

The Eve of the Ides

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An evening such as this was not a rare occurrence. Oft had they reclined amidst the intricately colorful tapestries of Lepidus' triclinium, in comfortable silence or conversing late into the night about matters as diverse as the gods in the heavens. If perhaps, enshrouded by the comfortable warmth of dusk one Summer, Venus cast a particularly bright aura over the cobbled streets of Rome, piercing from the black sky like a gladius, they would find themselves entranced by the boyish urge to discuss matters of love. On the late autumn days during which twilight began to encroach on the daylight hours, and a waning moon—reflected in the polished armor of the city guards—seemed to cast a watchful eye over the dark horizon, their conversation would shift towards strategies of war, guided by the dextrous hand of Minerva.

How different it was now. Decimus' eyes flickered from each battle-hardened, middle-aged face to the next. Some of them he knew he had seen in attendance at the meetings of Liberators organized by Cassius and Brutus. Others he thought might have been among those ranks, but he couldn't be sure. It was safer, then, to offer none of the men any reason to suspect anything malicious from him, to share no knowing looks or whispers. Decimus knew that if any of the liberators were to be accused of some plot, it would be the righteous Cassius or the ascendent Brutus, not *he*, who was not particularly vigorous, who turned his every idea over again and again in his mind before he ever considered breathing it into existence, who had engendered the faith and trust of Julius Caesar by never showing doubt towards the man who had been his general and was now his dictator.

Decimus let the conversations occurring around him fade into white noise, and he felt his mind drift to the years he had spent grasping, captivated, at Caesar's every word, carrying around him a shroud of his general's advice and praise, believing with his heart that he would be rendered untouchable to his enemies by the force of Caesar's affirmations. He supposed he was, in some way, protected by an armor impenetrable to *Caesar's* enemies, but it was all the more fitting, then, that his defense had been pierced instead by friends. Though neither Cassius or Brutus was in attendance that night in the domus of Lepidus, Decimus could feel the force of their determination steadying his hands and voice as he sat a palm's length away from the man who he knew would be dead before the next sunset, whose death he had assured by his own action, and whose blood would soon stain his *pugio*, hidden as it was in a basket of parchment at the Theater of Pompey.

Is this anticipation one which Spurinna feels as well? Decimus could barely conceal a wry smile at the thought. The soothsayer had come by commune with the gods to the same conclusion he and the Liberators had come to by careful planning, and when Caesar had first confessed to him the warning he had received from Spurinna, Decimus felt somehow more at ease, as though it was *fate* that the Ides of March be Caesar's final day.

“Mi Decime.” The voice of Lepidus from across the table rose above the chatter and startled Decimus from his thoughts. He met eyes with Caesar’s *magister equitum* over the overflowing platters of olives and sardines and boiled eggs spread over the tablecloth, and Lepidus gestured unhurriedly to something over Decimus’ shoulder. The praetor tilted his head to see one of Lepidus’ servant boys holding an engraved silver pitcher in both hands. “Some wine, master?”

Decimus lifted his chalice, shifting on his forearm to watch Caesar poring over a lengthy document from beside him while the slave boy obediently poured watered wine into his cup. Caesar’s eyes were tired, the wrinkles lashed into his face from years of innumerable responsibilities made more prominent by the dimly flickering light from the oil lamps which the sun had named its successors before it fell below the Apennine mountains. In one calloused hand the *Censor* held a pen which he tapped absentmindedly on the page as he read, and his other hand was pressed to his cheekbone, rubbing at his temple. Decimus could only stand to watch Caesar’s eyes flit back and forth along the lines of text for a moment before he began to feel as though the exhaustion that came with being *dictator perpetuo* was seeping from the man’s bowed back and wilted shoulders into Decimus’ own skin. Perhaps he would be doing his friend a favor by relieving him of this heavy weight the very next day.

“Mi Censor, please! Lay down your scrolls and drink with us,” Decimus proclaimed into the lively room. There were sounds of agreement from all sides of the hall. Caesar lifted his head and frowned at the Praetor, opening his mouth to scold Decimus, as he often did, for referring to him in such a way, but Decimus spoke before he could argue. “Your dear friend the consul has prepared such a meal as fits a man of such superior station as you, and we all have so gathered here in hope that we may celebrate our Caesar before he departs for Parthia in only a few days! Yet here we are, allowing you to continue signing senatorial orders when we should be sharing wine and conversation. Such matters as these can surely wait until tomorrow.”

He pointed accusingly at the parchment in Caesar’s hands. The Censor let out a tired sigh and his lips turned up in a slight smile towards Decimus as he leaned back and stretched his arms.

“Very well, mi Decime. Permit me to sign at least this one letter before I retire my pen and ink for the evening.”

Decimus nodded in acquiescence and there were some lighthearted cheers from the assembled men as the scratch of Caesar’s pen echoed against the columned walls.

“A toast,” offered Lepidus once Caesar had banished his sheaves of paper back to his satchel. “To the long and glorious reign of our worthy *dictator perpetuo*, Gaius Julius Caesar!”

The consul raised his ornate silver goblet and drank heartily from it, before passing the chalice to Caesar, who took his share and offered the remaining wine to Decimus. The praetor swirled the glass for a second, Lepidus’ toast replaying in his mind, and then downed the remainder of the tart liquid in one swig. Around him, friends were passing their own chalices amongst each other and drinking the diluted wine. Placing the empty cup on the table Decimus reached for a platter of fruit, gathering up a handful of green olives and raising them to his lips.

He relished the strong taste of the morsels, allowing them to chase away the bitterness that Lepidus' words, not the wine, had left on his tongue.

"Shall we discuss the campaign in Parthia?" one senator with whom Decimus had rarely spoken proposed. There were words of agreement from a few men. Caesar's brows furrowed.

"I feel as though that subject is not the most interesting for tonight," he responded, hesitantly. Another senator spoke.

"Ahh, Censor, you say this only because your plans for the campaign have already been laid in full! It should not surprise anyone among our number that our *dictator perpetuo* needs no advice from the people to win victories against the Getae or Parthians!" A few of the men nodded in admiration.

Decimus kept his face neutral but internally he was struggling to recall whether the senator who had spoken was one of the Liberators. He thought not, but for his words to Caesar to have been spoken without irony sent a shiver of disgust through Decimus. The senator had clearly been pursuing his own political gain by praising Caesar in such a way, but even with that being the case, Decimus scorned the display of flattery, not least because he knew it was off of people like this that Caesar thrived. He vaguely heard Caesar chuckle and acquiesce to the peoples' wishes to hear his plans for Parthia, but again Decimus let his mind drift, this time to the senates he had spent observing in his usual quiet way the conversations Caesar would have with his senators, the way he would shower praise and rewards upon them and his eyes would sparkle with pleasure at his own cleverness in keeping his once-ambitious subjects fat and sated so they would never oppose him.

How self-assured he seemed—Decimus reached for another olive—when he had scoffed at the men who warned him that Brutus would conspire against him for the throne. Caesar had laughed dismissively then, and responded that Brutus was a patient man, who would wait for Caesar's poor flesh to end its days. Decimus had felt rage run through him on that occasion and barely managed to contain himself. What a fool Caesar was to believe that Brutus was so selfishly motivated. If Brutus conspired against Caesar (which of course ultimately became the case) it was never to be because of his own aspirations, and as such he could never be sedated by Caesar's attempts to appease his ambitions. Perhaps it was an effective measure that Caesar used to charm others of his political colleagues like so many snakes, but Decimus had watched as day by day more men enthusiastically joined the Liberators' cause. Some, he was sure, hoped to gain honor as a member of their movement, but if any of their number cared more for his own personal status than for the sanctity of the republic, he would have been better suited to stand with Caesar anyway.

Decimus found it a cause for even more satisfaction to watch upwards of sixty men, all armed with the knowledge that any man who revealed the plot against Caesar to the *dictator* himself would be graciously rewarded with every honor he could aspire to, collectively choosing the restoration of the republic over that reward.

The night progressed and Decimus engaged very little in the discussion of a Parthian conquest he knew would not occur. Mind racing with thoughts of how the following day would

progress, the only clue Decimus had to the passage of time was the slowly dwindling plate of olives which he continued to eat, and then one of Lepidus' servants replaced the tray with another, which was overflowing, and Decimus lost even that. Pleasantly full with fruit and the bread which Lepidus has heaped in loaves on the tablecloth, Decimus was content to let the conversation carry on over his resting head, reclined on pillows as he was.

Guests slowly filtered from the hall with grand words of thanks for Lepidus' hospitality, and of course he sent most home with a portion of whatever dish they had found most appealing at his table, wrapped in a napkin and offered like a gift for his friends to enjoy. Soon enough, it was Lepidus, Caesar and himself who remained sprawled across the three couches in a satisfied post-meal stupor. Caesar heaved a sigh of relief and spoke to the other two, his eyes trained upward on the tiled ceiling.

"My good friends, I must admit I felt no great pleasure in discussing the matter of Parthia, for either the first minute or the seemingly infinite ones that followed. I beg neither of you endeavor to reignite conversation on any such topic. My days are ever full of meetings and planning and overseeing the drills of our legions. Please allow me not to have my nights be filled with that same subject."

Decimus only grunted in acknowledgement and tore a piece off of the nearest bread loaf, wiping his fingers (coated as they were with olive oil from the platters from which he had been plucking his favored morsels) on the dense sourdough and eating the bread slowly. Lepidus was doing the same, sopping up also the aromatic juice that had collected on the base of the now-diminished plate of fruit in front of him. It would be too suspicious, thought Decimus, if he were to retire now, as the trio which now reclined in each other's solitary company had never allowed a dinner party to end without talking late into the night. It was little more than a silly tradition but one with enough of a precedent that Decimus could not risk the puzzlement that would arise if he bid Lepidus and Caesar good night at such a reasonable hour. Decimus was interrupted in mulling over his inner thoughts when Caesar broke the relative silence.

"I wonder, how should I prefer to die?"

Decimus nearly jolted up in his seat, and would have been worried about arousing suspicion if not for the fact that Lepidus had done much the same.

"My dear friend, what do you mean? By the grace of the gods let it not be necessary to talk of such things so early in your career, Caesar." Lepidus stared inquisitively at Caesar's reclining figure before glancing to Decimus as though the latter would be at that moment sharing the same sentiment which Lepidus had spoken aloud. Of course, Decimus was anxious of the question for entirely different reasons, but he murmured some half-hearted echo of Lepidus' words, and it was enough to satisfy Lepidus and urge Caesar to respond.

"It is just a question I often ask myself. For the great men who have died in years past, I am sure there was one who found the ideal way to pass on from this world, be it in battle or of old age. Lepidus, my friend, I hope you are right in saying that my days will be numerous, but for all the dangers of my position I could meet my end as soon as tomorrow."

Decimus spared a glance at Caesar from the corner of his eye, and the man was still staring, deep in thought, at the ceiling. Perhaps Spurinna's warning had affected the *dictator* more than he felt it fitting to let on. Decimus hoped that was the only reason Caesar seemed inclined towards this topic of conversation tonight of all nights. Lepidus hummed in consideration of the question before adding his opinion.

"I believe, dear Caesar, that my ideal death would be one to which I would come while defending my general in battle. Perhaps saving the life of whoever it is from whom I take command." He paused before adding, "I suppose that applies not only to pursuits of military campaigns but of the state as well. To me, the most satisfaction would be gleaned from offering my life in exchange for the life of one who has a greater purpose than I, to lead all of Rome towards prosperity."

Lepidus was genuine in his belief, of that Decimus was certain. As unsavory as he found the proposition, Decimus was, not for the first time, glad he had stood behind Brutus in opposing Cassius' idea that they should purge Rome not only of the dictatorial hand of Caesar, but of the successors Antony and Lepidus as well. At the very least, Decimus admired the loyalty that Lepidus showed. Lepidus passed the question on to Decimus with a gesture.

"I respect your dedication, Lepidus, my friend. But I, myself, am of a different mind. I think that to die knowing that I have in some good way changed the course of the world's events would be most ideal. If the mission I have prescribed myself in life, and that which others have prescribed unto me, is to fight in favor of justice, I think I would rest more easily knowing that I would carry on a legacy as a man who defended Rome from malice." Decimus realized his response had been perhaps too telling and quickly continued. "This I think to be the case whether I am to die in a battle for justice or of old age after having made impactful changes with the power of the position our Caesar has granted me. Yes, I think justice can be pursued in both war and law, and in this I do not hold any preference between a death by the sword or illness."

Decimus turned to see Caesar looking at him cautiously, and he turned away, taking sudden interest in the design of Lepidus' intricately woven tablecloth. Caesar sat up.

"Those are both good and noble answers, my friends, but incorrect." He made a fist with both hands on the table and looked off into the distance. "The best death is the kind that comes unexpectedly and is over quickly."

He stared pointedly at Decimus, who fought to keep his face in a neutral smile.

"Of course, our Caesar has bested us both in regards to this question. Lepidus has said he would like to die defending his commander, and I have said instead that I would rather die in pursuit of justice, but neither of us can disagree that an unexpected and speedy death doing what we have previously described is better and more preferable than a slow and drawn-out one."

Decimus chuckled as he heavily slapped his hand on Caesar's shoulder. He recalled the first impression Caesar had expressed of Brutus, when he had heard the man exemplifying his skills as an orator. "*I do not know what this young man wants, but everything that he wants, he wants very badly.*"

It occurred to Decimus that Caesar wanted nothing very badly. He had won victories in battle and state, and had risen through the ranks and received many awards and honors, and always accepted with ease the positions of leadership that the Roman people bestowed upon him, and yet Decimus never knew him to have any final goal, any purpose or ambition beyond facing every challenge presented to him and letting his success be propelled by each victory. What Brutus wanted very badly because it held meaning to him, Caesar wanted because wanting was easier than not wanting, and if success meant he would receive so many rewards, it was a consequence of the true motivation, simply to continue rising upward. Decimus thought of the inflated bladders kicked around in sporting games. If one fell underwater, it would rise to the surface with haste. And more, if one attempted to push the bladder and keep it beneath the surface of the water, it would fight against that force and slip between the fingers and rise to the surface anyway. Caesar was like that. He rose up because it was his nature, because he couldn't bear to sink, not because he fought with determination against obstacles pulling him downward.

Not for the first time, Decimus wondered if in any way perhaps Caesar wished to die. If his power remained unchecked he would continue to rise, and where an inflated bladder would bob on the surface of the water, Caesar would continue even then to rise, and would rise until he reached the heavens, and would be unable to return to the ground, as much as he fought against the clouds. Decimus was sure that Caesar knew he was becoming a tyrant. His moments of seeming refusal to let any crown be placed on his head proved that at least some part of him knew and detested the idea, but the vast majority of his mind was beyond any care. To be a king was simply the next upward movement he could take, and so Decimus knew he would take it, with or without an internal struggle. If after becoming king and tyrant Caesar was offered Zeus's throne, Decimus knew he would take that too. Caesar was a slave to his own success, and Decimus knew that he had no choice in his life.

Well, Decimus would offer him a new choice. Tomorrow, on the Ides of March, when the *dictator perpetuo* sat on his gold-adorned chair at the head of the Theater of Pompey, and addressed his senators, his *subjects*, Decimus would free him from the impulses that pulled him toward the heavens. He and Brutus and Cassius and Casca and Trebonius and Cimber and Basilus and all of the *Liberators* would free Rome from its chains but would as much be liberating Gaius Julius Caesar.

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