’s name at the moment, it was lost to the wind. All that existed was that one voice,
that call which made Caesar’s name sound more like a spell, a curse, than an address. It alarmed Caesar, because he looked around the crowd when it was cast out, expression alert.

“Who calls for me?” he demanded, his brilliant smile melting away. The stern brow that I was so familiar with from those late nights strategizing and debating reappeared.

A body collided with me from behind. I staggered forward, but they were already past me, moving as if their feet weren’t touching the ground. They were enshrouded in a long, dark cloak that was both blue and black at once, shifting with how it moved in the sunlight. It almost seemed like there were stars dancing between the seams, blinking in and out as the figure approached the great Julius Caesar.

I jolted from my spot, moving quickly after the figure. My hand reached for the knife at my side, but hesitated when the figure dropped their hood. It was a gaunt woman, her milky skin layered with a sheen of sweat. She stood crookedly, as if her entire body pained her, but her face was youthful and her pale hair full, falling across her shoulders in tangled curls. For a moment she lifted her hands and I waited for the blow to land, for her to bury a blade into Caesar’s chest, but the moment never came.

Over the chaos of the crowd, over Casca calling for silence, I heard the woman speak, as if she were whispering directly into my ear: “Beware the Ides of March.”

Caesar spun towards her, and I was startled to see that she was nearly as tall as him. She might have even been taller, if she had not leaned to one side in agony.

Caesar’s nostrils flared, his hand moving to his knife blade. “What does this woman say to me?” His voice was tight.

Despite the sudden breathlessness that overcame my body, I stepped forward, nearly beside the woman. “She says to beware the Ides of March, Caesar.” I repeated.
When he realized it was me speaking, Caesar’s expression smoothed out, but I could have sworn I saw a flash of panic in those dark, calculating eyes. If he had asked me what I made of the message at that moment, I wasn’t sure I would have been able to answer. *What do you think, Brutus? I don’t know, Caesar. I know that all I could imagine was her blade, entering your throat. A blade that never actually existed. Would you hate me for seeing such a thing?*

Abruptly, Caesar let out a hearty laugh. It rippled over the crowd, which shifted uneasily at the scene. “Alright, alright,” Caesar laughed again, his perfect smile returning in an instant. “She is but a dreamer, dear Brutus. Let us continue. On with the games!”

As Caesar turned, the crowd moved with him, eager to follow in his footsteps. In an instant, the tall woman became swallowed by bodies. I had my eyes trained on her shifting cloak, and then it was gone, disappearing as if she had never been there in the first place, as if I had imagined her completely. I tried to search the crowd for her, but all I saw was Caesar’s followers encircling him. Mark Antony was leading the pack, beaming down at Calphurnia beside him. As they walked, he appeared to say something to her that made her laugh, her cheeks blushing. He led her forward with the confidence of a man used to having a lady on his arm; it was one of his vices, but also one of his strengths. At the very least, he seemed to offer Calphurnia some comfort amongst the chaos.

Even when the crowd began to disperse to stragglers, I couldn’t find the urge in me to move after them. The image of the woman behind Caesar deeply unsettled me; her words that formed heavily against my eardrum were creating a knot in my throat.

“Are you not joining the games?”

Cassius’s voice startled me from my frozen state. I turned towards him as the end of the procession disappeared around the corner of the street.
“Not me, Cassius.” I replied gently.

“I think you should.”

“I am not the type for games. I think I lack whatever zeal Antony seems to teem with. But do not wait on my account, Cassius,” I nudged his shoulder with my elbow and added with a humorous tone, “I would hate to keep you from your fun.”

The jest earned only a scowl from my companion. I had heard him described in many different ways: cold, cruel, unsettling. A man that rejected revelry as if it were a disease to his mind. It made others wary of him. How could they trust a man that did not enjoy music, did not smile at women or dance underneath the stars? I, on the contrary, found that he offered me a quietness that I so often lacked within Caesar’s circle.

“There is not much point observing now, is there?” I sighed, “We know the outcome already, after every other victory. Antony will win all of the games, trampling over the others to get his fill, while Caesar cheers him on—”

“Brutus.”

I stopped speaking. From Cassius’s mouth, my name was a crash of thunder. It sent my ears ringing, distorting all other noise around me so I could barely focus. He spoke it with such seriousness, I found myself looking to his face for an explanation. His lips were set in a firm line, his brow permanently creased with worry. Gazing into Cassius’s eyes was like being swallowed by ivy, the vines viridescent and hungry, eager to trap you in place. They reminded me of my garden that I had missed so much while I was away; its ability to grow, even in the worst conditions, and spread its color towards the sky.
Cassius’s eyes told me there was something unspoken and dangerous in the silence that had passed between us for some time. I knew because it was the sensation of unease that had passed through me after the tall woman had appeared to Caesar.

“Brutus, I do observe you now of late,” Cassius clasped my shoulder, bringing me further into the shadows of the street. “Your eyes have been empty of any of your love that I treasure dearly. It is strange and unkind, to treat one who loves you this much as you do.”

I inhaled sharply. “No, Cassius…do not be deceived by my appearance. Whatever unfriendliness you have seen upon my face, it has been turned upon myself,” I reached out and gripped his shoulders firmly, lowering my voice. “Recently I have had dissonant thoughts tormenting me; that may be what is reflecting on my face. Do not be grieved, Cassius, as one of my dear friends. I assure you that it is the war that rages inside me, not my lack of love for you, that has me behaving this way.”

Cassius’s gaze remained stony and unchanging as I spoke. The words came out of me in a flow of desperation. It was almost a relief to voice the truth this way, to him.

Cassius let out a soft breath that could have been mistaken for a chuckle, if it weren’t him, and reached out to pat my cheek with his cold hand. “Then I have misunderstood you, Brutus,” his expression turned serious again, as his hand fell to my shoulder. “Brutus, can you see yourself?”

“What do you mean? A man cannot see himself without a reflection.” I replied.

Cassius nodded. “That is true, and it is too bad. If you could, then you could see how worthy you are. Ah, Brutus, do not scoff at this,” he pointed his free finger at my face accusingly. “I have heard great men speak of you in these streets—all except immortal Caesar,
that is—and all of them praise you. If only you could see that greatness in yourself that they speak of.”

I took his hand that pointed a finger in my face and lowered it, careful not to look away from his gaze. I didn’t release his hand as I asked, breathlessly, “Cassius, what danger are you leading me into?”

“Danger, Brutus?”

“Yes, danger. That I should search in myself for something that is not truly there, this greatness.”

Cassius jerked his hand from my grip, using both to hold my face between them, bringing me even closer still. It forced me to look nowhere else but those swimming, entangling ivy eyes, paired with a brow firmly set and determined.

“Brutus, let me be your mirror,” he hissed, holding me tighter. “You cannot see yourself outside of a reflection, so let me show you everything that you are. Let me help you discover the greatness that resides in you, that even you do not know. I see it all. I see it all, Brutus, and you are worthy.”

His words tightened at the end, as if he were going to choke on them. I could not recall the last time I had seen Cassius so moved, or since anyone had held me this way. My wary mind begged me to look about the street—surely Caesar would have come looking for us by now?—but my body refused to move. Cassius must have seen the anxiety my expression betrayed, because he continued speaking,

“Do not be suspicious of me, Brutus. If you have known me to fall at the knees of others, just to betray them after, then be afraid. But you know that is not my intention with you.”
A tremendous cheer filled the air, so abruptly that Cassius let go of me, spinning around to search for the source. It came from the direction of Caesar’s procession, but it had sounded different than all of the other cheers before. It was louder, more excitable.

“What was that? Have the people chosen Caesar as King?” I gasped.

Cassius’s scowl had returned as he glared down the street at an invisible crowd. He did not answer for a few moments, and we listened to the noise of the crowd die down. When it was almost silent again, Cassius turned back to me. His scowl melted away, replaced by something more tangible—I could not place what it was in his face, but it felt more like an embrace than a firm stone wall.

“It sounds like the idea of that scares you,” he said. “Does that mean you would not want it to happen?”

Heat flooded my body. It was unreal to even hear the words implied, to know what was underneath Cassius’s gaze. Even if they had been shifting within my mind for some time, it was a whole other ordeal to voice them. To make them real. Yet, as my friend gazed at me, I felt a great sense of relief wash through me as well.

“Yes,” I sighed, squeezing my eyes shut. “Yes, I fear it, and I would not let it happen, but I still love him.”

When Cassius did not reply, I opened my eyes again, taking a slight step from him. “Why are we here, Cassius? What is your motivation? No more moving around it. If it is for the general good, know that I will look at it with reason. You know that I love honor more than I fear death.”

Slowly, a thin smile crept onto Cassius’s face. It showed no teeth, like Caesar’s smile, but it did not need to. It creased every surface of his face perfectly, illuminating his bright eyes, and
softened the scowling brow of his. The space between us was the air before a thunderstorm–thick and anticipatory, laced with energy. It made me want to look at the sky in search of the gods, if only to find an answer to this impending chaos. If only to know where the lightning would strike, and who it would hit.

“I know that you are good, Brutus, and I promise this conversation concerns honor. I cannot speak for others, but I know that I will not live my life cowering to others who are no stronger than myself. Do you agree?”

It felt too cruel to speak the words aloud, so I nodded silently.

Cassius appeared satisfied, even excited, by my agreement. “Then I am sure you agree that we, too, were born free. As free as Caesar was. That we eat the same foods, brave the same weather?”

“Cassius–”

“Let me tell you a story,” Cassius stepped back, spreading his hands before himself to mimic a picture, “Here I stand, on the shore of the Tiber beside Caesar. Suddenly, Caesar approaches me and points to the distance, to a gathering of sharp rocks on the horizon. And he says to me, ‘Cassius, I bet you wouldn’t dare swim to those rocks!’ Mind you, the ocean was angry, but I was not afraid–dare I?! I leapt right into the frigid waters, and what did I see when I looked back?”

I folded my arms, half-amused by his display of dramatics as he threw his arms through the air to demonstrate the waves. But there was also a peculiar sparkle in his eyes, a subtle playfulness that I was not used to seeing from him.

“There he stood, gazing down at me, shivering in the cold. I had to shout for him to follow! He crashed into the waves, flopping like a lost fish,” Cassius illustrated swimming with
his hands, then made a crashing sound with his mouth, “We raced against the storm, and for a moment I thought the rivalry was strong. Then he cries for me, ‘Cassius!’” Cassius put on a shrill voice, which forced me to hold back laughter, “‘Cassius, save me! I am sinking!’”. So I, like Aeneas—"

I let out a bark of laughter. “So you are Aeneas, now?”

Cassius’s smile widened to a grin. He shoved my shoulder. “Yes, I, Aeneas, from the flames of Troy, carried Caesar to the shore. Do you not believe me, oh fair Dido?”

“Dido!” I scoffed, but it hardly concealed the laugh that crept through. The more I watched this dramatic exhibition, the faster my heart beat in my chest.

“I jest, Brutus,” Cassius said. Another cheer rang out from the distance. Cassius stepped closer as if it startled him, then urgently took a hold of the front of my cloak, tangling his fingers with the fabric. It was as if the laughing Cassius had been but a mere illusion, returned to the reality of the shadow lurking outside the procession.

“Brutus, is this the man that we have let become a god?” he whispered. “While we are mere creatures that must bend to his will? Do you recall when he had a fever in Spain, how he trembled like a feeble little girl. This is the man we honor,” Cassius shook me by the cloak when my eyes drifted from his, searching for Caesar. “Should a man like this get the world all to himself?”

Another cheer rang from the distance, louder this time, though it did not seem like it was closer. I inhaled sharply. “Another shout. Someone must have offered Caesar new honors.”

Cassius scoffed. “Why, man, he bestrides the narrow world like a Colossus, and we petty men walk under his huge legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves!” He gazed
deep into my eyes, desperate. “Brutus, I know you feel it too. You must know that the fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves, because we are underlings!”

I reached up to grip his wrist, but did not remove his hand from my cloak. “So what do you suggest, Cassius? That we take control of our own fates? That we deny everything?”

“Yes! You can not tell me you do not feel it, too. ‘Brutus’ and ‘Caesar’ –where is the difference in those names? Should one be cried more than the other? Do they not weigh the same? Can the masses not rally under a cry of Brutus as much as Caesar?”

“You overestimate my worth, Cassius.” I said softly.

“No, Brutus, my dearest friend, I know there is greatness in you. It is something I have been sure of for a very long time. I have seen you in battle, and I have seen you in the Senate. Has Caesar eaten some food that you have not? What has made him more powerful than you?”

Cassius turned his face up towards the sky and shouted, “Rome! You have lost all noble men to shame!”

“Cassius!” I gasped, dragging him further into the shadows, “Keep your voice down!”

“I will not!” Cassius snapped back, his face turning crimson, “Since when was Rome built for one man? There was once a great Brutus—a Brutus that would have let the devil rule Rome over a King!”

“Cassius! Hold your tongue. Do not speak of him.”

“Should I hold my tongue? Lucius Brutus made our Rome possible! His blood is in your veins, in your very name. Do you not think that matters?”

I finally pulled his hand from my shirt, pushing it to his side. I took a step back from him. My mind was too filled with his words, so they were becoming tangled together, melting into truth and lies. For the longest time, I had felt these sentiments that he expressed, but why had I
not spoken them? What was the difference now, this stirring in my gut, like a creature awakening from its hibernation?

I took a deep breath and pressed my hand to the back of my neck, urging the tension in my shoulders to fade. After another beat of silence, I returned my gaze to Cassius and said, “I do not doubt that you love me, Cassius, and I have some guesses as to what you are asking me to do. I must beg that we stop this here, at least for the time. What you have said, I will consider, and what you have to say, I will listen to, because I love you. In the meantime, know that I would rather be a peasant than a son of Rome in these conditions.”

Cassius looked me up and down thoroughly, and from his expression I could glean that he was considering stepping towards me again, closing the distance that I had created. At last, he just gave me a satisfied nod and replied, “I am glad my weak words have been able to move you, Brutus.”

I sighed. “They always seem to, do they not?” I said.

Cassius glanced around the street, taking in our surroundings for a moment. The sun was just beginning to set in the distance, painting the decorative banners draped from buildings in an orange glow. The wind was picking up as well, but as far as I could see the skies were still clear of clouds. The cheering of the crowd in the distance was thunderous, which made me think the race had begun.

“Do you remember when we were boys?” Cassius asked suddenly, his voice soft against the rising wind.

I kept my eyes on the banners, flapping like flags of surrender out on the battlefield. “What do you mean?”
“Having you by my side again reminds me of our early days together. Do you remember our time there with Staberius Eros?”

“How could I forget? He treated us with such kindness.”

“Do you ever think about how we would not have been there, had our fathers not been killed by a tyrant?”

I allowed a silence to pass between us for a few moments, focusing on the changing lights of the sky. Finally, I sighed and turned back to Cassius, who looked at me with an amiable expression.

“We would not have been there without Staberius’s kindness. To teach boys like us for free was beyond what he was asked of. Yet he did it.”

“Boys like us?” Cassius echoed, but it was not judgmental. In fact, there was a hint of a smile at the corners of his lips. Seeing it made a spark of happiness course through me, pure and charged.

“Well, I suppose you are right. We were nothing alike in grammar school. I was not getting into fights.” I said with a smile.

Cassius scoffed. “It was hardly a fight.”

“You broke his arm!”

“He deserved it! Do you not remember how he used to threaten the younger kids with his father’s powers? Was I supposed to sit idly by while the son of the man who killed our fathers abused his power?”

I shook my head, laughing at his frantic attempt to defend himself. “No, I do not expect that from you. I only find humor in the memory of your bruised and bloody face as Staberius scolded you.”
Cassius rolled his eyes at this. “Faustes barely got in trouble for it! Do you remember that?”

I pretended to ponder this for a moment, tapping my finger to my chin. “Hmm…no, I do not remember that. I do remember you crying afterwards, though.”

“I did not cry!” Cassius exclaimed, giving my shoulder a light shove. There was no real anger behind the gesture, and it just made me laugh more.

“I would remember, since I was the one that had to console you.” I replied.

Cassius shook his head. “It amazes me how you make me regret trying to reminisce.”

I just laughed again. “I do not think it was a bad thing, Cassius,” I assured him. “In fact, it reminds me how dedicated to our cause that you have always been. Even as a boy, you felt the imbalance of justice so strongly…I have always admired that in you.”

Cassius bristled slightly at the praise, as if he were unused to it. Then he said, “Well, I was inspired by someone’s words. If I remember correctly, there was a certain classmate of mine who could not keep his mouth shut.”

It was my turn to scoff. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“No? Might you recall the infamous ‘Pro Brutus’?”

My cheeks warmed a little with the embarrassment of that memory—of me standing amongst my classmates, demanding attention as I delivered a speech as if I were in the courthouse defending my honor. At the time, I had thought it was the most magnificent speech on liberty and honor that had ever been written. It was, to this day, the only speech I had delivered just for myself. There had been no murder, no crime—only a deep sense of injustice as I watched Pompey’s reign continue. It was foolish, boyish behavior.
“At least I chose to use my words rather than my fists.” I replied, trying to maintain a calm expression to not expose my embarrassment. Cassius saw right through it immediately, a smile spreading across his lips.

“Staberius would have scolded you as much as he did me if he had heard that horrific rhetoric.” he said.

“Yes, well, thankfully he did not. And I have since improved.”

“And what would you say, Brutus, about Rome as we know it today?”

It was a leading question, one that had a specific answer that would please Cassius. An answer that was perhaps not too far from my original speech as a boy. I had watched the fight for liberty and freedom take the lives of many men–my father, Pompey, Cato. The debate Cassius hinted at, then, laid in the center of whether those lives were necessary for our freedom. Would more deaths be needed to protect the Republic? Caesar’s unwillingness to give up his emergency dictatorship past its expiration made my gut tell me that they would.

But this was not something that could be so easily articulated. Even as I trained and practiced in rhetoric, I had never found the ideal way to express it. It was too large of an idea to limit to simple words, to Greek rhythms and pentameter. There was much I could say about Rome as I knew it, but none of it would really be the complete truth, not when I was still so conflicted in my own mind. There was only one aspect of Rome that I understood at the moment, that I knew with all of my head and heart.

“To speak about Rome today,” I replied softly, “I would say that it is an honor to share it with you, Cassius.”
Cassius reached over and clasped my shoulder firmly. He did not appear surprised by my answer, or frustrated that it did not answer exactly what he had asked. His gaze was gentle as he said, “And I you, dear Brutus.”

A trumpet sounded down the street. Cassius and I both straightened, turning towards the sound. Though I was not disheveled, I felt the urge to smooth out my robes, my fingers moving over the place where Cassius had previously held them. Caesar’s party rounded the corner, a collection of bodies bobbing with the waves of his march.

“The games have finished, and Caesar has returned.” I whispered to Cassius. It was unnecessary to state, yet saying it aloud made it real. It made the dizziness from our conversation feel a little more steady. Caesar was something real, something constant for me to ground me in reality once again.

“When Casca passes, grab his sleeve. He can tell us what happened.” Cassius whispered back.

“I will, but look at them. Caesar looks angry, and Calpurnia pale as a ghost. Even Cicero has fire in his eyes, such as he does at the Senate.”

“Hush now. Casca will tell us all.”

“We should greet him, or we may seem suspicious.” I said. I did not wait to see if Cassius agreed to move through the street. Caesar’s gaze found me almost immediately, his dark eyes glowing through the clustered bodies. His expression of anger, so unlike him, turned into his charming smile.

“Brutus, my friend! I did not see you at the games!” he exclaimed, closing the distance between us. He clamped a strong hand onto my shoulder.

“Yes, Caesar—”
“Gaius Cassius appears at last from his brooding!” a shout came from behind Caesar. Antony approached, throwing his arm around Caesar’s shoulders once again. I shifted to the side when Cassius stepped up beside me, hands folded behind his back.

“Brooding?” Caesar echoed with laughter, “Why, Antony, look at this fellow!” Caesar grabbed Cassius’s face with one hand, turning his head from one side to another, like a butcher inspecting his livestock for slaughter. “He has a lean and hungry look about him. You think too much, Cassius!”

Cassius’s jaw was clenched, but he did not pull away from Caesar’s grip. Antony laughed loudly, shaking Caesar’s shoulders. “This Cassius? Do not fear him, Caesar. This Cassius is noble and honorable to Rome.”

Antony’s grin was mocking and sharp. Cassius’s nostrils flared slightly, but he still did not relent. Calmly, he said, “It is true, Caesar.”

Caesar just laughed again. “I am not afraid of you, Cassius. You are a great observer,” he turned to Antony. “He does not enjoy the games and music as you do. Once, I caught him smiling, but it was an odd smile, like he was mocking himself for allowing such a thing to cross his face!”

Antony burst out into laughter, clinging to Caesar to keep from falling over. I glanced at Cassius and found his lips pressed into a firm line, his chest rising and falling faster than normal. I knew that look of anger, that look of shame. I knew it not just from Cassius, but from various men around Caesar’s camp. Countless men had borne the brunt of Caesar’s amusement.

“He is not a fearful creature, Caesar.” I remarked calmly, hoping that my input would quell the laughter. I could feel Cassius’s eyes on me, but I continued looking ahead to Caesar.
The great general stopped laughing, his lips constricting into a bemused expression. Even though his tone was playful still, I knew his expression well. It was one of calculation; one that sought to make you aware of what he was capable of. He let go of Antony and adjusted his cloak. “Of course not, Brutus,” he said. “We merely jest. I talk about what men should fear, not what I fear. Come, Antonius. Let us continue.”

Caesar gave a nod to both of us before continuing along with his procession. We did not get the same farewell from Antony; he only shoved past us with his broad shoulders, pushing us out of the path that led to Caesar.

I looked at Cassius. His face was red with shame, and I did not know what else to do besides say, “I have seen your smile, Cassius, and it is anything but cold.”

Cassius’s shoulders dropped and he sighed, his eyes sliding back over to me. “Perhaps that was a smile reserved only for you, Brutus.” he said, then hissed, “Quick, Casca!”

Casca almost slipped past me through the procession, his sly body weaving through the masses with ease. I just managed to grab his sleeve as he passed, jerking him back harder than I had intended to. He turned towards me with the expression of a man who was not accustomed to being caught; a man who was more used to choosing exactly when and where he wanted to appear. His eyes were wide and unblinking as he stopped and looked at me hand on his sleeve, then Cassius and I.

“A word, good Casca?” I asked softly.

I said nothing more, yet Casca’s expression shifted for a moment, as if he had heard something completely different. He nodded and stepped closer, smoothing down his sleeve when I released him. The three of us watched Caesar’s procession disappear once more, followed by a
gaggle of small children, screaming his name and throwing flowers at his back. Such adoration. Such young minds. Such influence.

“What is the matter, fellows? Are you not coming to the feast?” Casca asked.

I glanced at Cassius, but his eyes were trained on Caesar. I watched his eyes glimmer, his expression harden, and I knew without looking that Caesar was gone. He returned his gaze to Casca, looking down at the short man, but said nothing.

“We wanted to ask about Caesar. Why was he so angry upon returning?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

Casca blinked at me. “Well, you were there, were you not?”

“I would not be asking if I had been.”

“Well, a crown was offered to him. He cast it aside with the back of his hand, like one would swat a fly. The crowd went wild.”

Casca said it with such ease, but the words brought a rush of panic through my body. It took all of my power to keep my breathing steady as I said, “Then what was the second shout for?”

“Well, the same thing.”

“He was offered the crown again?”

“There was a third shout.” Cassius remarked.

“Was the crown offered to him thrice?”

Casca’s shaded expression loosened, with what seemed like contempt creeping in around the edges. “Yes, three times,” he said, “and he rejected it more gently every time.”

As I watched Casca’s wide eyes move around the street, it became clear to me that what he said was not intended to be a compliment to Caesar’s nature.
“Who offered him the crown, Casca?” Cassius asked.

“Why, who else?”

Cassius and I spoke the name at once, mine soft and exhaled, his sharp and envenomed:

“Antony.”

Casca nodded. “Ay, Mark Antony.”

“Tell us what happened, Casca. Do not spare the details.”

Casca shifted in his stance, folding his arms across his chest. He had a slight frown on his face now, like he had eaten a sour grape. “Well, it was a joke, that I can say. It was not actually a crown, but one of those coronets—you know, the ones made from laurels—”

“Yes, we know what a coronet is,” Cassius snapped, “Get on with it, Casca.”

“Right. Well, Antony offered it to Caesar, and he pushed it aside. But…”

“But what?” Cassius demanded, clearly growing impatient.

Casca glanced around and, finding no one, leaned closer. “But I think he would have been pleased to take it,” he said, without whispering despite his dramatic lean. “And when he pushed it aside a second time, I bet he loathed to take his fingers off of it. And the third time, the crowd was so overjoyed he pushed it aside they started cheering again, even louder. They clapped their chapped hands and threw their sweaty, smelly arms in the air, and their breath was so dreadful that it nearly choked Caesar! He swooned and fell to the ground from it.” Casca leaned back, letting out a small laugh.

I rolled my eyes. “Their breath did no such thing. He must have had a fainting spell.”

Casca shrugged. “I saw what I saw. He fell to the ground and foamed at the mouth.”

“No,” Cassius said, worrying at a spot on his cheek with his hand. “No, Caesar does not have the falling sickness. We do. And you do too, Casca.”
My heart skipped as I looked at Casca for a reaction—as the conversation between just Cassius and I became abruptly more expansive. As the words were spoken and not spoken.

“I…do not understand what you mean,” Casca said slowly. “But I am sure Caesar fell down. I am a liar, then, if the crowd did not trample him and cry his name for this deed.”

“What did he say when he got up?” I asked. I hoped to steer from Cassius and his irritation. A short temper was not something that would work with a man like Casca, a man whose expression never said what he truly felt or thought.

Casca said, “Before he fell, he bore his throat to his audience and offered it for them to cut. If I were a tradesman like that sort, I would not have done it, unless I wished to go to hell. When he came to, he asked us to forget if he had said anything unusual, since it was just a cause of his illness.”

Cassius scoffed, shaking his head. “A clever act.”

“Ay. Three women stood around him and cried his name with all their hearts. I think they would have done the same even if he stabbed their mothers to death.”

Cassius let out a breath of air. It was the closest sign of approval I had heard from him thus far. It was reassuring he did not find Casca a total fool.

“Did Cicero say anything after he fell?” I asked.

“Ay, he spoke Greek.”

“Yes, but what did he say?”

Casca gave me a puzzled expression. “Well, I could not tell you, I did not understand a word of it. But the surrounding people were nodding along in approval.”

“Not a word?” I asked, my own irritation beginning to rise up now.
“I knew it to be Greek, but nothing more. Oh, but there is other news!” Casca beamed, proud of his role as messenger, “Marullus and Flavius were imprisoned for removing honorable scarves from Caesar’s statues.”

Cassius inhaled sharply, looking at me. “This is the man that swore to protect the tribunes. Who started a war against Pompey for their rights, yet he arrests them for using their freedom. He is silencing our voices, Brutus.”

“Would he do such a thing?” I asked, but the question was weak and pathetic. It was not a question that needed to be asked, because we knew the answer already. Yes, Caesar would do such a thing. Caesar, the conqueror, meant to be worshiped by all.

Cassius, as if reading my thoughts, nodded approvingly and turned back towards our companion. “Casca, will you dine with me tonight?”

“I can not tonight, I am expected home.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Yes, if I am alive, and you would still like me to, and your food is worth eating.”

Cassius’s face twitched with irritation, but he extended his hand anyway. “I will expect you, friend.”

The two men shook hands, and then Casca shook mine as well and said. “Farewell, soldiers.”

As he left us, I sighed heavily. “He is much more blunt than I recall. He was so sharp in school.”

Cassius’s eyes did not leave the direction Casca had gone as he replied: “He still is. He only puts on an act of rudeness and stupidity. It allows him to say what he wants and get away with it without being punished. He is a wily fellow.”
“I suppose he is,” I said. “But I must leave you now, Cassius. Portia waits for me.”

Cassius’s shoulders dropped, and for a moment I saw the irritation for Casca reflected at me. Then he faced me and extended his hands. I placed mine in his. He held them firmly, his eyes capturing me there, before him. “Of course, your lovely wife waits for you. As does mine.”

“Wish my sister well, Cassius.”

“I will, Brutus.”

“And I will come to you tomorrow. Or you shall come home to me. I will wait for you.”

A smile crept onto Cassius’s face. It was not the confused, spiteful smile that Caesar had described. It was not a smile of judgment or appeasement. It was a smile that uplifted his entire body, that filled the shadows of his face with golden light, that made him more handsome than I thought possible. As I returned with a smile of my own, I found myself praying foolishly to the gods that his was, truly, reserved only for me.

“Till we meet again, Brutus,” my companion whispered, his face inches from mine, “Think of the world.”

I left Cassius behind, following in the direction of the procession. I left Cassius, imagining a world at the palm of my hand. A world of fire. A world of chaos. A world of rot. A world of Cassius, and his smiles.

A world of Brutus, and his greatness.
Act II: Vidi

Scene I: “When all the sway of earth shakes like a thing unfirm”

Rome, Italy, 10 February 44 BC

“Brutus, will you not come to the table?”

I stopped in the doorway to the dining room, immediately caught in the act. The front doors were still groaning closed behind me when Portia noticed me. I should have known she would be ready this early. She had been growing increasingly aware of my behavior; I could feel her eyes on me, sharper than any sword I had wielded on the battlefield.

So my desperate retreat to my library was interrupted by my wife, the noble daughter of Cato. As I turned to look at her, I felt a familiar sense of dread. It was not that she was unpleasant to look at. Her dark curls fell loosely from the intricate braids around her head, each one pinned with a silver hairpin in the shape of delicate leaves. She sat upright in her chair with the commanding yet elegant form of a regal woman. I had never seen her falter, never seen her question her choices. That was why, now, I feared facing her. I knew looking at her, truly speaking to her, would result in a conversation about my behavior the past few months. I knew looking into her shadowy eyes would expose me to the truth of what had been happening in the past month behind closed doors.

I had thought about telling her many times. I knew she shared my passion for the Republic, but I did not know to what extent she would approve of such a measure as the one we had chosen. I could not ask her about philosophy, as Cassius and I had been doing for weeks now. Meeting with the Senators, asking them philosophical questions in a friendly debate, and testing their openness to the idea of tyrannicide—it had consumed my days. It was a line we had to traverse carefully. Of course, we could not be outright in calling it tyrannicide, but we had to
be specific enough that we could decide if they could help our cause. So I ended up dining with the men, or going on walks in their gardens, and asking the same question: how far should a man have to go to protect his home?

The answers had varied. Philosophers were quoted, lineages were invoked. Just before arriving home, I had determined we lost Favonius from our cause. I had been hoping to gain him, for he was a follower of Cato. He had fought directly against Caesar, as Cassius and I had. But it was another lost cause, another man too concerned with his own wellbeing to look towards the future. I could tell Portia none of this. Yes, she was the daughter of Cato, but she was not educated like us men. I could not win her over with debates of philosophy. If I told her what was being planned, it would have to be nothing but the raw truth, and I was not sure that was meant to be spoken aloud just yet. I was not sure I was ready to hear how she would respond.

“Brutus, dear? Are you listening to me?” Portia spoke again. She gestured for me to come to her, silver bracelets jingling softly against her wrist. There was no avoiding it, so I took a breath and entered the dining hall. The sound of my feet on the pristine white tiles created an unnerving echo against the high ceilings, as if there were actually twenty men walking rather than one. The long dining table had been laid out with food—a duck roast with *garum*, paired with fresh bread and crimson wine. Portia had not touched her food yet, as if she had been waiting for me to arrive home, despite me telling her I might be out late.

I took my usual seat directly across from her. Lucius moved in beside me, quickly pouring me a fresh glass of wine. The boy was fantastic at hiding out in corners, unseen until the exact moment he was needed. Without a word, he retreated back to the wall, holding the pitcher against his palm.

“How was your day, my dear? You look exhausted.” Portia remarked.
I could feel her eyes trained on me as I focused on slicing off a piece of my duck, soaking it in the *garum* sauce. “Nothing out of the ordinary. We had a civil case today. More land disputes. Favonius invited me for a drink, so I joined him afterwards.”

“Those land disputes do seem to be getting out of hand.” Portia observed.

“Yes, well, Caesar has promised a lot of people a lot of things…” I sighed, rubbing my thumb against my forehead. I could feel a headache creeping in; it had almost been perpetual since the beginning of February. I took a bite of my duck to avoid the thought of it. The saltiness of it tingled against my tongue.

Portia made a soft sound, which nearly sounded like the beginning of a response, but it never came. If she had any thoughts about Caesar’s generous gifts for his followers, she did not voice them. Most smart people did not.

“How is Favonius doing? It has been some time since I have seen him. He has always been so loyal to my father. I should thank him.”

“That will not be necessary,” I replied, gripping my fork tighter to stab another piece of duck. “He is doing well. Staying out of trouble, one might even say.”

Portia’s eyes were piercing. I could feel her gaze like it was inside my own skull, invading every surface of my own thoughts. I wondered what she would see if she was. The dozens of tired expressions of Roman citizens before me in court? The late-night meetings with the other conspirators, whispering about our plans? The countless conversations about Epicureans and Stoics and Antiochians? Maybe something as recent as Caesar, that very morning, consulting me about his preparations for his march to Parthia in eight days? Or the image that floated through my mind most of all, the image that my eyes always seemed to seek as of late, the image that haunted the corners of my mind.
Cassius, seated beside me in the courtroom, rubbing his temples in exasperation. Cassius, nodding along with a furrowed brow as Decius explained his ideas for the conspiracy. Cassius, debating why his Epicurean beliefs are exactly the reason he is choosing to defend Rome. Cassius, smiling at me behind closed doors— the warm, comforting smile that reminded me at the worst moments that I was doing something honorable and good, and I had nothing to fear with him by my side.

I did not want Portia to see these memories. I did not want her to know about them or judge them. They were for me and me only. I did not know if it was guilt or shame that I felt as I recalled them, but the peculiarity of the feeling made me desperate to change the subject.

“And you, my dear? How was your day?” I asked hoarsely. I ate another piece of duck, but my stomach was suddenly queasy, so I lowered my fork and reached for the wine.

Portia had not touched her food. She took a deep breath and said, “Nothing very exciting, I am afraid. I read in the garden for some time. Cicero stopped by, but he did not stay long.”

My head shot up, my eyes focusing on Portia’s lovely face. A face with a strong jaw and a confident tilt of the head, so it always felt as if she were looking down on you, even when you were above her.

“Cicero was here?” I asked.

Her lip twitched. “Yes. He was hoping to speak to you, but he left when he heard you were not home. Do you know what it was about?”

“No, I…I have not the slightest idea.”

This was not entirely a lie. Cicero and I had never exactly seen eye to eye, and it had been some time since we had spoken alone. The only reason I could imagine him approaching me was to speak about the whispers that had been permeating Rome—whispers about an
assassination. Had he heard about it? Had someone spilled the truth to him too soon? Cassius and I had already argued about whether we should include the elder man; I was still not sure I wanted him involved, or if he would even like to involve himself. Yet, the visit could have been harmless. We had corresponded quite a bit since I asked him to write Cato’s eulogy. Plus, we were both friends with Atticus. We were bound to cross paths naturally many times.

“Brutus. You look as if you may, in fact, have some ideas.” Portia said. She spoke her words softly—such a womanish tone to take—yet they were more than what they seemed. They were not as questioning as they were demanding; she was sure of her words and wanted me to know she saw through me. But there was no way...there was no way that she could know.

I pushed my chair back, sending the wooden legs scraping across the tiles. I took another gulp of my wine and set it on the table, turning away.

“Brutus, are you ill?” Portia asked.

I turned from her and ran my fingers through my hair, pressing my palms to my forehead. The agitation that had already plagued me earlier was growing. I knew why I was so upset. I knew because it was the thought that had been tormenting me since the very start: was I doing the right thing? Was killing Caesar going to solve all of our problems? It felt like it was only days ago that I had stood alongside Cassius and others to swear an oath to protect Caesar’s life. And now I was trembling because Cicero had come to my home.

When had I lost my fortitude?

“Brutus, will you not let me send Lucius for the physician?” Portia asked, but her voice was distant. I waved my hand dismissively, squeezing my eyes shut so I did not have to see her. I started to pace, just to get my thoughts sorted amongst the chaos.
I must not lose focus. I must continue. I must be steadfast in my beliefs. I must have faith in myself and my fellow Romans. I must prove my greatness.

“Brutus—”

“Enough!” I cried, and in that moment my frustration overtook me completely. I swept my arm out, sending my wine glass flying off the edge of the table. It shattered against the stone, exploding into hundreds of miniscule shards that spread out as far as the toes of Lucius. The boy stood there, staring at the glass in disbelief.

With my chest heaving, I slowly returned my gaze to my wife. She was already staring back, her jaw clenched. She did not waver when our eyes met. In that moment, I saw her father in her stubborn gaze—I imagined it was his expression in his final moments, as he drove his own blade into his gut and spilled his insides at his feet. All so he did not have to live in Caesar’s Rome. That was the face that gazed back at me now, and yet…yet I could not stand to look at it.

“That is enough.” I repeated with less force this time. I drew back from the table and turned away. I avoided Lucius’s gaze as I walked towards the foyer. I did not like the idea of catching the boy in this chaos, of watching him clean up the mess I had created. So I left him and Portia behind in the dining room, my heart clenched in my chest. Without thinking, I took a sharp turn to the atrium. I tried to force my way through, but the moment I stepped foot in the atrium I was overcome with a need to look down. I stopped at the door and turned, gazing down at the tiles.

They were white like the dining hall, except these tiles had been intricately carved with complex vines, intertwining and weaving between one another. In certain areas, wisteria flowers draped across the vines. Along those flowers were names, each carved with detailed precision. It
was the work of none other than Titus Atticus, a good friend of mine who had understood my desire to see my lineage proudly displayed.

Atticus had traced my father’s side all the way back to Lucius Brutus, the symbol of freedom in the *Junii Bruti* clan. Every Roman knew the story of Lucius and how he expelled the tyrant Tarquinius from Rome. My father had died resisting a dictator in the same way, and his name stood proudly above my own. The right side of the tree included the *Servilii* clan as well, my mother’s lineage. This went as far back as my ancestor Servilius Ahala, a man who, much like Lucius, had removed the threat of a tyrant and was celebrated for it.

Two tyrant-killers side by side, preceded by their profound lineage. These were the men I was descended from. These were the men that I had grown up admiring—their strength and bravery and power. They had fought for everything I stood for now. It was the reason I had asked Atticus to do the family tree in the first place. I wanted my friends, my enemies, my loved ones, to understand who I was and who I wanted to be. I was the descendent of Servilius and Lucius. I was the son of a Republican, the son of Rome.

Though the mural was more of a reminder to others, I felt a strong surge of pride pass through me as I gazed upon it now. The pressure in my chest eased slightly. I was able to calm my anger enough to crouch down before the tree. I pressed my palm to my father’s name, the stone frigid against my hot palms.

* Marcus Junius Brutus.

It was the same name I wore. I owed it to my father to wear it proudly.

I owed it to my ancestors to take down a tyrant.
Scene II: “Like wrath in death and envy afterwards”

Unknown

I had been told as a boy that visions of the future could come through in dreams. While I certainly believed it was possible, I never once considered that I would experience them. Even as I stood in the dim street, I found myself thinking that it could not be a premonition. It was something else, something in between, where my body was not my body yet I could move it, or at least think about moving it. At one moment, my hand appeared before me, but the next all that existed was the cobblestone around me.

It was a Roman street, that much I knew. I recognized the clustered brick homes of the plebians, buckets placed out on the roofs and landings to catch the falling rain. Rain. The moment I thought about it, it became obvious to me that it was raining quite heavily. Streams of it fired from the clouds at an angle, flooding the street almost instantly. But I did not feel the drops, not against my cheeks or on my feet, which may or may not have been planted on the ground. The rain did not help the fact that I could not identify exactly where I was; the buildings were vaguely familiar, but everything was hazy around the edges, as if it was taken from the idea of my home, rather than the actual presence of it.

A crash of thunder startled me, causing me to look around for any place to take cover. Upon searching, I realized that the streets were completely empty. Not just empty, but silent. Rain would keep the people inside, but that did not mean it would keep them quiet. I did not know a Roman street that was not filled with noise—of laughter, of shouting, of music, of barking and bleating. It was as if no one existed here but me, and even then, I was not sure how real I was anymore.
Then, through the downpour, came the sound of footsteps to my left. They were unnaturally clear in my ears, as if the rain did not exist when the steps took place, so every other moment of sound was filled with pellets tumbling off wooden rooftops. I turned, hoping to find another Roman, but was instead met by a beast.

The lioness that stalked towards me moved confidently, powerfully. Her muscular shoulders glistened with raindrops. She was as large as a horse, her head lifted and ears twitching in a regal awareness of her surroundings. Her tail swung amiably behind her, but her eyes lacked any sort of friendliness as she neared me. My instincts roared at me to move. The closer she approached, the more I wanted to, but it was as if my body had been replaced by a block of marble. Every time I told my legs to run, the thought dissolved into the concrete bones of this dream body.

The lioness reached me, slowly turning her head so she could look directly at me. She did not slow her pace, but her glorious amber eyes trained on me. Her ears twitched against the rain. Still, I could not move, and the two of us became locked in an iron gaze. Close up, her eyes looked as if they were consumed by twin flames, flickering within the black ring of her eyelids. Before I could see it better, the lioness broke our connection and looked ahead. She continued her prowl, passing me entirely to continue down the street. As I watched her go, the weight on my body slowly started to disappear, like she was dragging it away with her.

I was not given a moment to collect myself. A deep rumble shook the ground beneath me. At the same moment, a curtain of red light cast over my body, drawing my gaze upwards. In the sky above, where the moon usually hung, were three separate glowing orbs. They were not exactly the sun because they were all a bloody red. The sky around them was void of all clouds and stars, a dark mass of endless stillness. Shadows crept around the edges of the houses. The red
suns loomed ominously against the dark backdrop of the sky, three angry eyes of a cyclops triumvirate.

I did not take my eyes from the suns. I did not dare to move, even with the feeling of my own body returning. I knew an omen when I saw one. The more I stared at them the more my body filled with dread, and the more I wished that this nightmare would end. Was this truly just a dream? Despite the haziness, it all felt so real. Was I condemned to be stuck here forever, a hellish limbo designed by my own indecision?

The three suns started to move through the sky. They moved slowly at first, then sped up, colliding with one another. I flinched, expecting an explosive crash from the heavens, but it did not come. Instead, there was that deep rumbling in the ground again. I watched as the orbs reshaped and melded together. Shadows shot down from the suns, as well as from the sides, and they were darker than even the night sky behind them, twisting around one another to form limbs. A torso, then a right arm and a left arm.

The head was the most horrific part. The three suns had reformed to create a singular, monstrous head, but the head had three faces instead of one. Each face was as red as the suns had been, with the same shadowy glow. From the creature’s back tore two mighty wings, spreading with a violent gust of wind that sent me staggering back a step. They were not feathered like a bird but were instead leathery in the way that bats’ wings were. Once its limbs had solidified, its torso now covered with some kind of ruddy fur, it descended upon me.

The creature was closer than it had appeared. Before I could even attempt to turn away, its boundless shadow cast over me, throwing the world around me into slithering shadows. It used one of the houses to propel itself forward, the force of its clawed hand collapsing the roof instantaneously.
I was a soldier of Rome. I had seen war, and bloodshed, and murder. It stuck with you, but you learned to steel yourself against it. It was necessary for survival, for growth. Yet when the creature lowered its heads to my level, drawing two of its six eyes upon my figure, I collapsed in utter terror.

In its wide jaw, the front face was chewing on a human body. It was unidentifiable since the creature was gnawing through the bones of the man’s shoulders as his dark legs dangled helplessly with each crunch. The creature did not stop its chewing as it examined me; it was so close that the breaths through its twitching nose swept my hair back. Gazing back into its eyes, I was aware that I was currently faced with something much more ancient, something much wiser than I was. I was nothing—nothing—to this creature made of suns and blood.

I braced myself for its attack, but the creature eventually retracted. It twisted its body and with one arm reached into the roof of the house that it had shattered to get here. Out of the house, it lifted a squirming body. I did not need to hear his voice, nor see his face—the sensation in my heart was enough for me to know who the creature had in its grip, as if the dream space had whispered it to me from the shadows.

“Cassius!” I roared his name, staggering to my feet. There was nothing I could do to stop the creature, but something overtook my dream body, driving me forward. Above, the creature lifted Cassius towards one of its unoccupied mouths. Cassius was shouting and thrashing, but his movements were as futile as a mouse cornered by a lion.

“Cassius!” I screamed again. Just as I reached the leg of the creature, Cassius heard my cry and looked down. There was terror in his eyes as he cried back.

“Brutus! Help me, Brutus! Brutus! Help—”
Cassius’s wail of agony interrupted his pleas for help when the creature shoved him into its mouth legs first and crunched down. There was the sound of bone shattering, of raw flesh shredding. Crimson blood erupted from the creature’s mouth and Cassius continued to scream. The sound was dreadful. It was not the scream of a man. It was the scream of an animal, the scream of a dying deer slowly bleeding out with your arrow in its throat. And I could do nothing as it continued, as the creature chewed through Cassius’s stomach and I was splattered with blood and viscera.

Then the creature grabbed me in its iron grip, its fingers flexing against my ribcage. It took my breath away, so I almost did not notice the figure that had suddenly appeared before me on the street. Standing with his hands planted on his hips, Julius Caesar watched the creature take me in its grasp. He was wearing his purple robes that he had grown so accustomed to, which were untouched by the blood that rained down.

I had one arm free from the creature’s grip and my first instinct was to extend it, reaching desperately for Caesar. My fingers just brushed the front of his toga, yet still he did not move, even as the creature lifted me upwards.

“Caesar, please!” I cried, “Caesar, help me!”

Blood started to leak from his eyes and ears, snaking down his cheeks like tears. When he opened his mouth, blood drizzled between his lips, staining his teeth. He looked at me with a cold, bitter gaze and spoke at last.

“Kai su, teknon,” he hissed, as blood pooled at his feet, “will have a bite of my power.”

I reached desperately for him, but there was no hope. The creature brought me up towards its final free mouth. It held me before its face for a moment, as if it were examining me. I pushed pathetically against its hand. The low groan from its transformation returned. It rattled
my bones as it lifted me towards its open jaw. The heat of its breath struck me, but I stopped fighting. I stopped gasping and screaming. I stopped completely because, at that moment, I realized what the low groans were.

As the creature buried its fangs into my torso, as my body seared with torment, as my vision devolved into an endless darkness, I realized that it was not groaning or even growling.

As the creature devoured me, it was softly weeping into my blood.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Rome, Italy, 14 March 44 BC**

The long moments between waking up from the dream and realizing I was, in fact, still in one whole piece stretched out agonizingly long. Panic coursed through me when I opened my eyes to darkness, but as they began to adjust to the darkness I could make out the familiar shadows of our bedroom, dancing with the moonlight through the curtains. My chest was rising and falling rapidly, my palms sweaty against the bed. I tried to focus on steadying my breathing and not on the image of the three-faced creature. Eventually, my body had relaxed enough for me to sit up. My mouth was dry; my head ached. I did not want to stay in bed like this.

I pushed the blankets back and climbed from bed, retrieving my robe from the bedpost. As I slipped it on over my arms, I glanced back at the other figure in the bed. Portia was laying with her back to me, the blankets pulled up to cover everything but her head. She did not move or stir, and for some reason that made me feel unreasonably lonely. We had not spoken much in the past week, besides the cordial discussions of our days and soft whispers of goodnight. I knew she was angry with me, yet I did not try to appease her. It felt right for her to be angry. It felt right to have someone be angry at me, rather than look at me like I was supposed to know all the answers.
Of course, I was not actually alone. As I exited the bedroom, Lucius appeared in the hallway. Though it was the middle of the night, he appeared to be awake and alert as ever. He had wide, pale brown eyes that often reminded me of an owl, staring at me through the darkness. His dark hair was often not combed properly, but his clothes were always well-kept, and he never failed to do the tasks I asked of him. The sight of him filled me with more relief than I thought possible at that moment.

“Lucius, good boy.” I said.

The young boy approached. “I thought I heard you awake, my lord. Is all well?”

“Just fine. Fetch me a lamp, will you? Bring it to me in the garden.”

“Right away, my lord.”

The boy hurried off in the other direction, his footsteps echoing down the long stone hallway. I turned to the right, following the green tiles that led out to the open pillars of the back courtyard. The night air nipped at my cheeks, but I merely drew my robe closer and stepped out onto the path, breathing it in. The lamps that lined the garden’s paths were still lit despite the slight breeze, so I had somewhat of a view of the area around me. Above the moon was full and powerful, sending beams of light through the dark clouds. It helped fill the spaces where the lanterns did not entirely reach, and made it so I could walk forward with ease.

My garden was one of my most beloved places to socialize, to read, to walk, to ponder. To think among the trees was freeing; I could be isolated from the rest of the world and exist only with nature and my own heart. Short stone walls had been constructed throughout to create a maze-like structure around the greenery. Though I knew it well, this night filled me with the slight dread of expecting something around the corner at each turn; I was waiting for the moment
the minotaur jumped out to sacrifice me to the gods. Yet was the minotaur, too, just a victim of his oppressors, trapped by their inadequacy?

I strode past the fountain that stood at the center of the maze of walls and shrubs. The fountain itself was tiered, so the water poured down and over the sides in a misty spray, collecting in the bottom bowl. The bottom was surrounded by the shrubs of sweet briars, whose pink petals took on burgundy hues in the nighttime.

I passed the briars and the fountain and continued to the gazebo, which sat on the outskirts of the maze. The path there was lined with various plants, as well as the busts I had commissioned for the garden. The lanterns that were positioned between them created a comforting, warm glow against their edges and petals. There was the bust of Lucius Brutus above soft, snowy daisies and curling irises. Underneath Servilius Ahala were the vibrant clusters of rue, as yellow as the saffron that perfumed the streets of Rome. Last was the bust of my uncle Cato, head tilted triumphantly towards the sky. His bust was decorated with bushes of rosemary, per Portia’s request. She told me she had enjoyed the smell of it, so that is what I did. Despite my opinions on his death, Cato was still my family, and I would honor him as such.

Further along were the full and towering mulberry trees. Come summer, their branches would be filled with sweet purple berries, and Lucius would go out with a basket and collect them with a gentle touch. He would be overjoyed when I allowed him to eat them straight from the basket, staining his fingers red with his eagerness to pop them in his mouth. It was rather boyish behavior, but every year I found myself unable to deny him such a simple pleasure.

I finally reached the gazebo, stepping underneath it to shield myself from the cold breeze. I approached the flowers that lined the gazebo’s edge, perhaps my favorite in the entire garden. The violets were a deep shade of purple, their edges fading into a soft lavender. The orange
centers stood out in the darkness like the whites of our eyes. When I leaned in and smelled them, their sweet aroma wrapped itself around me, pressing against my skin. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly.

That dream—whatever it was—could never compete with this. The world of dreams and prophecies was muddy and unclear, but here, by these flowers, I felt the most real. It was nature; it was simple. Usually, the flowers soothed me for that exact reason. I could stand and smell my violets and know that I was alive and the world around me was real—I could ground myself in their presence, in the presence of my ancestors looming over their rosemary and rue.

So why—why—did I not feel comforted now?

“My lord?”

I lurched back from the flowers, snapping my eyes open in the direction of the voice. Lucius startled as well, as if he had been the one surprised.

“Your lamp, like you requested,” he said nervously.

“Yes, of course...thank you, Lucius,” I carefully took the oil lamp from his hands. I was not sure if he would go to bed after I dismissed him, but suddenly the idea of being the only one awake frightened me. “Lucius, is tomorrow not the Ides of March?” I asked, despite already knowing the answer.

“I am not sure, my lord.” Lucius replied.

“Go check the calendar for me and return with the answer.”

Lucius dipped his head and disappeared back into the maze to fulfill my request. I exhaled deeply, lifting the oil lamp towards the roof of the gazebo. Images of the stars had been carved into it, depicting various constellations. I whispered their names to myself to create a distraction.

The image of the three-faced creature of my dreams flashed through my memory, invading the calm that I had been trying to cultivate. I groaned, lowering my head. I could not keep it out, the sight of the blood and flames. The sounds of Cassius’s screams begging for help. The cold expression on Caesar’s face, watching as I was devoured.

The indecision plagued me as much as it had at Lupercalia. What it came down to was this: Caesar was a threat. Personally, I did not hold malice towards him, but this was far beyond the personal, was it not? If he was given the crown, there was no telling what he would do. He had not stopped at Gaul. He had not stopped at Egypt. Now all of Rome was just at his fingertips, and he was not even stopping there—in three days he would march on Parthia. There was no telling what would stop him, this man that had yet to give up his position as dictator perpetuo, a role that even Sulla had relinquished when the time called for it. Caesar had taken the temporality of that position, and his growing power, and turned it into a weapon.

Some men called it greatness. But was it not selfishness? After all, greatness is abused when it disconnects compassion from power. When a man climbs to the top of a mountain and glares down scornfully at the path that brought him there, does he have honorable intentions for such base degrees? Caesar was heading in this direction at a rapid pace, and I was not sure I could quell him any longer. The only way to prevent such a thing was action. I must think of him as a serpent, developing in an egg from which he would hatch and wreak havoc. To avoid the feared outcome, one must kill him in his shell.

“Yes,” I whispered to the constellations, “it must be by his death.”

“My lord,” Lucius said, stepping up beside me. He moved carefully, as if he were afraid of startling me again, but I managed to keep myself more collected this time.
“Boy?” I said.

“March has wasted 15 days, my lord.”

I inhaled softly. I had been expecting this answer, of course, but the boy speaking it made it all so much more tangible. I was suddenly reminded of the heavy words of the tall woman at Lupercalia.

Beware the Ides of March.

“What else is there?” I demanded. I could see Lucius shifting his feet, glancing around as if he had another comment to make.

“Well, my lord, when I was searching for a lamp, I found these letters by your window. As if someone had thrown them in.”

Lucius extended a handful of envelopes towards me. I took them with a frown, flipping them over to look for an address. All they had was my name on the outside, written in a strong hand.

BRVTVS

“Thank you, Lucius. Before you go to sleep, check to make sure the doors are shut,” I said, hoping that he did not hear the worry in my voice.

“Right away.” Lucius said, nodding his head again. I waited until he was out of sight to return to the letters. I unfolded the one on top, holding it carefully up to the lamplight. My breath caught in my throat.

Brutus, you sleep. Awake, and see yourself. Speak. Strike. Redress!

“Brutus, you sleep…” I whispered, running my fingers along the dark ink of the words.

I opened the other letters, flipping through them with increased desperation. None of them were signed, but they were all written in different hands, advocating for the same thing.
Shall Rome stand under one man’s awe?

The people had come to me. This was beyond any rumors through the streets, any graffiti on statues. It was a direct address. Not to the conspirators, or to Republicans as a whole. But to me. I had been sleeping. I had laid down and allowed this all to happen. But no longer. The Ides were upon us, and I was awake now. I was the ancestor of valiant and honorable men, vanquishers of dictators. It was in my blood to do this; the Roman population thought as much. I was their hope for freedom.

I put the letters to my chest, tilting my head upwards. I took a soft breath and watched the stars blink in and out, the very lights that were said to control our fates.

Cassius was the one who had told me to craft my own fate. He believed in me, and his belief had spread to the people of Rome. Since he had spoken to me about the assassination, I had not slept. Between the acting of a dreadful thing and the first motion, everything in between is like a phantasma, or a hideous dream. The man suffers from the nature of insurrection, that is the truth. But was that not also the nature of justice? If my cause were not honorable, it would not be this painful. I was following my head, not my heart, and as a result it was tearing me in two.

Not for much longer. Only a little bit longer, and the deed would be done. Rome had me at its full disposal.

“My lord?”

I turned at the sound of Lucius, tucking the letters into the pocket of my robe. “Yes, boy? Are you not going to bed? It is late.”

Lucius shifted nervously between his feet. “The doors are all shut, but… your brother-in-law, Cassius, arrived. He wished to meet with you.”
“Was he alone?”

“No, my lord. He had a few men with them, but I did not know them, since they had cloaks covering their faces.”

My heart thundered in my chest. Speak. Strike. Redress. It was time.

“Let them in, Lucius.”

Lucius rushed away to retrieve the conspirators. He returned only moments later, trailed by a small crowd of dark shadows. They moved with their heads down, shoulders hunched. Even amongst the safety of my private garden, the conspiracy was unable to show its true face. With their cloaks they hid shamefully, even from the light of the lanterns that threatened to reveal them. They collected within the gazebo’s edges. I gave Lucius a nod and he left dutifully, only glancing back once. I found myself hoping that he was going to bed; then again, if I had been faced with such a thing at his age, I was not sure I would have slept, either.

Cassius was the first to approach me. He dragged his hood off, revealing green eyes and a grim smile that calmed my nerves. He clasped my hand in a tight grip, slapping his other hand onto my shoulder.

“Good evening, Brutus. Do we trouble you?” he asked.

I took a heavy breath and replied, “You do not need to worry about that. I have not slept.”

Cassius held fast to my hand, keeping me from releasing my grip. His eyes bore into me, as if they were searching for a break in my expression, anything to show my wavering. He must have found nothing urgent, because he nodded and said, “Then you will be pleased to meet us. Every man here honors you and wishes you would see yourself as we do.”
I watched the other men pull their hoods off in succession, making sure I recognized all of their faces clearly. There was Decius towering over Cassius’s shoulder, his scarred face twisted into a dour expression. Metellus and Trebonius exchanged silent expressions with one another before nodding in greeting to me. And there was Cinna, carelessly brushing a sweet briar leaf off his shoulder while Casca lurked further back in the shadows, head tilted to the side like a curious animal. I recognized him mostly by his lanky frame, as curved as the trees of the garden.

“We trust in your guidance, Brutus.” Cinna said.

The men surrounding me nodded eagerly at this remark. Casca stepped forward into the moonlight just to say, “Aye, we do.”

It felt rehearsed, but it did not matter now. If they had convinced themselves they needed me for this expedition, then I had already given them my devotion. The letters sitting in my pocket were a reminder of that.

“You are all welcome here,” I said, “but what brings you this late at night?”

Cassius glanced at the men, who gazed back with wide, eager eyes. Their expressions reminded me of soldiers on a battlefield, waiting for their orders. Soldiers who were afraid to make their own moves without the expertise of a general. They wanted someone that they could follow.

“Brutus, a word?” Cassius asked. I nodded, leading him further into the garden. There was a collection of tall shrubs that had been positioned to form a shady area for lounging and reading. It offered us enough seclusion from the others for the moment; Cassius was partially concealed, and I was imperceivable behind the greenery.

I faced Cassius with my arms folded. “What is the matter? What brings you here now? On this night of all nights?”
Cassius leaned close to speak in a hushed whisper. “There has been talk. Whispers as we gather forces.”

I started to speak, but he lifted a hand to silence me, his expression grim. “We have not been found out. But the men are getting nervous with everything that has been happening. They need encouragement.”

“So you bring them here?”

“Where else would I bring them? They look to you for guidance. You were the only answer.”

Now I understood. I was not one of the soldiers on the battlefield awaiting orders anymore. Now I was the General, preparing the troops for bloodshed. Rallying them underneath my words, guiding the points of their blades into the hearts of enemies.

“You want me to speak to them?” I asked, even though it was obvious now.

Cassius gripped my shoulder, giving it a small shake. “Remind them of their purpose. Do what I know my dear Brutus is capable of—put the flames of justice in their blood again! They will be cured of their anxieties after you speak, I swear that to you.”

Despite the circumstances, Cassius’s insistence made pride rise in my chest. Not only did he have faith in me for the task, but the men with us were looking to me for encouragement. This was why I had taken on the cause, was it not? To unite Rome once again under the Republic, to put an end to tyranny.

I nodded. “Alright. I will do my best.”

“Your best is far mightier than most men’s.” Cassius gave me a reassuring smile, then turned around. I followed him back to the other men, still huddled underneath the gazebo. They appeared to have fallen into some type of argument, which left Cinna and Decius scowling at
Casca, who seemed significantly less bothered than the other two. I did not indulge whatever it had been, instead approaching quickly and spreading my arms out towards them.

“Give me your hands, each one of you.” I ordered.

“And let us swear our resolution.” Cassius said, stepping up beside me.

“No,” I shook my head, ignoring Cassius’s surprised expression. “No, no oaths. If our home’s abuse, if our suffering souls, if our brothers’ faces are weak motives, then we should give up now. But if they are strong enough to spur even the most cowardly men—which I believe they are—then we do not need such oaths.”

The men shifted closer, all their eyes on me. Even Casca had tilted his head to listen closer, a flash of intrigue moving across his face. It was a familiar feeling, the feeling I got every time I had taken the stage in the courts. It was a rush of excitement, as well as power. I had all their attention at the touch of my fingertips; I could tell them to climb the Capitol, and they would.

I was too energized to stop now. “What need do we have for oaths? What bond is more powerful than Roman brotherhood? What is more honest than honor? What can be truer than declaring that this shall succeed, or we will fall for it?”

Nods went through the group, paired with some low mumbling. I could feel Cassius’s unwavering gaze on me, but I did not turn to look at him as I said, “Liars and cheaters swear oaths because their causes are evil. Do not taint our enterprise like this! Do not assume we need an oath, when every drop of Roman blood is guilty if any particle of a promise is broken. In our hearts we find the strength to proceed, not in our words.”
The nodding was even more vigorous now. Decius approached first, extending his hand. It dwarfed my own hand, but I managed to keep my composure as he shook it firmly and said, “You speak wise words Brutus.”

Each of the men approached me and shook hands with me, finishing with Casca. He smiled a thin, knowing smile. “To Rome.” he declared.

My heart was thundering with the excitement of my success, but when I turned my gaze to Cassius, I was met with a scowl. It was an expression I had seen from him before, at Antony’s boisterous partying, at children running loudly through the street—it was irritation and, above all else, disapproval. I had almost never had it directed towards me before, and I could not fathom why it was now. When he noticed me looking, the expression fell almost immediately, snapping into a less frustrated expression of diplomacy. He averted his gaze to the other men before I could search for more in his face. The thrill of my speech did not fade completely, but as Cassius spoke again I felt an unusual pang of disappointment.

“What about Cicero? I think he would stand with us. He has been vocal against Caesar thus far.”

The men shifted in their spots reluctantly.

“I suppose…we should not leave him out.” Casca said hesitantly.

Metellus nodded in agreement. “His seniority will earn us more respect. The people trust him and his opinions. And if things go awry, we can direct the leadership to his judgment. Our deeds will be outweighed by Cicero’s greatness.”

“Name him no more!” I snapped, overcome by a sudden rush of irritation. Their heads snapped back at me. I took a deep breath and shook my head, speaking more calmly, “We will not include Cicero. He will not follow anything that other men begin.”
Cassius let out a small breath through his nose, which I recognized to be his sign of reluctant agreement. “Then we will not include Cicero,” he said firmly.

I was pleased that we were able to resolve that quickly. I did not think there was no value to what Metellus was saying; Cicero did hold sway over the people, and he was as close to Caesar as any of us. But I did not see a collaboration with him going well. Even though his visit to my home had ended up being a friendly affair to exchange books, I had been left with an uneasy feeling. He had supported me as a young boy, but I knew he disapproved of my decisions during the civil war. He would have no doubt joined our cause. But then what? I was the orator, the guide. These men had chosen to follow me, and I did not need Cicero coming in to disrupt the trust I had developed with them.

“Should we not touch anyone else besides Caesar?” Decius asked. His jaw twitched with his clenched expression, but his tendency to appear on edge was never something to be concerned about. He was one of the best generals I knew. There was a reason Caesar had promised him control over Gaul; he was a good leader, and a smart strategist. But that kind of position placed a lot of pressure on a man–I knew from my time in Gaul years earlier. One wrong step, and Caesar could tear it away from you, or punish you with even more difficult work. There was no end to the power he held over men like Decius.

“Good point, Decius,” Cassius said, angling himself between me and our companions. “I think it is not fitting for Mark Antony, so beloved by Caesar, to outlive him. I think we would find him an irritating opponent. He has enough means to cause all of us pain. Let Antony and Caesar fall together.”
“Our course would be too bloody, Cassius,” I protested. “To cut the head off and then hack the limbs could be perceived as cruelty rather than justice. Let us be sacrificers, not butchers.”

Cassius’s lips twitched, and I knew he was not pleased with me challenging his proposals. But I knew my friend; I knew his hot-headedness and determination. It was the same fire that had gotten him into a fight in the days of Sulla’s reign, beaten and bloody by wealthier boys. I admired it, and I loved that aspect of him. But he had chosen me to guide them for a reason; I could see beyond his anger. Beyond it, I saw opportunity. Opportunity that would be put in danger if we continued on a tirade of violence. The Roman public would be frightened by such bloodshed. I was not afraid of having to convince Cassius of this.

I stepped towards him, aware of the other eyes on us. “Cassius, we are faced with the spirit of Caesar, where there is no blood. But we cannot destroy his spirit, so we must dismember Caesar. And, gentle friend,” I reached out and gripped his shoulders, “let us kill him boldly, but not wrathfully. Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods, not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds! Let our hearts be filled with rage, but let our minds chide them after, so that our cause appears necessary, not envious. We shall be called purgers, not murderers.”

Cassius did not speak immediately, but he appeared less frustrated than before, and I had some hope that my words had gotten through to him. I released him, spinning around to face all the men. “Think not of Mark Antony,” I said. “He can do no more harm than Caesar’s arm could with his head chopped off.”

“Yet I fear him, Brutus. He loves Caesar dearly.” Cassius replied.
I nodded. “He does, Cassius, but if he loves Caesar, then the only harm he can do is to himself: he would die from grief. And that is more than is expected of him, given his wildness and company.”

I witnessed the exact moment Cassius decided to agree with me; his shoulders loosened, and he let out a very quiet sigh, almost imperceivable in the darkness of the garden. Triumph returned to my heart. I had won not just the minds of my peers, but the mind of one of my dearest companions.

“Fine. We leave Antony to the wolves.” Cassius relented.

“Let him live,” Trebonius agreed. “I am sure he will live to laugh about it with us afterwards.”

A chime rang through the air, thunderous compared to the quiet alcove of the garden that we inhabited. All the men visible tensed; Casca flinched at every chime of the clock as if he were the one being struck.

“Midnight has come. It is time to leave.” Trebonius said.

Cassius held up a hand in protest. “Wait. There is still doubt whether Caesar will come today. He has grown superstitious lately. Far from the confidence he used to boast. The terrors of the night and his augers may convince him to stay.”

“Do not worry about that. I can get him to the Capitol,” said Decius, stepping forward. In the darkness, there were dark shadows underneath his eyes, but the rest of his body seemed alert and awake. Perhaps he was one of the men putting the most at risk alongside Cassius and I; he had been a good friend of Caesar’s for some time. Like me, he had earned his trust and affection. The stress of the situation was evident in his features, even as he tried to conceal it.

“How do you plan to do that?” Cassius demanded.
Decius shrugged as if he had not been expecting that question. “Caesar loves stories. He loves to hear that men fall to flattery. When I tell him he hates flatterers, he agrees, yet is the most flattered by it. If he is against coming, I can change his mind. I promise you.”

“That is settled then. You will retrieve him from his home, and we will all escort him to the Capital.”

The men looked at one another, but there was no protesting this plan. The rest had already been laid out; it was only left to follow through with it.

“Alright,” Cassius said, “then I leave you all with this: remember what we have discussed and prove yourselves to be true Romans.”

The weight of his words appeared to put the men more on edge. Metellus and Trebonius exchanged another silent expression, this one more nervous than the other.

I took a step forward and added, “Gentlemen, remember to walk proudly. Do not show our purpose on your faces, but bear it like Roman actors do. The end is near. We must persevere.”

“Aye, well said, Brutus.” Casca said, stepping forward. He shook my hand once again. Then he turned and lifted his hood, disappearing into the maze. The other men followed his example, until Cassius was the final one standing before me. His eyes lingered on mine as he shook my hand. I was overcome with the desire for him to stay with me in the garden. If he stayed with me, in this otherworldly maze of buds and butterflies, and never left, would the world just melt away around us? Would we be able to forget about everything else—about the pain, the responsibility, the suffering—and just be together?

“I must go, Brutus.” Cassius said, as if he heard my thoughts.
“Yes, it is getting late,” I croaked, pulling my hand back from his. I stuffed them in my pockets, feeling the edge of the letters.

“You did well,” Cassius patted the side of my face affectionately. “The sun will rise on the day soon enough. Till then, think of the world, my dear Brutus.”

He left me underneath the gazebo, with something like a smile on my lips. I was smiling, but I felt no joy from it when he was leaving me. The idea of facing the rest of this night without the comfort of his presence was daunting.

I took a deep breath and repeated the fortifying words of the night: “Brutus, you sleep. Awake, and see yourself.”

“Brutus.”

For a moment, I thought the name had come from my own mouth as it blended with my spoken words, but it shot through the cold night air in a much sharper form, cutting through my contemplations.

“Portia, what are you doing up at this hour?” I demanded, turning towards my wife.

She stepped into the lamplight and I was able to take in the sight of her. She was not even wearing her robe, her arms exposed to the cold of the night. Her dark eyes narrowed at me; as she stepped forward, I realized she was not even wearing shoes.

“Portia, this is not wise for you to be out, with your condition—”

“With my condition?” Portia interrupted, her tone incredulous. “I think you should pay closer mind to your condition, Brutus. You leave our bed in the middle of the night. You spend entire days out of the house. You do not eat or sleep. The other night at supper, you barely listened to me, barely spoke to me, and when I tried to get your attention, you stomped your feet and slammed your hands like a child!”
Her cheeks flushed with the accusation, and her chest rose quickly against the soft fabric of her nightgown. I did not get the opportunity to speak in my defense.

“And when I persisted, you waved your hand at me. Like I was some servant to be dismissed, unwanted in your presence at the slightest inconvenience,” Portia stepped closer, pointing her finger in my face. “I hoped that it was an effect of some sickness. I told myself that it happens with every man at one point. He has his need for seclusion and privacy. But then you…you waved your hand at me. And I do not know you anymore, Brutus,” her shoulders fell, as if this statement filled her body with exhaustion, and her voice softened. “Will you not acquaint me with your cause of grief?”

I swallowed hard, unable to look away from her flushed cheeks. “I am ill, that is all.”

Portia let out a bitter laugh. “No, Brutus, you are naive. If you were ill, you would not come out into this cold and risk worsening your condition. You would seek help to mend it.”

“I do just that. Dear Portia, go to bed—”

“Is Brutus sick?” Portia cried to the sky, throwing her hands above her head. “Is Brutus so sick that he will steal from our bed to dare the vile contagions of the night? No, no, Brutus, that is not it.”

I instinctively took a step back when she approached me again. There was a fire in her eyes, a fire that seemed to pierce through the darkness around the gazebo. She did not slow down, even when I stumbled slightly. She jammed her finger into my chest so hard that it caused a dull pain over my heart.

“The truth, Brutus,” she hissed through tears, “is that you have some sick offense in your mind. A sickness that, by the right and virtue of my place as your wife I ought to know of. What is it you want from me, Brutus? To get on my knees and beg?”
I let out a sound of protest as Portia knelt on the stone, her bare knees digging into the cold ground. She gazed up at me with tears streaming down her cheeks, only visible because of how they reflected the flickering lights of the lanterns. Her face was not gentle or kind at that moment; it was inflamed and agonized, and all I could think was that I was the reason for it.

“Portia, please stand–”

“Should I charm you, with my once commended beauty?” she cried, her voice breaking on the word once. “Should I have to evoke the vows we shared, that were meant to make us one, and ask you why there were men who came to you tonight, all with their faces hidden? Can they see your true self, and not your own wife? Is this why you married me? To cast me aside, to be a showpiece for you and my father?”

My heart clenched. I knew that there had been rumors from the beginning of our marriage. That I had divorced my first wife so quickly, it must have been a calculated decision. That my marriage to Portia had been rushed and sudden, and it had. I knew it had. But I had known her my whole life, one way or another, and at the time it had felt like the only way. The only way to keep things the way they were, to regain the trust of her father after I had done so much to disappoint him.

“Portia, we talked–”

“We talked, did we?” Portia snapped, “No. You talked. You talked, and I listened, because I trusted you. I believed this marriage would mend things, protect us from the violence that was to come, but it has only torn us apart. You are not gentle anymore, Brutus.”

“Portia,” I sighed, my own eyes filling with tears. I carefully took her arms and lifted her to her feet. She did not resist my help. Her eyes remained trained on me, her cheeks streaked with tears.
“Is this all I am?” she whispered, reaching a shaking hand to my face but not touching me. “Am I just a woman to have meals with, to comfort your bed, to talk to sometimes? Do I only dwell in the recesses of your mind? If so, then I am your whore, not your wife.”

I gripped her face between my palms, my heart thundering with urgency. “Portia, you are my true and honorable wife, as dear to me as the tears that fall from your eyes.”

Portia scoffed. She pulled herself from my grip, creating a few steps of distance between us. Her fists clenched at her sides. “If that were true, then you would tell me your secrets. But I am a woman. A woman that Brutus took as his wife, a woman born from Cato. Do you find me weak, with such connections? Am I unable to deal with these conditions as well as you men can?”

“You are honorable—”

“Honor!” Portia spat the word, “Always speaking about honor, and yet you act this way with me! Here, I will show you my constancy. I will show you my strength.”

She pulled something small and shiny from the inside of her nightgown, jerking the gown up high with her other hand, exposing the pale skin of her thigh. I had only a moment to realize it was a piece of glass in her palm, and barely half a moment more to realize it was from the wine glass I had broken at the dinner table the previous night.

Then Portia was fiercely dragging the jagged glass shard across her thigh. I smelled the blood before I could see it clearly. In the shard’s wake, her skin split open like a plum to a knife, the flesh folding out to release a rush of rich red juices. The wound formed fast, blood streaming down her thigh, almost black in the flickering lights. She was gripping the glass so tightly that it had cut through her palm as well, sending blood dripping onto the front of her nightgown.
The worst part was the way that she looked at me. Her eyes never left mine, her jaw clenched against the pain. But the more I looked at her, the more I started to think that it was not actually the pain in her leg giving her that expression, filling her face with so much anguish. It was a wound much deeper, a wound that I did not have the power to heal. Had I caused the wound, or had I simply forced it open wider?

“I can bear pain like any man,” Portia said, her voice low. “Honor has nothing to do with suffering. And you know nothing of suffering.”

Her words were soaked with raw emotion, but I could not understand it. I could not tell if it was rage, or malice, or sadness. It burrowed into my body, forcing its way through my limbs to vibrate in my chest, constant and unknown. It was then that I truly realized that I could not help her. At least not in the way she expected me to. No matter how hard I tried, I could not give her what she wanted, and if we continued the way we were, I would have to watch her bleed out in front of me one day. Despite all that she had said, I did not want that outcome. I cared for her deeply. The panic in my body at the sight of her confirmed as much in my frantic state.

“I am unworthy of a wife such as you,” I said, trying to keep my voice as even as possible. I stepped forward slowly as if she were a wild animal that would startle at sudden movements.

“Is that it? That is all you have to say to me?” Portia hissed. She still clutched the glass as if it were a knife. As if I were an attacker that she would have to fend off with it.

“No. No, my dear…please put that down,” I reached a hand out slowly.

Portia jerked the glass back. She was shaking from head to toe. “No. I need to hear you say it.”

I let out an exasperated sound, but it was clear there was only one way to resolve this.
“Put the glass down, and I will tell you all of the secrets in my heart. All of my engagements.”

I could hear my own heart beating in my ears as Portia glared at me. She did not move right away. She let my words soak in, let them hang in the cold air between us so they began to develop frost. Then, at last, she threw the glass down. She let her nightgown drop as well, a black blotch immediately spreading across the fabric where the wound was. She tilted her chin in the air and rolled her shoulders back. The gesture reminded me of my fellow soldiers preparing to enter the battlefield. Moments away from their potential glory, or their eternal demise.

“Then let us go inside. We have much to discuss.”

I watched my wife turn from me and descend back into the garden’s maze. She barely limped as she walked. Her nightgown danced around her in the wind. In the flickering lights of the garden, it painted her as a phantom amongst the blooming flowers.
Scene III: “Set a huge mountain ‘tween my heart and tongue.”

Rome, Italy, 15 March 44 BC

“I did not ask you to do this.”

It was the third time Portia had said this to me since we had entered the bedroom again. Since I had sat her in her armchair and knelt before her with a bucket of water and handful of bandages. And it was true—she had not asked for my help. But as I told her my deepest secrets, I had to keep my hands occupied. I had to be doing anything but looking at her face, watching for her reactions. What had she felt in those first moments I told her about the assassination? Anger? Pity? Surprise? I would never know.

“I think we are beyond that mattering, my dear.” I sighed. I had already cleaned and dressed the wound on her thigh. Now I was moving to her palm. I held it gently in her lap, dipping my cloth into the water bucket with my other hand. When I touched the cloth to her palm, she winced but did not pull away.

“Have you truly thought this through, Brutus?” she asked suddenly.

I did not need to clarify what she was talking about. “It is all I think about, at all moments of my day. It haunts me even in my sleep.”

“Then you understand the consequences if it fails.”

I wet the cloth again, pressing it against her palm. Lucius had lit the oil lamps around the room and together they produced enough light for me to see the wound on Portia’s hand. It was jagged and angry, worse than the one on her thigh. Her fingers twitched as I cleaned it.

“I am aware of the consequences, yes.” I said softly.

“Are you? It is not just a fine or imprisonment that you can face, Brutus. You know how Caesar’s whims are. You could be dead this time tomorrow.”
“Or we will succeed, and I will be Rome’s savior this time tomorrow.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Portia said, “So that is what this is about.”

I paused in cleaning, lifting my gaze to hers. She was not angry anymore, but I recognized the expression of tired disappointment in her eyes.

“What do you mean by that?” I demanded.

“A savior. Your glory, your honor. That is all you can think about.”

“That is not—”

“Let me tell you, Brutus, that is a foolish thing to die for,” Portia shook her head, one of her curls falling across her forehead. “It is not the reason to take a man’s life.”

For a moment I felt ashamed, but the shame was quickly followed by a wave of irritation.

“Well, why should I not want glory? Do I not deserve it? If I kill a tyrant, am I not owed recognition?”

Portia snorted. “I do not know what demon has gotten into your head, my husband, to make you desire such things.”

I sat back, the irritation in my chest growing. “So what do you suggest I desire?”

Portia seemed to notice my frustration. She sighed and leaned forward, taking the wet cloth from me. She began to dab at her own wound as I stared at her in disbelief.

“Do not get the wrong idea from me, Brutus. I am not saying I disagree with you. I think it is time that Caesar must go. The Republic will not survive much longer,” Portia said calmly. “I just think that one’s motivations should not be muddied by one’s own hubris.”

My stomach clenched. This was what I had feared all this time. Portia would be honest with me, would expose the parts of me that had me questioning the entire conspiracy from the
beginning. The idea of honor and recognition for my actions was overwhelmingly inspiring. Surely, Rome would celebrate such a sacrifice on my part. Surely, that would make Caesar’s death a just one.

Portia placed the cloth in her lap and took my chin in her uninjured hand. She tilted my head upwards so she could investigate my face. She frowned as she examined me.

“Are you having doubts?” she asked softly.

I swallowed hard. “Caesar is a good man.”

“Yes. And Pompey killed your father, but you still fought for him. Cato was a good man, was he not? Yet he is dead.”

“I am not sure it is the same. Caesar has been good to me, to us,” I said. “He was generous to give me a pardon, to pardon so many of my companions. He granted me rule in Gaul.”

“Brutus, do you know what these are, the actions you are listing?”

“I…”

“Appeasements,” Portia said. “Caesar is as generous as he is cruel. He hands out rewards to any man who compliments his features.”

“I am honest with him. He values my honesty.”

“Maybe he does. But how prized can you be, if every other Roman with a flattering tone heaps up the rewards same as you? And how quickly can he take them from you if you anger him?”

I inhaled. She was beginning to sound a bit like Cassius now; they both shared the same impassioned lift in their voice when they spoke of Caesar’s misdeeds.
“I understand what you are saying,” I said quietly. I reached for the cloth in Portia’s lap and brought her hand towards me again. She did not speak as I finished wiping it clean. As I began to unroll the bandages, she sighed.

“You are a smart man, Brutus. I would not have married you if I thought otherwise. But I fear that this conspiracy will crumble beneath you if it is not for the right reasons.” she explained.

“My reasons are for Rome’s salvation. Like my ancestors. Just because I love Caesar does not mean he shall not fall.”

Portia made a small sound that I almost thought was approval. “If you succeed…what do you think will happen to your consulship?” she asked.

The question surprised me; not because I had not thought of it before, but because I had not considered Portia would have thought about it. There had been whispers that Caesar was considering me for the consulship in the upcoming election. It was not set in stone, but the possibility had been gnawing away at my insides since it had proposed itself. It was the position that all young men dreamt of holding, one of the highest points on the ladder of Rome. It demanded respect, it delivered power. But to take the position from Caesar went against everything the Republic stood for, bypassing the power of the Romans for the sake of more gift-giving. More appeasement.

“I have considered that,” I said, “and we have discussed the possibilities following the assassination. The Roman masses have been expressing the desire for Caesar’s removal. When we do so, I believe we will gain their support. I believe my position will be secured for the election.”

“You are sure of it?”
“Yes.”

The desperate words from the letters flashed through my memory. *Speak. Strike.*

*Redress!*

Yes, I was sure. The people had come to me for help, and I was going to free them from their oppressor.

“You said you have discussed it. With the other conspirators, you mean?” Portia asked.

I brought the bandage around her hand one more time. “Yes. There are about twenty of us now, maybe more.”

“Who is leading you?”

“I…I believe they look to me for guidance. Cassius has also been important in making decisions.”

Portia snorted. I placed her freshly bandaged hand in her lap and stood up. My entire body ached with exhaustion, but the more we talked, the higher the sun got on the horizon.

“What is that noise for?” I demanded.

Portia shrugged. “Nothing. Cassius just seems to have his hands on everything recently. You trust him with this?”

“Of course I trust him.” I snapped, my irritation returning.

Much to my surprise, Portia just smiled at me. It was a small, clever smile, like I had fallen into a trap of her making. But I was not sure what she could have gleaned from these questions.

“So, has Cassius thought about what might happen after the assassination? If you succeed.” Portia said. The *if* was said with particular emphasis. Though she was for the
conspiracy, it was clear she still had her doubts. I reminded myself that doubts were a good thing to have; doubts were what allowed us to prevent catastrophes.

I wiped my hands clean on the front of my nightshirt and said, “Yes, actually, we have formulated a plan. It will happen at the Senate meeting tomorrow morning. We will be able to bring our weapons in without notice, and the other Senators will be unarmed. There will be no resistance.”

That was not entirely true, but the fact that Senators such as Antony would not be armed was a reassuring idea. He surely would come to Caesar’s defense, and his intervention could disrupt the attack, especially if he was armed. So the Senate floor it was.

Portia did not seem satisfied with that answer yet. “What if there is resistance from the other Senators? From the people?”

My heart jolted with excitement; this was a question I knew I could answer thoroughly. So I could prove to her the thought that had gone into this.

“There will be a gladiatorial event at the theater down the street. Decius will position his gladiators outside the theater, so they can escort us from the Senate.” I explained proudly.

“Decius is with you?” Portia asked. The surprise in her voice mirrored the surprise I had first felt when Decius approached us about the conspiracy.

“Yes, he has been vital to recruiting some of Caesar’s closest friends to our cause.”

Portia nodded slowly as this information sunk in. The sunrise had shifted from her hand to her abdomen, which was still stained with blood. Finally, she stood up and faced me.

For a moment I just stood and admired her features in the warm glow of the bedroom. Even with her tear-stained cheeks and bloody clothes, her unbound hair and reddened eyes, she was beautiful. And I had let that beauty slip between my fingers. I had failed her. I had failed to
love her truly. I had failed to trust her as a husband trusts his wife. I knew, deep in my heart, that there was nothing of her truly left for me. I had no right to her heart or her beauty. It was hers and hers alone. Yet I loved her. Despite it all, I knew I loved her.

“I cannot tell you what to do, Brutus. You are a man, and you are your own man.” she said.

“I value your judgment.” I said, the words coming out choked with emotion. I desperately needed her to understand there was truth in those words, that I valued her.

Portia’s frown only deepened. She replied, “I cannot guide your hand with the blade. That act is up to you and you alone. But as your wife, I must stand by you in your decisions. I can fortify myself against the world, so long as you stand strong in your beliefs and actions.”

I clenched my fists at my sides. “Caesar will fall, Portia. I promise you that.”

Portia let out a small laugh. She cupped my face with her injured hand, running her soft fingers along my jaw. It was such a tender gesture for the melancholy expression on her face.

“Let us hope he does, my husband. By this time tomorrow, we will know the outcome of the Ides of March.”

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

After finding Lucius to clean the rest of the water, I began to return to my bedroom, hoping that I could get some rest before I had to prepare. I subconsciously stuck my hands in the pockets of my robe as I walked. I stopped in my place, my shoes scraping across the stone. The letters were gone. For a moment I imagined Portia sitting in our bedroom reading them, but then my reason returned. I must have dropped them somewhere in the garden in my attempt to get Portia inside.
I turned from the bedroom door and made a beeline for the garden again. I could not risk the letters ending up in someone else’s hands; it could expose the conspiracy at the final hour. I passed the rue and mulberries and rosemary, searching the ground as I went. When I rounded the corner to the gazebo, I nearly leapt out of my own skin at the sight of an enshrouded figure standing underneath it.

The figure lifted its head at the strangled gasp that came from my lips. I could not see his face clearly under his hood, but every muscle in my body eased following the realization of who was before me.

“Dear Brutus, you look as if you have seen a ghost.” Cassius remarked, pulling his hood down. He had a faint smile on his face, clearly amused by his ability to startle me.

I frantically closed the distance between us, searching his expression for any signs of concern or violence—anything that hinted that we had been discovered. Because why else would he come back so soon?

“Why are you here, Cassius?” I asked.

“I made sure the others returned home, but I was worried about you, so I wanted to come back. The door was open, and, well…” Cassius sighed, “I figured you would come back out here at some point. I had a sense it would not have pleased Portia to know I returned.”

Embarrassment filled me. It was an unusual sensation; I was not easily embarrassed or humiliated like others, and I did not think that was Cassius’s intention. Yet it was embarrassing nonetheless to know he suspected my marital strife. I did not want him to think of me in that context. Having him here now made me feel suddenly foolish about the entire ordeal with Portia.

“Worried about me? Why?” I asked.
Cassius shrugged. “I know your mind has been tormented with indecision, even as you guide others. It seems like you have heard other voices as of late.” He lifted a pile of papers he was holding in his hands.

The letters. I took them from him, relieved to have their weight in my grip once again. “I was worried I had lost them. Lucius brought them to me, he said they had been slipped in through a window.”

The corner of Cassius’s mouth twitched as if it were about to smile, but he stopped himself and instead said, “It appears that the people agree with our cause. We are to be their saviors, Brutus.”

I ran my fingers over the ink of the letter on top, then lifted my gaze to him. “Is that truly why you came? Because you were worried I would waver?”

Cassius’s brow furrowed as if I had asked him to solve a complicated equation. He looked around the garden and found no one, so he stepped closer and took my hand in his. He pressed my hand between his own. I had not realized how warm I was from the chaos until he touched me with his cold hands. They sent shivers up my arms, through my body. They froze me in my spot before him, gazing at his ivy eyes.

Home at last, his eyes. They were amongst the leaves and bushes and petals that gave me equal comfort to his gaze.

“No, Brutus, no,” Cassius whispered desperately. “I did not come because I thought you would waver. I came because I was worried about you. You have carried this burden alone for weeks.”

“I was not alone. You have been with me.”

“And so I am here now.”
A soft breath escaped my lips, steeling myself for what I was going to ask next. “You gazed at me with disdain earlier tonight. Why? Did I do something to anger you?”

Cassius’s expression fell. He collected himself almost immediately after, shaking his head. “I did not mean to be so harsh, Brutus. Your words were powerful and inspirational. I just did not expect you to take that direction…”

“I did as you asked.”

“Yes, you did. And you did it well,” Cassius squeezed my hand. “Pay no mind to my foolishness.”

“Did you want to do things differently?”

“No, Brutus, you handled it well.”

“Yet you gaze at me now with contempt.”

Cassius flushed. It might have been the first time I had seen him flustered in such a context, and that thought gave me a small sensation of pride. I could influence him as much as he influenced me.

“It is not contempt, Brutus, I promise you. I trust your judgment. That is why Antony will live. If anyone can win him over, it is you.” Cassius insisted.

“And yet…”

My companion released me and clutched my face in his hands, drawing me in so our noses were nearly touching. I could see all of the creases in his weary cheeks, all of the golden flecks dancing in his eyes.

“And yet I ache when I am around you, Brutus. When I must share your greatness with others,” Cassius hissed, his voice etched with emotion. “I do not see a future for myself if we are not together in it. Do you feel the same?”
“Yes,” I said, the word coming out more as a sigh.

“So we must succeed tomorrow. Together.”

“We can. We will.”

“And we will be the saviors of Rome!”

A childish laugh escaped my lips. “The honorable liberators!”

Cassius laughed, too. “Yes! Because we have a right to our own futures. And we will not lie down for Caesar to walk over our backs. We may love him. But we must love each other more. It is where we find our strength.”

My heart swelled with his words. The night that had unfolded around me suddenly felt inconsequential as the pieces fell together. My dreams had not been omens from the gods; they had simply been nightmares designed to scare me from my true potential. Portia’s doubts in my values had just been the hysterics of a woman that did not truly understand politics. I would follow through with my plan and prove to her that I was always destined for this, that I was doing this for the people, not just myself. And I would do so with the man that had never doubted me, the man that had never left my side.

Cassius grinned at me, a brilliantly vibrant expression, and said, “By this time tomorrow, dear Brutus, we will be liberators.”

His smile was contagious. I felt it creeping onto my own face. Did I not have the right to feel joy for such a monumental occasion? It was a dreadful ordeal, but it was for the greater good. It was for Rome.

“We will strike Caesar down before he outgrows us all.” I replied.

The chill of the night air barely existed anymore. My entire body was vibrating with warmth, everywhere except the places Cassius touched, and I knew it for the fire he had always
As the flames burned through me, a moment passed between Cassius and me. He pressed his forehead to mine, the smile still on his lips, a laugh in the back of his throat, and for that moment we were children again. We were children running through the streets of Rome together, sitting in the back of rhetoric classes daydreaming of courtrooms packed with enraptured faces. We were fighting the sons of murderers, defending the name of the Republic from boys who thought they were better than us because they were bigger than us. What those children had not known at the time was that they were bigger than everything else around them—theys were destined to overcome those misguided tyrants of chaos.

They were Brutus and Cassius, liberators of Rome.

And, as Cassius looked at me, I knew he was thinking the same thing. His fingers twitched against my cheek. My heart was caught in my throat with anticipation, for what I was not entirely sure. I suspected it was something that had been silent between us, exchanged within glances and handshakes and private smiles. It was something unspoken but so enormous that it had taken on a life of its own, sprouting wings for us to fly into battle on the Ides. It was a picture painted with an immaculate brush, the tip dipped in the blood of Caesar. It was every note in the most bewitching song, sung by the most beautiful nymph of the Tiber.

It was love.

“My lord?”

Lucius’s voice cut through the serenade, harsh against my ears. Cassius and I pulled away from each other in unison, eyes darting around the garden for the source. Lucius had not entered the garden yet, but had ducked his head out the doorway.
“I am here! Go inside, boy, and I will join you soon!” I called out. I was thankful at that moment that Lucius was such a good young man, a man who did as I asked. I watched his shadow disappear back into the house. Once it was completely gone, I turned to Cassius.

“I should go,” he said, but not unkindly. “We have much to do. I will meet you at Caesar’s home, as we have planned.”

I nodded. “To the Senate floor we will go, and end this at last.”

Cassius extended his arm. I reached out and gripped his forearm in a strong embrace that he returned. His eyes were glowing in the early morning light, and he looked nearly divine in his confidence.

“Farewell, Brutus. Until then.”

I smiled, finishing the line for him: “Think of the world.”
Bibliography


