

Interlude MJB: Knife's Edge

Of all the wonders that came with being a Servant, the chance to see what had become of everything you had built over the course of your life so long after your own death was undoubtedly the greatest.

Brutus hated every inch of it.

The Rome that Brutus had sacrificed so much for, the Rome that he had killed for, the Rome that he had eventually died for, it was a Rome that no longer existed.

Instead, in the place of that enlightened republic was a farcical empire, a facsimile of the nation he and his fellows had dedicated their lives to building and preserving. Ruled no longer by the wizened sages of the Senate but by the whims of tyrannical emperors, it was everything he had first feared it would become that day when he had plunged his dagger into the chest of Gaius Julius Caesar.

It was no longer a nation of people, but a festering pit that served only to glorify those who claimed to be exalted above the rest, those petty children who paraded about calling themselves emperors. It was no longer a nation guided by the steady hand of the senators who held stewardship of the lands and their people, but a crumbling cesspool yanked to and fro by the indelicate grip of a stream of dictators who invariably exploited that power and prestige for their own ends.

The most recent of these so-called emperors, Nero, was no better than her forebears. She was just as impulsive, just as whimsical, and just as prone to flights of fancy. Worst of all, she was exactly the sort of self-aggrandizing, self-centered, self-absorbed madwoman that Brutus had feared would one day sit at the helm of Rome since the moment Caesar himself had refused to relinquish his power.

Of all the parts of this current Rome that chafed his sensibilities, she was the one he hated most of all.

“A callow upstart,” Brutus muttered to the empty air. “I would see Rome in better hands than hers.”

And then, immediately, he sealed his lips and silently scolded himself for letting even that much out. The capital city was full of loyalists, and any indiscretion of his within earshot of the wrong ears would carry with it an inevitable and ignoble end.

He was no novice to intrigue and subterfuge, after all. Even if his contempt sometimes got the better of his tongue, this was not his first conspiracy against a foe so dangerous to the cause of a more just Rome, and he of all people understood the necessity of keeping one's sentiments close to the chest, especially those that those in power might consider seditious or treasonous.

The past weeks, however, had not been easy on the nerves, and the growing sense of the approaching culmination of all that work had left even one as esteemed as he with an impatient anxiety.

The time was almost upon him. Soon, he would commit his second act of murder.

Therefore, this was no time to let himself slip up and make such critical mistakes. If all was to go as it needed to, then the most important thing was that he escaped suspicion for at least that much longer. As long as he could keep it together until then, until that moment.

What happened after was of no concern.

No, from the beginning, Brutus had known the inevitable result that would come from his plot. There was no other possibility.

When this was all over, Marcus Junius Brutus would be dead once more.

And he had accepted that as a foregone conclusion. Therefore, there was no reason to fear the unavoidable outcome of the path he had committed himself towards.

A breath hissed out of his lips, and his footsteps became surer, less tense, as though the thought put him at ease. In a way, it did. There was something incredibly freeing in knowing that your death was inevitable and soon, as though the weight of the future no longer needed to rest upon your shoulders.

Yes. Brutus would entrust the future to those who came after. The only thing he needed to concern himself with was ensuring that the opportunity for that future to be grasped came to pass.

For now, destiny called, and so Brutus walked through the streets of the capital city towards his certain doom.

Along the way, he was greeted respectfully by several of the city guard, men decked out in the legion's armor. "Senator," they mumbled at him as he passed, bowing their heads in deference, stony-faced and solemn.

"Citizen," he greeted them each in kind.

He saw no faces he recognized, not truly, even though they recognized him either from his face or from his senatorial robes. They were all as the same to him, all victims of this same corrupt system that had betrayed the principles of the Rome Brutus believed in, and so the names and the faces to which they were attached were interchangeable.

Ha. What a farce. What use were senatorial robes as a marker of his station when there was no senate for him to be a part of?

It made him sick, and the sour feeling in his gut drew his lips tight and his brow down, carving deep furrows into the lines of his face. Some might have said it made him look distinguished. Certain others might have used the word "constipated" in their vulgarity, a sure sign of Rome's degradation. All would have immediately put him to the sword if they had even an inkling of his thoughts.

Eventually, as the sun drew high in the sky, the *Curia* came into view, a tall, simple building unadorned with any of the ostentatious ornamentation of the imperial palace, and Brutus took a brief moment to pause, breathe, and square his shoulders. The false heart in his chest, a simulacrum of the one that had stopped upon his death so many decades ago, picked up speed, and he forced it to calm.

It would have been appropriate, he thought wryly, if the *Curia* he was about to enter was the same in which he had ended Caesar's life. But that murder had taken place in the theater while the *Curia Julia* was still being built, and the *Curia Julia* had been complete for many years now. There was no reason why he and his compatriots should meet elsewhere than where they were originally meant to.

Brutus ascended the hill leading up to the *Curia*, all the more keenly aware of the weight against his side because of what it was about to be used for.

As he climbed the steps, however, a woman peeled away from the building's shadow, a petite, lithe thing with long, black hair and eyes as sharp as razors.

"Good morning, Brutus," she greeted him amicably, smiling as though he was an old friend.

"Good morning," he greeted her in turn.

"You're looking especially dour today," she teased. "Haven't had your morning cup of wine yet?"

"Whereas I see that you have yet to drink yours," he said archly.

From her belt, she produced a wineskin, and she held it out in offering. "We could always remedy both of those right now, if you like?"

"I think not."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Then, she lifted the wineskin to her lips and drank deeply of it. Brutus watched her throat contract with every gulp with a kind of morbid curiosity. For such a small woman, she handled her liquor well.

"Can Servants even become intoxicated?" he wondered.

It was not in his personality to have tried. As any Roman, he enjoyed a good cup of wine, sweetened with *sapa*, but the very last thing he needed to do here was risk the discovery of his plans or his true nature, so he had never truly tried. Not if there was even the slightest chance that it would loosen his lips.

She took one last gulp and lowered her wineskin with a sigh, shaking her head. "Who knows? I'd like to think that even normal Servants can enjoy the effects of good wine or that beer stuff the Mesopotamians invented, but you'd have to ask one of them."

"Quite."

She secured her wineskin on her belt again, then folded her arms and looked back up at him. When she canted her hips to the side, one leg slipped past the hem of her robe, revealing the smooth, bare skin of her thigh. Brutus wondered if she dressed the way she did specifically for the purpose of distracting men so that they never suspected her.

"So what brings you to the court today?" she asked.

Brutus, who had begun to relax against his will, straightened. “An emergency summons,” he answered.

Her eyebrows raised. “No joke? Something going on that I should know about?”

“Nothing that I was informed of officially,” he told her cryptically. “However, given the current state of affairs, the conclusions I have come to are all but certain. It appears that the Divine Ancestor believes that the situation has devolved to the point he may need to become personally involved.”

“You don’t say...”

“I fear that our time has run out,” he confessed. “The moment for which I have been preparing has arrived, and my path forward is clear. The course I have set upon is reaching its inevitable conclusion.”

“Are you sure?” she asked solemnly. “There might still be time. A better opportunity to aim higher. Emperor Nero isn’t even in Rome anymore, last I heard. She’s out of reach.”

Brutus scowled and took a deep, calming breath. Even if her very name infuriated him, losing his temper over Nero now of all times was dangerous.

“Things with Emperor Nero will be handled in due time,” he replied. “It is unfortunate that I will be unable to see them through, but it was something to which I had already resigned myself from the beginning.”

His compatriot frowned. “I see. There’s nothing I can do to convince you otherwise? If you already know how this is going to end, then you have to know it means you die.”

“As I said. I had already resigned myself to this from the beginning.”

A bitter smile curled on her lips, and she shook her head again. “Yeah,” she said ruefully, “I understand that better than you probably think.”

Brutus did not question her on that. Her backstory wasn’t one he was especially familiar with, even as a Heroic Spirit, but there was no shortage of people throughout history who had gone to their deaths for the sole purpose of achieving the one thing they thought needed to be achieved.

This did not have to be her own grave, however. He could lie in it by himself this time.

“Perhaps it is insulting to ask you to be a simple courier,” he said, and he dug about in his robes for the scroll he had prepared, “but as I myself will be unable to deliver this intelligence...”

He held it out to her, a thin thing hidden in a brass tube, and she took it with a grin, sliding it up her sleeve into some hidden pocket. “You’re saying you need me to make it out of this one alive, is that it?”

“There is no need for the both of us to die here,” he told her. “My end is unavoidable. I will be surrounded by my enemies, and the moment my betrayal is evident, they will waste no time in

destroying me. You, however, have no ties to this place or these people, for you are only a guest. You can sneak away during the chaos, free of suspicion.”

“How about that,” she said. “My lucky streak continues, it looks like.”

“Lucky streak?”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. Can’t talk about it out in the open anyway. Maybe if we ever see each other again, I’ll tell you over some wine.”

A rare smile broke out on Brutus’ face. “Perhaps we will.”

“Alright. I’ll escape during the ruckus your little trick will cause and make sure this information gets to the right hands.” Her grin widened. “Think I’ll take my own shot on the way out, even the playing field a little more. What do you think?”

“Your escape is paramount —”

“Won’t have to worry about that. I can still call for backup.” She scanned the skyline, looking about what they could see of the city from their place in front of the *Curia*, and she nodded at a nearby palace. “He’s over there, right? The golden goose. I don’t think I’ve seen him leave since I got here.”

“He has not,” Brutus confirmed. “The decision was made that he would be safest there, and so he has been forbidden to leave it so that his life is never endangered. Truthfully, I believe he prefers it that way. At his age, he is much easier to kill than you or I.”

She chuckled. “Makes it easier on me, at least. That’s the best place to kill your target: deep inside their territory, at the place where they think they’re safest. They’re always more surprised that way.”

“Indeed.” That was essentially how Caesar had died, after all.

“Alright, then.” Her eyes slid up to lock onto his. “I guess I just need to wait for the screaming to start, and that’ll be my cue.”

Or the sharp increase in magical energy being thrown around. Brutus thought it incredibly likely that the most immediate response to his murder would be to kill him with whichever Noble Phantasm reached him fastest.

“Yes. I shall attempt to postpone it for long enough that you might position yourself optimally, but I *will* strike before the opportunity slips me by. I apologize that I cannot afford you greater leniency.”

“It’s fine,” she assured him. “I’ll have more than enough time to get into place, so you just go whenever you feel like you’ve got the best shot, yeah? Don’t let me be the one who screws this up for you.”

“Very well. I shall trust you to act as you believe is best.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “So wordy.” She offered him a smile. “The phrase you’re looking for there is ‘Good luck,’ Brutus.”

A ghost of a grin graced his lips, there and gone again in a flash. “And to you as well.”

She stepped away and slipped back into the shadows, and Brutus rolled his shoulders, then pushed open the heavy doors of the *Curia Romanum* and walked into the antechamber. Predictably, it was empty, and the room itself shrouded in dim light from its singular window above his head. From further in, voices resounded, muffled and indistinct, so Brutus went further in and pushed open the door that led to the main chamber.

Immediately, the voices quieted, and all heads in the room turned to look at him, and he felt the eyes of Roman emperors past and future scrutinize him. He bowed his own slightly.

“My apologies for my tardiness,” he said smoothly. “I was waylaid on my way here and unavoidably delayed.”

At the head of the room, seated upon a marble throne, the imposing figure of the Divine Ancestor waved his hand.

“All is forgiven,” he said imperiously, and that was that.

Brutus gave a short bow of his head again, showing the proper deference to the man whose efforts had forged the Rome that he himself had loved so dearly, and then moved to take one of the empty seats as his robes swished about his legs. Ironically, in a place that had been originally built for the purposes of the Senate to meet, Brutus himself was the only senator in the room.

To the right was Konstantinos XI, a lean man in red and black, easily the latest of the entire group, in terms of legend. To the left was Hadrianus, thick-necked and curly-haired, who would normally be bedecked in the armor of a Roman general, but here in the capital wore only a tunic and toga marking his status.

Only once Brutus had taken his seat next to Hadrianus did the Divine Ancestor rise. If the room had not already been silent, it would have become so at that moment.

“My beloved children,” the Divine Ancestor said, “sons of Rome whose love of it has been immortalized in history, there is grave news.” He closed his eyes briefly as though pained. “Six of our brethren have fallen.”

A ripple of shock traveled the whole group, and Brutus himself affected his own expression of surprise.

“Six?” Konstantinos XI choked out. “But...*how*?”

“They were slain, each by a Heroic Spirit acting on behalf of the doomed Rome of this era,” the Divine Ancestor said. “Marcus Cassius Scaeva, Gaius Julius Caesar, and Lucius Tiberius Caesar all died in combat along the Gallian front.”

“Gallia?” said Hadrianus. “What threat could there be in Gallia that could defeat *three* Roman Servants of that caliber? I understood that there were only two mediocre Servants leading Nero’s resistance in Gallia.”

The Divine Ancestor turned to the man standing beside his throne, a man in green wearing a tall hat who had been so still that Brutus' eyes had initially registered him as part of the background.

"Court mage? What have you to say about this?"

The court mage, who Brutus believed had called himself Lev Lainur, stepped forward, and although he was by all accounts an ordinary human, he wasn't at all cowed by the presence of so many Heroic Spirits in front of him.

"Only that it was inevitable, once the fencesitter got involved," the court mage said bluntly. "So long as that wild dog was content to sit upon that pile of rocks and play at guarding Britain from us, our victory was assured and certain. However, even if many of you have found yourselves at the peak of your strength because you were summoned in Rome, Aífe was also summoned here in the ideal time and place. The Counter Force chose well."

"One woman?" Konstantinos XI demanded incredulously. "A single woman was enough to put down three great warriors of the Roman legion?"

"You would do well not to underestimate such a strong legend," the Divine Ancestor warned. "A warrior who took the gods themselves as a challenge to be overcome is a powerful foe, even if she is a woman."

"No, she did not accomplish it alone," said the court mage. "She had help. Not only from those two Servants leading Nero's resistance that you believe mediocre, but from the meddling pests from Chaldea as well."

"Chaldea?" asked Hadrianus.

"Cockroaches," sneered the court mage. "Vermin that simply don't know when to lie down and die."

"They are agents here to stop us from reforging our empire," the Divine Ancestor explained. "Children of a distant era far removed from this one, sent to bolster Nero's Rome and cast ours down."

"They brought their own Servants here," said the court mage. "And then they joined forces with that fencesitter and those you call mediocre nobodies. They are ultimately the reason those three Servants were killed."

"We can't let that stand!" Konstantinos XI said, fists clenched so tight that his gauntlets creaked. "We have to do something! We've come too far to let them ruin everything!"

"I already have," the court mage said smugly. "They're to the south now, visiting with that useless goddess hiding out on her island. I sent Caligula to handle them."

"You *what*?" Hadrianus demanded, rising to his feet. "Six of us already killed, and you sent another to face the enemy *alone*?"

"He's little more than a mad dog himself," the court mage said, dismissive. "Even if he does die, it's no great loss for our side."

“You!”

Hadrianus made to lunge at the court mage, but a raised hand from the Divine Ancestor stopped him in his tracks. The Divine Ancestor, however, only had eyes for the court mage.

“I did not give you that order,” he said sternly. “I would have you explain yourself, Lev Lainur.”

The court mage’s lip curled. “Despite the position you’ve seen fit to hand me, I don’t take orders from *you*, Romulus. Remember which of us holds the Holy Grail that summoned each and every one of you. Without me, this entire endeavor of yours becomes impossible, whereas I can replace all of you at my leisure.”

A chill descended upon the room. Hadrianus and Konstantinos XI both leveled glares at Lev Lainur, but Lev Lainur was unfazed. There wasn’t even a bead of sweat upon his temples to belie his apparent courage.

Eventually, against all reason and common sense, it was the Divine Ancestor who backed down. “I expect you to replenish our forces as necessary.”

“I don’t need you to say so to do something so obvious,” the court mage said.

Hadrianus and Konstantinos XI both bristled, scowling at him, but since the Divine Ancestor wasn’t rebuking him more strongly, the both of them settled back into their seats reluctantly. If there was even more reason why Brutus hated this entire farce, the amount of control the court mage could exert on all of them would have been enough.

“This decision may turn out to our benefit,” the Divine Ancestor said. “Even if Caligula falls, it is possible he may cause serious harm to one of Chaldea’s members, and they will come here to seek vengeance as a result. They will have to fight us on our terms, in a place where we hold the ultimate advantage.”

“And we will be able to crush them effortlessly,” agreed Hadrianus. “Yes, I see. We may yet snatch victory even through such folly.”

“Forgive me, Exalted One,” Brutus interrupted, “but you said that six of our number had fallen, did you not?”

“Yes,” the Divine Ancestor said gravely.

“Wait,” Konstantinos XI began, “but then that would mean —”

“That is correct,” the Divine Ancestor confirmed. “Traianus, Agrippa, and Octavian have all fallen as well.”

So it was true. Then, naturally, she would be able to strike down her own target as well, for she had already struck down three of them. He had no need to worry.

“That’s impossible,” said Hadrianus. “There must be some mistake. My wall — it still stands. Constantius I yet breathes. So long as both of those are true, even if Chaldea were to muster every single one of Nero’s allied Servants, they would fall upon my wall and fail!”

“It was not Chaldea,” said Lev Lainur. “Not once have they approached your wall. There was no opportunity through which they might have killed any of those three who were guarding it.”

“Who did, then?”

“Unknown.”

“Tch. An Assassin,” spat Hadrianus. “It’s the only way those three could have been killed without us knowing.”

“It is likely,” agreed the Divine Ancestor. “Perhaps one summoned specifically for having killed a Roman emperor in life.”

“But who?” asked Konstantinos XI. “Who was so prolific an assassin in Rome that he could kill three of us on his own?”

None of them turned to Brutus with suspicion. As always, Brutus felt a wash of relief to know that his Noble Phantasm had secured his position so, because his own legend should have made him the most obvious choice.

“Many of Rome’s emperors were assassinated,” said Hadrianus. “You are right, however, in that I cannot think of a singular name whose legend would lend him the weight necessary to kill three emperors without contest.”

“Then shouldn’t you think to stop looking for a Roman?” mocked the court mage. “Do you think Rome was the only empire to ever exist? That Roman emperors were the only ones ever assassinated? You Servants, always getting so caught up in your own legends that you miss the obvious answers.”

“Your condescension is unproductive, Lev Lainur,” said the Divine Ancestor. “Speak. If the answer should be clear to all of us, then that must surely mean that you have already deduced the culprit.”

The court mage sneered yet again. “As I said, there have been many empires throughout history, and many emperors assassinated. Grecian empires, Persian empires, British empires, Mongolian empires, and indeed, even Chinese empires. Each of them should be distinct enough from one another that you could determine the culture and era of an assassin from any of these empires merely by the clothing and the name offered to you.”

Brutus shifted uneasily. This was not going a direction he liked.

“Your comrades’ bodies are not even cold, as the saying goes,” the court mage continued, disdain dripping from every word. “Can you think of no one who arrived here recently enough that she might be the Assassin you’re looking for?”

Eyes around the room went wide. Hadrianus rose from his seat again, panicked words spilling from his lips, “You mean, that woman —”

“I have personally vouched for Jing Ke,” Brutus said confidently. “She is as trustworthy as I am. Your suspicions are groundless, Lev Lainur.”

It was not instant, but slowly, the urgency faded and the rest of them relaxed. Brutus allowed himself to relax again as well. It was only because he himself had been so careful to avoid suspicion that his ruse just now had succeeded at all.

The effects of his Noble Phantasm did not apply to his allies, after all, only to himself.

“Forgive me, Brutus,” said Hadrianus. “I had momentarily forgotten, and I let my paranoia get the better of me.”

“It is forgiven.”

“These are trying times,” the Divine Ancestor said. “Now, more than ever, we must stand united.”

“Yes,” Konstantinos XI affirmed at the same time as Hadrianus said, “Of course.”

Lev Lainur’s expression was sour. “Simply because Brutus is trustworthy does not mean that he himself is incapable of being deceived.”

“Enough,” the Divine Ancestor commanded, and though he didn’t raise his voice, even Lev Lainur didn’t disobey. “I will hear no more of it. We would be better served determining who our mysterious Assassin might be.”

“Perhaps it is one of the Sicarii,” Brutus suggested slyly.

Hadrianus grimaced. “Do you think so? I would not think them any more pleased with Nero’s Rome than with ours.”

“Sicarii...I see. Jewish assassins.” The Divine Ancestor hummed thoughtfully. “Although the group themselves are familiar, I cannot recall any individual member ascending to the Throne of Heroes.”

“There was a sect of Muslim assassins a few centuries before my era,” Konstantinos XI pointed out. “Perhaps they are like them, and they are an otherwise nameless collection of potential Heroic Spirits.”

“But why would they side with Nero’s Rome?” asked Hadrianus, sticking to that point. “What cause would they have to side against us instead of Nero?”

“Why does Boudica?” Brutus retorted. “Indeed, why does Spartacus? Why does Aífe, who never crossed paths with Rome in her life?”

“They are agents of the proper course of human history,” the Divine Ancestor answered. “You may not be wrong, my son. If they, too, believed in the proper course of history, then even the Sicarii who hated Rome would set themselves against us instead of Nero.”

“I have seen no such thing,” the court mage said stiffly. “There is no indication of the presence of the Sicarii in this era.”

“Other than the ones currently alive, you mean?” Hadrianus said sardonically.

“It’s still six years too early for them to be involved in anything,” said the court mage. “And the living Sicarii would be all but useless against the Servants you lost. If, by some impossible sequence of events, any of them had been summoned in the form of a proper Assassin class Servant, I would know about it.”

“We’re getting nowhere,” Konstantinos XI said, frustrated. “All we’ve managed to agree upon is that none of us can be sure who the assassin might be that killed Traianus, Octavian, and Agrippa, and inconveniently, I’ll remind you, Agrippina committed suicide rather than take up the fight against Nero, so it couldn’t possibly be her.”

She had? Through an exercise of will, Brutus kept his eyebrows from rising. Agrippina’s presence had never been discussed before. If she had truly been summoned and committed suicide... Why, it must have been almost immediately, before Brutus ever arrived in the United Empire, let alone made the trek to the capital.

Truly unfortunate. She might have been an ally if he had made it here soon enough to keep her from killing herself — and that, too, was a surprise, because Agrippina’s hostile relationship with Nero was well-known, especially among Roman Heroic Spirits.

Konstantinos XI raked a hand through his hair, slumping in his seat. He looked up to the ceiling, as though the tiles that made up the roof could offer an answer that none of the others present had.

“We’re just going in circles at this point,” he continued sourly. “Forgive me, Great Founder, but it seems to me that we won’t know who the Assassin is until they’ve arrived in the capital and attempted to kill —”

The air shifted. At that moment, the oppressive film of Pax Romana that had hung about the capital the entire time Brutus had been there flickered, faded, and died, disappearing from the world as though it had never been there in the first place.

Constantius I was dead.

Konstantinos XI flailed and fell to the ground in his shock. The Divine Ancestor straightened, eyes widening as his mouth thinned into a line, furious surprise roiling like thunder in his chest. Even the court mage’s expression fell, for once looking stunned.

Brutus briefly closed his eyes.

You were too impatient, Jing Ke.

Hadrianus was the first to react, leaping to his feet. “What? Where has Pax Romana gone?”

“Constantius I...” Konstantinos XI murmured.

“The Assassin!” Hadrianus gasped. He spun towards the door. “We must go now! The Assassin has not yet had time to flee! We can catch him in the act!”

Brutus stood and placed himself in the way, reaching out with one hand to stop Hadrianus. Hadrianus, having the benefit of much superior strength, nearly bowled him over in his rush, but hadn’t had enough time to really build up a run.

“There will be no need for that Hadrianus.”

Hadrianus’ brow furrowed. “No need? Brutus, what do you mean? Constantius I has been killed!”

With one hand, Brutus took tight hold of Hadrianus’ shoulder, and with the other, he reached into his robes for the dagger concealed there.

“Because I already know who it is that killed Constantius I.”

“You do?” Konstantinos XI blurted out.

“Yes. But more importantly, Hadrianus…”

The squelch of pierced flesh resounded like thunder.

Hadrianus gasped, staggering, and looked down at the dagger buried in his chest, uncomprehending, as his hands flew reflexively to the wound. His eyes followed the hand that held it, up the arm, and when he reached Brutus’ eyes, his own asked why. Why had Brutus done this?

“**Sic Semper Tyrannis** (For the Sake of Democracy, I Slay Thee).”

The Noble Phantasm hit like a hammer blow, dealing even more damage, and Hadrianus stumbled back and collapsed to the floor, taking Brutus’ dagger with him. He was already fading at the edge, flaking away into motes of light.

The veil was torn away. In the face of such a blatant betrayal, the Noble Phantasm which had allowed Brutus to be so trusted among these heroes could not stand.

“YOU!” Konstantinos XI shouted, scrambling to his feet. “YOU! YOU TRAITOR!”

A metallic rasp echoed off the walls as he ripped his sword from its sheath, and without waiting for permission from the Divine Ancestor, he rushed across the room, the pointed tip of his blade aimed unerringly at Brutus’ chest.

Brutus made no attempt to stop him.

Blood splattered across the floor. Konstantinos XI’s sword found its mark, piercing straight through cloth and flesh alike, and just as Hadrianus had, Brutus staggered under the blow. Unlike Hadrianus, he braced himself with his legs, accepted it, and did not allow himself to collapse.

This had been the only possible conclusion from the beginning.

“Damn it,” Konstantinos XI cursed. “Damn it! You’re not even going to fight back?”

Of course not. What dignity was there in something so pointless?

"I've...achieved the reason why I'm here," Brutus ground out. "I'm an Assassin. This...was the extent...of what I could do."

"Et tu," rasped Hadrianus, "Brute?"

"Yes."

Hadrianus' face twisted with resigned agony, and he burst apart, exploding into dust that glittered and vanished. Brutus' dagger clattered to the floor.

"You..." Konstantinos XI's hands trembled. "We trusted you... Brutus, you stood with us as an equal, and still..."

Was he expecting an apology? There wasn't one forthcoming, and there wouldn't be one. There was no room in an Assassin's heart for uncertainty or regret. Every kill was made with the entirety of his spirit behind it.

"How did I not see it?" the court mage muttered to himself. "How did I not *see* it?"

Brutus ignored him and turned his gaze towards the Divine Ancestor, whose countenance was stony. A cough racked him, and what spewed from his throat and across Konstantinos XI's cheek was bright, red blood.

He would not last much longer, he knew. That, too, was as expected. He was no great warrior, no famous centurion who had held off a barbarian horde or withstood a month-long siege. He was merely an assassin, famous for the final blow he delivered to a man who had trusted him completely.

"Nothing to say...Divine Ancestor?"

"My son," the Divine Ancestor began sadly, "even you are one of proper history's champions? Even you, who knows best of all the corruption of Rome?"

"Yes," Brutus managed to grit out. "The democracy I...loved is dead."

Caesar had killed it. No, it had been a joint effort, hadn't it? Caesar, the Senate, even Brutus himself had all played parts in its death. Nothing Brutus had done that fateful day on the Ides of March would have changed the inevitable outcome.

"The empire you...created, it has...no room for democracy."

He was no fool. The United Empire was, in some ways, a pleasant dream, a return to what had forged the great republic of Brutus' life. But he could not blind himself to the fact that it would always be an empire with the Divine Ancestor at its helm, with the emperors of the past and future as his delegates.

There was only one thing left for him to bet on. Only one thing he could put his faith in. Yes, if the past and the present were both full of failures, then that only left one thing for him to believe in.

“But...the future... It may teeter...on a knife’s edge, but... The democracy of the future...”

He grinned, through the blood and the quickly fleeing strength, teeth stained red, and with the last few seconds he had left, he spat his final curse at Romulus, the man who had twice built Rome.

“Lives on!”