**Killing Caesar by Jon Herman**

A yellow- crusted tooth skittered across the floor, followed by its owner, blood ejecting from his gums. All around was chaos. Bodies and arms tangled, curses and cries filled the bar. Picking himself up from the floor, Marcus Junius Brutus had had his fill. His jaw was sagging, possibly broken, and fresh bruises would soon litter his body, but neither of these inconveniences troubled Brutus. Pausing only to retrieve his knife from a dead man’s tongue, Brutus maneuvered his way to the front entrance. His lost tooth forgotten, Brutus wiped his knife and signaled for his bearers with a slightly gaped smile. He also motioned to his bodyguards who had been standing idle just across the street.

  “Kill everyone inside.” Brutus ordered his chief bodyguard. The man looked puzzled and hesitated, Brutus quickly pulled his knife from his belt. Arcing upward he cleanly cut through the man’s jugular just below the Adam’s apple. Brutus’ former employee immediately dropped to the floor gurgling, his hands vainly attempting to staunch the blood pouring from his neck. Eying his remaining guards Brutus firmly ordered again, “Kill everyone inside.”

  Without hesitation, his men, swords drawn, burst inside the bar, and soon the street was quiet. But Marcus Brutus was already well away from the scene. Swiftly his bearers navigated through the hustle and bustle of the Roman streets. It was barely past noon. The hot Italian sun beat down upon the cobblestone roads and sun browned citizens. Brutus slumped down within the faint protection of his canopy, drinking a lambskin of wine. Soon enough his bearers wound their way up the Aventine to his home. The Aventine hill was home to Rome’s most prominent citizens. Julius Caesar himself had a villa at the very top. But, Caesar spent little time there. Caesar could only be found in the Forum remaking Rome into some bastard confabulation of his own imaginings. His temples pounding, Brutus stumbled towards the front entrance of his senatorial home. Much less, the image of a senator of Rome, Brutus entered his home a drunk, the visage of a beggar.

  He stumbled and fell immediately within the front entrance. Marble floors, arching ceilings, columns and fine statues abounded in the wide, front rooms. Prostrate upon the floor, Brutus vomited. Servants stood silently in the shadows, unmoving, knowing an incorrect word or action would mean their death. Rising up from his knees, he stumbled through the contents of his belly and bellowed, “Wine!” Quickly three servants raced forward.

Suddenly a female voice commanded, “Do not give him anything.” The servants stopped, but the one closest to Brutus received a violent uppercut and several kicks to the ribs for his troubles before the woman shouted again, “By Jupiter, Brutus, stop it, just stop it, you are drunk again.” Brutus turned to face the woman. She was an older woman, in her forties, dressed royally in white. Fine jewels laced her neck and wrists. Brutus knew her. This was Servilia his mother.

“Mother, leave me be,” he stated coldly.

Unbowed his mother retorted, “You are an idiot. Sober up. By the gods, if I would have known how worthless you would be in times of crisis I would have suffocated you at birth.” Then noticing the blood and bruises, Servilia sighed and asked Brutus more mildly, “Did you kill anyone important this time…gods please not a senator?”

Chuckling Brutus raised his puked stained arms upward, mocking innocence saying, “Do you remember Septimus Cato Fabius? I overhead him calling Caesar an ill-bred man-hoar. I plucked out his tongue.” Brutus laughed… and then he kept laughing. He doubled over, tears streamed from his eyes, but then his laughter became sobs.

Grabbing hold of him, Servilia slapped Brutus hard, shaking him, “Brutus, your guests are here. Pull yourself together and cooperate with the servants as they make you presentable. I will tell your company that you will be with them within the hour.” Quietly to the servants, she ordered, “Give him wormwort. After he throws up everything in his belly, bathe him and beat him if necessary until he is making sense. Then get him into the solar.” Hearing his mother’s orders, Brutus normally would have been furious. However, he knew no amount of wine could put off his fate. He had to kill the most powerful man in the world. He had to kill a man who was like a father to him. He had to kill Gaius Julius Caesar, emperor of Rome.

After his marvelous conquests of Gaul and Egypt, Julius Caesar had made himself consul for life, or emperor of Rome. To the people, Caesar was more god than man. Mindlessly they worshipped him. Caesar put on near constant chariot races and gladiatorial games. As sole ruler, bureaucracy and red tape were nonexistent to Caesar. Never before had Rome been governed so well or so efficiently. For the average Roman, Caesar’s rule was a blessing. Grain ships, the lifeblood of Rome, now continuously sailed up the Tiber River supplying Rome with more grain than Rome needed. The hungry hordes in the city were now given free bread. Caesar created jobs by building roads, temples, and aqueducts. Fresh water flowed freely in fountains throughout the city. Sanitation, sewage, and food, all were seemingly under the control of Caesar. Now while the average Rome basked in Caesar’s rule, the Senate of Rome was furious. Composed of three hundred men chosen for life, the Senate had ruled Rome. However, that was before Caesar. With Caesar, they were now as worthless as Brutus’ forgotten tooth, ground into that bar room floor, beneath the blood soaked bodies of dozens of dead. The Senate had ruled Rome poorly caring more about their own political squabbles than the people, and now Caesar had taken their power.

Brutus was a senator, but his decision to kill Caesar was motivated by more than petty self-interest. Marcus Brutus was famous in Rome. Generations ago a dictator had taken over Rome, enslaving the people. It was Brutus’ family who had killed that tyrant. It was known throughout Rome, that the family of the Brutii were the champions of liberty. Fairly or unfairly, Brutus inherited the responsibility of preserving and protecting Rome from those who would make themselves king over all. Perhaps this is why Caesar had cultivated such a close relationship with Brutus. As Caesar was growing greater and greater, conquering land after land, it was young Brutus who was often at his side. Many joked that Brutus was like Caesar’s son, and indeed Brutus’ mother Servilia had engaged in a torrid love affair with Caesar. But that had apparently ended poorly. Whatever the truth of his parentage and his love for Caesar, Brutus’ duty was clear.

  The signs were all there. From the beginning, Caesar’s ambitions were known. Over and again he promised to return power to the Senate once reforms were made. But Caesar took to wearing red boots. Red boots were only worn by kings. He scoffed at the suggestion his wearing them was anything more than fashion. Caesar’s fashion also extended to a fondness for Tyrrhenian purple, a dye worn by eastern kings. But now everywhere statues of Caesar were being erected. What could they be for other than for worship? Beyond that, a law authored by Caesar had been found, but not yet introduced, which would proclaim Caesar a living god. Brutus remembered that Caesar had always told him that ‘he would rather be first in a village than second at Rome.’ But now that he was first in Rome, Caesar did not intend to stop until the gods themselves were seconds to his greatness. Whatever good Caesar brought to Rome would soon be outweighed by his mad quest for power. He was too dangerous and tyranny must not stand. As his ancestor’s had saved Rome, so now Brutus must do the same, no matter the cost.

  All these thoughts and more swirled in Marcus Brutus’ mind. Brutus had known for weeks what he must do. Hating himself, a somewhat sobered Brutus entered the solar to a small assembly of fellow senators. His words were of no surprise to him. “We must kill him tomorrow.”

The men seated around him gasped. Protests erupted. Cries of “We are not ready” and “No it is too soon.” Unlike Brutus, these men who were dressed formally in long, flowing white togas, were not men of courage. Political conspiracies were their nature, not regicide and murder. Gradually, gently, Brutus calmed them, and led them to the necessity of the deed. Caesar was to march tomorrow with his legions. Surrounded by his armies, hundreds of miles away, Caesar would be out of their reach. But, despite the distance, Caesar could still reach them. From the edges of the earth, he would hear of this meeting and have them killed. Turning to the side, Brutus noticed one of the servants in the courtyard outside, close enough to perhaps overhear a word of their meeting. Pausing to write a quick note he sent orders to have the man permanently quieted. As he did so, he heard the cry of a raven. Ravens’ calls often signal death. Was this a good omen perhaps or chance? And whose death might it be signaling? After several hours, and many speeches and sobs, the senators finally made a pact. Slicing their palms and mingling their blood, the twelve senators swore tomorrow to kill Caesar as he spoke in Pompey’s theatre. Parting at last for a fitful night’s sleep, Brutus quietly ushered them out with the words, “Gentlemen, history records the deeds of the great. Tomorrow history shines its light on us.”

***The next morning…***

Brutus’ brave words belied the torment within his soul. Brutus would have drunk the entire night, but the morning’s foul deed required sobriety. Now, as he was standing in the theatre with his co-conspirators, Brutus did not know if he would go through with the murder. Within his long robes, the cold steel of the blade pressed against the inside of his forearm. Its touch a burning reminder of what was to come. Quietly he reassured the other senators with a confidence he did not feel. How was he to kill a man he loved? A man who had loved him like a son and may even be his own true father? But how could he not kill a tyrant, a man who would bring Rome to ruin? The guards at the doors to the forum were bribed to leave and to close the great doors after Caesar entered. Caesar’s personal bodyguards were either bought or distracted. All was prepared.

  Gaius Julius Caesar entered the theatre of Pompeius Magnus. Walking down the marble stairs, senators pressed around him bringing pleas and supplications from various parts of Rome. Broadly he smiled and whisked them away as he made his way forward to speak from the rostrum below. The steel burned against Brutus’ skin. As planned by the conspirators, senator Ambrosius stepped up to Caesar extending his palm in greeting. As Caesar reached to answer, Ambrosius swiftly stabbed towards him. A trained military warrior, Caesar blocked the blade with his forearm. Everyone stopped, aghast at the sight of Caesar’s blood trickling down his forearm. Drawing their blades the senators circled Caesar and began furiously stabbing at him again and again. The remaining senators fled the hall as Caesar whirled, kicked, punched and bit to protect himself from the torrent of blades. Again and again life- ending blows rained down on Caesar only to miss or make superficial wounds. Several senators collapsed from wounds inflicted by their fellow conspirators. Ambrosius, who started the melee, had fallen from a blade strike to his eye. Blood was everywhere, but Caesar fought on.

  Yet during this attack Marcus Brutus stood alone, frozen, watching the struggle play out before him. It was only now that he noticed the pain from his missing tooth. Once more, he heard, or he imagined, the raven’s call. As if from a trance Brutus pushed his way forward. Almost sensing him, the senators parted leaving him a clear path to Caesar. Bent over, panting, bleeding from multiple wounds, Julius Caesar looked up and caught the eyes of Brutus. For but a moment, a glimmer of hope resonated in Caesar’s eyes, but then Caesar saw the naked knife in Brutus’ hand pointed directly at him. The color drained from Caesar, his prior expression of hope and defiance gave way to a look of agony and defeat. Julius Caesar, ruler of the Roman world, now looked a broken man. Pitifully he reached his hand to Brutus and stammered “E tu Brutii?” You too Brutus? Only a small part of Brutus heard Caesar’s words. Stepping forward Brutus took his blade and drove it deep into Caesar’s groin. Gasping, Caesar clutched Brutus’ shoulders briefly before crying out and collapsing in a pool of blood. At the foot of Great Pompey’s statue, Julius Caesar lay dying.

Within moments the assassins ran from the scene. When they had spoken in secret, they had envisioned the killing of Caesar as a moment of heroism and triumph. But now, horrified at the bloody murder, they scattered through the confused crowds milling outside. Brutus ran with them as if crazed. Finally he stopped outside the temple of Jupiter. ‘Gods,’ he thought ‘what have I done.’ He stared at his blood stained hands. His robes were covered in great Caesar’s blood. Shaking, on one knee, his chest heaving, he rested. Soon shouts of “Caesar is dead!” echoed through the streets of Rome. In the dark skies high above the city, a raven called, but Marcus Brutus could not hear it. Instead at the foot of the colossal statue of the god Jupiter, in the heart of Rome, Brutus wept.

*With the murder of Julius Caesar Rome plunged into civil war. Marcus Brutus and his conspirators would flee Rome. Inevitably they would be hunted down by Caesar’s nephew and adopted son Octavian who went on to be the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. Rather than save the republic, the Roman Empire would forevermore be ruled by an emperor and be a dictatorship. Some consider Brutus a hero and others a villain. Neither answer is correct or incorrect. It is something you must answer for yourself.*