

3202 words

“Sic Semper Tyrannis”

Rita tipped her head before the mirror, checking her braids and the Roman bun. The gold tassel swished below her lobe. Oh, and the carnelian necklace—she’d nearly forgot!

You are preening, my dear.

She flapped the voice away, finished the contour of her nose and cheeks. Voilà.

Lipstick straight? Perhaps a spot of powder before—

“Knock it off.” She unclipped the bib and rose.

Ah. The great Calpurnia stands.

“Stop it.”

But my dear—

“You heard me. Piss the fuck off.” She rattled her head, gave it a ten-count, listened hard. Quiet, finally.

Stepping before the full-length, Rita slipped the robe from her shoulders and assessed. Nipples showed through the satin of the slip. Hips not too shabby. No double chin. She sucked in her gut. Nothing to write home about, but still. Good enough for Simon. Or used to be.

She tried a line. “Here, my lord,” the mirror mouthed.

Knuckles rapped at the door. “Ten minutes!” It was Tony. His footsteps faded.

Time to dress. She lifted the lapis tunic from the hanger and pulled it over her head, cinching the waist. Next came the gray mantle, draped shawl-like about her shoulders. The pleats conveyed a regal air.

Where had she put the knife? There it was, under the bib. More of a dagger, really. She swept the blade across her fingers. Yes.

Her phone buzzed.

“Hi Andy,” she answered. “What’s up, Bunch? Well, don’t worry. Mona’s there. She’ll read to you after dinner. What’s that? No, don’t wait up for me. I’ll creep in and give you a cuddle. Soon as I get home. Uh-huh. I... I have to go, Andy. Love you.”

She kissed the air, hung up, sighed lengthily.

Darkness crept.

“No,” she warned. “Andy is off limits.”

Poor lad, stuck with a sitter. Again.

“She’s not a sitter. Mona’s a friend.”

Tomato, tomah-to.

“He loves her! And she him.”

Methinks thou doth protest—

“Bullshit. You don’t know me. You don’t know squat.”

I know you’re going a touch mad.

“I said fuck off!”

She gritted so hard her teeth hurt.

Problem was, she couldn’t disagree. Something wasn’t right within. Sure, everyone has an inner voice—but why the hell did hers have to be a *man*? The bastard followed her everywhere, editorializing, reporting her life as if from the outside. She felt like a gazelle in one of those shitty nature films, trapped in a long-lensed shot with David fucking Attenborough narrating Britishly: *The female is in estrus. She will copulate with multiple males...*

The bell rang. Time to go.

Outside, the hallway churned with bare limbs, togas, sandals, the odd sword or crested helmet. All men. Except for Lily, in red, ready to play her perky-titted Portia. And speaking of rutting, Simon couldn’t be far—

Ah, right on cue. All white, the gold sash curving over his belly, wreath of laurels balanced on the remaining sprigs of hair. Hail, Simon, Emperor of Assholia!

Tony strode by, clipboard in hand, barking directions. Everyone shuffled to the wings.

Positions. Lights down. Final coughs. Cables ran in their pulleys, and the velvet parted. Two legionnaires stood at center stage, a flock of commoners around them.

“Home, you idle creatures,” one cried. “Get you home: Is this a holiday? What! Know you not, being mechanical, you ought not walk upon a labouring day without the sign of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou?”

“Why, sir, a carpenter...”

Next came the cobbler—the mender of soles and souls. Yadda yadda yadda. Already the jokes were rolling, the thousand clevernesses. How smug he must have been, that Globe-trotter of old, pleasuring himself page after page, play after play, barely stopping to catch his breath.

Meanwhile, all Rita got was residue. Six lines, not a one of them quick.

To think that Simon had promised her Portia—Brutus’s wife. A real role on a big stage. Meat. And like a fool, she’d believed him—even declined Hedda (in Albany, but still). Only to find, weeks later, that Lily had replaced her. In more ways than one.

From behind, breath on her neck. A hand rounded her bottom.

“No,” she said.

“Don’t be angry,” Simon whispered in the darkness.

“Get your hand off my ass.”

“But it’s such a lovely ass.”

To accept a mate, her head murmured, *the doe lifts her tail...*

“This way,” a soldier declaimed from stage right, “will I disrobe the images, if you do find them deck’d with ceremonies.”

Simon chuckled in her ear. “Would like to disrobe *your* image. Deck *your* ceremonies.”

Rita turned and looked him in the eye. Her hand glided down Simon’s silk rotundity, toward the pound of flesh, fondling. (Oh, to be Shylock, instead. But for that she’d need the knife.) He pulled back, but she held, rapidly bringing him hard.

“... and keep us all,” a voice cried, “in servile fearfulness.”

“Cue,” she said, shoving him forward.

Always the pro, Simon swirled onstage, hunching somehow nobly, managing the pleats to hide the hard-on.

“Calpurnia!” he called out.

“Peace ho,” a patrician piped. “Caesar speaks.”

Again: “Calpurnia!”

Rita waited, waited, watched him worry before finally stepping forth, speaking slowly.

“Here. My. Lord.”

#

Having dispatched all three of her words, the rest went fast. Caesar called out her barrenness, and Rita cast down her eyes. She quailed while the claw-handed soothsayer (a bit hammy, frankly) mewled about the ides. Then relief, back to the wings. She had seventeen minutes. Simon hustled stage left for his next entrance.

On the planks, Cassius scowled, lean and hungry. Brutus, opposite, in the brown toga,

curled a fist, flexed a bicep. Jeffrey was gay as a lark, but you needed a gym-rat for Brutus.

In the shadows she rested her eyes. The past swirled.

God. How the hell had she ended up here? All those crossroads where you chose left instead of right as life turned into a lint roller collecting clots and cat hair. Near as she could pinpoint, it happened at Lake Forest. Sure, there'd been those high school plays. But at college, after failing the Psych exam, on the brink of quitting it all, she'd let her roommate drag her to tryouts, and there, in Hixon Hall, raw from failure, she'd read for *Hot Tin Roof*, and against all expectations nabbed the role of Maggie. There'd been something *broken* in her, Oliver said (pillow talk, much later) about why he cast her. Something desperate.

And then what?

“Oh, Christ. Go away.”

No, tell: How did that Oliver thing work out?

“I don't want to relive this.”

Au contraire. You live to relive it.

“Go hump your fucking gazelles.”

Would you fancy that? All right. The male approaches the female's rump with a prancing gait...

She squeezed the voice away, focused on the stage.

Caesar was confiding to Antony. “Would he were fatter! But I fear him not.”

Blah blah blah.

At least in Chicago Oliver had opened doors, made calls, got her a walk-on at the Orchid, bit parts at the Wit, two roles at the Gardens. *Lean and hungry*. (There are no small parts, etc., etc.) Script readings earned a few bucks. There was the house manager stint. That TV commercial for Fructis (Color Shield®).

But the whole thing was a mountain of scree: she'd climbed and climbed while the stones slid under her feet, never getting higher. Despite all the promises, where was the break?

Actors. Directors. Let me help you, each one said. Let's talk about it. Let's get a drink. She'd passed through so many hands. Not to mention three years with Keith—Keith and his liquor, his wandering, his lies, leaving her with nothing but a squirt of sperm inside, leading to Andy, only (or already) seven now, so wonderfully needy the way he clung to her, but who one day would step from his cocoon and turn into one of *them*.

Center stage, the spotlight narrowed now on Lily. That bitch's big scene, the blood-red tunic gliding over her curves. Portia twined about her Brutus, both temptress and confidante.

"I grant I am a woman," Lily-Portia said. "But think you I am no stronger than my sex?"

Again Rita thought about the knife.

There'd been that night at the Schubert. *Oedipus*. Simon was hardly a handsome man. Too big. But a presence. Emitting limelight. She'd never seen such. As king, he *became* arrogance, *was* anger. In him, fear took on flesh, horror breathed. And at the end, with the truth revealed, all lost, blood streaming from his sockets, hands covered with gore, as the Chorus drove this broken man from Thebes, the curtain fell. And as the thunder of applause began, Simon sprang to his feet and announced dinner plans. What a pro.

Onstage Rita had been a slave.

Offstage, too.

She followed him to New York. Better than swagger, Simon had sway. Directors cut him concessions in casting, leading to a good year for her. Decent parts. Until...

She ran her fingertips across her brow.

Until what?

"None of your business."

Till Lily-of-the-impertinent-tits?

"Wasn't her fault."

And you believe that I believe that you believe that?

"Get the fuck out of my head."

In fact, it didn't matter. The effect was the same: She was back to square one (maybe two), except in age, which had marched forward to square thirty-nine—too late to head back to Decatur, to drop her head before her dad's tight lips, to start something real.

What she had to show for it: Twenty years of small parts. Small women. Small plays by small writers—most of them by men, cast by men, directed by men. Hell, even half the women's roles had been written for men—men who, back in the day, played the women, and sometimes even played women disguising themselves as men, like that other Portia, in *The Merchant*, the play about broken oaths, the payment of debts. (Once again, the knife came to mind.) Where *mercy seasons justice*. But here, now, at the end of their run, the last performance of *Caesar*, she—

“Dammit Rita! You’re on,” a voice hissed, not in her head. It was Tony, prodding with his clipboard.

She stumbled onstage, dizzy.

“Here, my lord.”

Simon gave her a withering look. Wrong fucking scene.

“What mean you, Caesar?” she said, recovering. She concentrated her glare, slowed the delivery. “Think you to walk forth?” Now, absolute: “No, you shall *not* stir out of your house today.” Next line even stronger. She moved toward him, and the tyrant stepped back.

#

“What the hell was that?” he snipped after the scene. “What’s got into you?” Simon looked cautious, almost admiring. There’d been a power in her delivery of the premonitions—the whelping lioness, the yawning graves.

“Simon!” Tony hissed. “Get to the steps!”

He scrunched his toga to keep from tripping, shuffled off.

But he was right. Something *had* gotten into her. Molten iron and blocks of ice. How delicious to stand twofold before Caesar-Simon—fearful Calpurnia inhabited by Rita’s own fearless self, the wife’s warnings doubled by the mistress’s threats. Even the fucking Bard couldn’t have predicted that.

Onstage, Lily strode fretfully, raised a knuckle to her teeth. “I have a man’s mind,” she declaimed, “but a woman’s might.”

An echo. Your problem, too, isn’t it? A man roaming through your head.

She refused to take the bait. Time to move. Act III coming up. Onward.

She passed the green room. Usually packed with plebians and guards—or that Irish soothsayer with his jack-o-lantern teeth and his hip flask. However, for closing night, they’d all gathered in the wings, holding to the moment, drunk with imminent nostalgia.

Down the stairs. Hallway still clear, she slipped into her dressing room. The phone pinged. Three messages. Andy wouldn’t go to bed. Well, Mona would have to manage.

The handle of the knife was cold. She clenched it, lifted her arm high.

Lift your arm.

“Screw you,” she replied. “That was my idea.”

Was it?

Christ. Maybe she'd just anticipated the order.

"Enough!" she yelled.

The doe responds to the male's stretch by urinating...

She stormed to the door, yanked it open, and came nose to nose with Lily, whose eyes sprang wide, ruby lips rounding.

"What the fuck?" Rita said.

"Who were you talking to?"

Rita didn't blink. "Rehearsing my lines."

"But you've finished." Lily's eyes dropped to the glint in Rita's hand. "Why do you have...?"

Shit. Not part of the plan.

"Come on in." Rita pulled the scarlet girl inside, slammed the door.

Eyes on the blade, Lily backed to the mirror.

Oh, well done, my dear. And now what do you have in mind?

"Shut up!"

"Me?" Lily squeaked.

Stupid cow. Didn't she realize she was just the next Rita-in-waiting, queued up till Simon tottered over on his peg leg, a parrot on his shoulder, and made her walk the plank?

And now, see how the females will compete for—

"Fuck you," she barked at the ceiling.

Lily flinched. "What did I do?"

"Sit," Rita ordered.

Lily sat.

"Now, count to a billion."

In the hallway, she slammed the door. Off came her fabric belt, which she cinched over the knob, lashing it to the railing. Not perfect, but enough to hold her for a while.

Three doors down, she glanced left and right. Of course it opened. (Even the leads didn't get working locks.)

The room stank of man, but Jeffrey-Brutus kept his space tidy. White sneakers with balled-up socks. Designer jeans, folded. Shirts on hangers. On the makeup counter, an adorable stuffed Pikachu stood guard.

The mantle slid from her shoulders, and the tunic pooled on the floor. Why stop there? Off with the slip, the panties even. She released the Roman bun, shook out her hair. Then evaluated. Christ, even the mirror was a man—ogling her, judging. Well, take it or leave it, this was what she had. Could you blame Simon? Face it: she was no Lily, no Portia—no Porsche, not one of those sportscar women purring at the touch. Caesar—the real one—had plowed through them as well, wedding two others before bedding Calpurnia. And there'd have been more, no doubt. If he'd not been stopped.

How did men get away with it? As if women weren't even the same species—had no eyes, hands, heart, senses. But if you cut a woman, did she not bleed? If you poisoned her, did she not die? And if you wronged her... Shit, wrong play.

Point was, someone had to do something. Because no, she wouldn't let Andy grow up like this. Two weeks ago, by the swings, he met that blond girl with the curls. Cute, the way they played house under the slide, Andy making furniture with mounds of gravel, the girl serving tea in cupped hands. A little family. She'd crept forward to eavesdrop on their innocence.

"No," Andy was saying, hands on his hips.

"Why not?" the girl complained.

"Because *I'm* the man."

She could have smacked him.

Jeffrey's wardrobe rack held two backup togas in Brutus brown. She slipped one on. No time for pins. She hemmed it with a stapler.

The dagger fit in a fold.

Stop it.

"Go to hell."

You don't want to do this.

"You have no fucking idea."

After all, it's your fault, too.

She glared at the mirror. Of all the gall.

You put up with it.

"How dare you?"

If you'd gotten better roles, you'd—

"One more word," she snapped. "One more word, and you're next."

Ah. Fascinating. And how do you see that working?

No more Attenborough, she thought. Just do it myself. Like everyfuckingthing else.

#

Rita passes the sash-tied door (Lily pounding) and climbs the stairwell.

Onstage, at the base of the Senate, Simon belts a line: “The ides of March are come!”

The sloshed soothsayer: “Ay, Caesar, but not gone.”

She pauses behind the quick-change rack as Tony marches past, makes her move to the wings. Under the lights: Caesar, citizens, conspirators. Near the curtain, two legionnaires lean on spears, loitering till it’s time to enter.

She taps one on the shoulder. “How far are they?”

“Almost to the kneeling.”

In the center, Simon raises his hand. “These couchings and these lowly courtesies...”

Shuffling comes from the stairwell. Light footfalls. Christ. Lily is out.

Brutus brings Simon’s knuckles to his lips. “I kiss thy hand, but not in flattery, Caesar.”

“Bet he’d like to kiss more than that,” the legionnaire next to her whispers. “Might work,” the second one says. “Simon’s equal opportunity, you know.” They chuckle.

Tony appears, shushing. “They can hear you in the house!” He turns to Rita, looks her up and down. “What the hell—?”

She darts onstage, disappearing into the throng of plebes.

“Let me a little show it,” Cassius cries, “even in this; that I was constant Cimber should be banish’d, and constant do remain to keep him so.”

At the curtain, Lily has arrived. She’s hissing to Tony, pointing.

Simon lords about. “Hence! wilt thou lift up Olympus?”

Rita elbows her way forward, and Jeffrey-Brutus turns, sees her, gapes.

From somewhere, distantly: *The younger males form a bachelor herd...*

Conspirators have circled. Simon roars his indignation.

“Speak, hands for me!” Casca cries. Seven arms rise, blades plunge, the tyrant moans.

And then the crowd parts, opening a path for Jeffrey-of-the-brown-toga.

But instead it’s Rita. She stands alone, hair down.

Simon’s mouth opens. His chin wags in search of words. Then his eyes drop to the dagger. They widen. (Genuine emotion?) He steps back, stumbles on his hem, catches himself.

The house goes still. One beat. Two.

Then idiot Cassius skips ahead. “Liberty!” he cries. “Freedom! Tyranny is dead!”

Not yet it’s not. Rita lunges, but Simon swats, grabs. Her tunic tears. Christ—wardrobe malfunction! No matter. Her fist rises, falls once, twice with the knife.

Simon rolls to the ground, yowls, pats his chest, his gut. Blood over his fingers. He touches again, searching for the wound, here, there. Hands now covered with red, all red, too red. Sweetness hangs in the air.

She sneers, raises the knife again, this time turning it inward, to her own bared breast, watching Simon as she drives it in to the hilt, then pulls it away, leaving the skin intact, nothing but a faint smudge, like a lipstick kiss, bare in the middle, no mark from the blade’s tongue. She strikes again, higher on her chest. Another kiss, a spring of spring.

Simon stares at his bloodied hands. How? Where?

And when she snorts her disdain, he breathes. A stage knife! Fake blood!

Justice, aye, but with mercy.

Dazed, Simon straightens. The pro tries to ad-lib them back to the script.

“Et tu, Calpurnia?”

And then, moments before half of the crowd leaps to its feet, before the applause, before that full column in the *Times*, before she leaves the stage forever, Rita turns. For once she has her own line, one she has written, one the play begs for, and that no ballsy man has whispered into her ear.

“Yeah,” she says. “Me too, you brute. Me fucking too”

###