Fiction Excerpt 4: Excerpt from *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare

The English author William Shakespeare (1564–1616) wrote many plays about great events and famous people in history. In *Julius Caesar*, he dramatizes the last days and the murder of Julius Caesar (/see*zur/), one of Rome’s great leaders. Here we retell Shakespeare’s play in prose but quote some famous passages in the original verse.

It was mid-February, time for the Feast of the Lupercalia, in honor of the god of fertility. Ancient Rome was in a holiday mood. Many citizens had gathered along the streets to see the great leader Julius Caesar on his way to the festival games. Some of his well-wishers had been up early, decorating his statues with garlands in honor of Caesar’s recent triumph over his enemy Pompey.

But many citizens of Rome did not hold Caesar in such high regard, for they had known and respected Pompey. They resented Caesar’s attempts to glorify himself, and they feared that they would lose the freedom they cherished as Roman citizens if he became too powerful.

Soon Caesar and his retinue came along. Caesar’s wife Calpurnia and the young officer Mark Antony were beside him. Suddenly a voice from the crowd called to Caesar. It was a soothsayer, one who predicts the future. “Caesar!” the soothsayer cried. “Beware the ides of March.” (The ides was the fifteenth day of the month.)

“He is a dreamer,” said Caesar to his companions. “Let him pass.”

When Caesar’s procession had moved out of sight, two noble citizens who knew Caesar well, Brutus and Cassius, remained behind and began to talk. Both were worried about Caesar’s growing power. Rome was a republic, with a senate that helped make the laws; would Caesar’s growing power threaten this way of government and the freedom of Roman citizens?

As Brutus and Cassius talked, they could hear shouts and applause for Caesar in the distance. “What means this shouting?” Brutus asked Cassius. “I do fear the people choose Caesar for their king.”

“Ay, do you fear it?” responded Cassius. “Then must I think you would not have it so.”

“I would not,” said Brutus. “And yet I love him well.”

Cassius became agitated and spoke to Brutus. “I know you for an honorable man, Brutus,” he said. “I cannot tell what you and other men think, but for myself, I am not in awe of Caesar. I was born free as Caesar. So were you!” There was another cheer from the people, then Cassius continued, “Why, man, Caesar doth stand like a giant
and we little men walk around under his huge legs. . . . In the name of all the gods, upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed, that he is grown so great?”

Cassius’s heated words seemed to trouble Brutus. He turned to Cassius and said, “For the present, say no more.” Then he added, “Till we meet again, my noble friend, consider this: Brutus would rather be a slave than to call himself a son of Rome and live under a tyrant.”

Now Caesar’s procession returned. As they passed by, something about Cassius made Caesar uneasy, and he remarked to Antony, “Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.”

Brutus and Cassius stopped their friend Casca to ask the reason for all the shouting and applause they had heard. Casca said that Mark Antony had offered a crown to Caesar three times and that each time Caesar had refused it, which caused the people to shout their approval for his show of humility. “But, to my thinking,” said Casca, “he would fain have had it.” Cassius sensed that Casca too did not trust Caesar and feared his growing power.

In the days that followed, Cassius secretly gathered a number of men who were willing to take violent steps to stop Caesar’s growing power. Among the conspirators were Casca, Decius, Metellus Cimber, and other prominent men; but they still needed the support of Brutus to lend dignity to the plot, for Brutus was known throughout the city to be an honorable man. During this time, it is said that many strange signs foretold that something terrible was about to happen: fire filled the skies, lions walked the streets, and an owl hooted in the public square at midday.

One day it was rumored that the Senate was on the verge of crowning Caesar king. At last Brutus gave in. He agreed to join the conspirators at the Senate the next morning, and there they would put Caesar to death.

On the night before the bloody deed was to be done, Brutus was troubled. His wife, Portia, approached him. “Brutus,” she said, “yesternight at supper you suddenly rose and walked about, musing and sighing. And when I asked you what the matter was, you stared upon me with ungentle looks. Dear, my lord, tell me the cause of your grief.”

“I am not well in health, and that is all,” said Brutus. But Portia knew that something greater troubled her husband. She knelt at his feet and said, “No, my Brutus. You have some sickness within your mind. I beg you, by all your vows of love, that you unfold to me why you are so worried.”
Brutus helped his wife to her feet, saying, “Kneel not, gentle Portia. Wait a while and by and by, thy bosom shall know the secrets of my heart.”

The next morning, several of the conspirators went to Caesar’s house to accompany him to the Senate. Before they arrived, Caesar was approached by his wife, Calpurnia. During the night she had dreamed that Caesar’s statue poured forth blood like a fountain with many spouts. Now she pleaded with her husband to stay at home. “I never believed in omens,” she said, “but now they frighten me. Alas, my lord, do not go forth today!”

But Caesar was determined to go. He turned to Calpurnia and said:

- Cowards die many times before their deaths;
- The valiant never taste of death but once.
- Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
- It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
- Seeing that death, a necessary end,
- Will come when it will come

But Calpurnia insisted until, at length, moved by his wife’s fear and sorrow, Caesar relented. “For you,” he said, “I will stay at home.”

But shortly thereafter, when the other conspirators arrived, Caesar changed his mind. Decius told Caesar that the Senate planned to offer him a crown that day, and that they would mock him for staying home because of his wife’s bad dream. So Caesar dressed and went with the conspirators. As they entered the Senate House, Caesar saw the soothsayer. “The ides of March are come,” Caesar said to him.

“Ay, Caesar,” said the soothsayer, “but not gone.”

The senators stood as Caesar took his seat. Then Metellus Cimber drew near and knelt before him. Caesar bid him rise, for he knew that Metellus was about to ask that his brother, Publius Cimber, who had been banished from Rome, be allowed to return. Brutus and Cassius came forth to support Metellus’s request, but Caesar would not be persuaded.

“I am as constant as the northern star,” he said. “I was constant Cimber should be banished, and constant do remain to keep him so.” Other senators called upon Caesar to change his mind, but he spurned them all. Then Casca stepped behind Caesar, and saying, “Speak, hands, for me!” and he struck Caesar in the back with his dagger.
Suddenly the conspirators were upon Caesar, stabbing him on all sides. Despite their attacks Caesar stood firm—until he saw Brutus raise his hand to strike. “Et tu, Brute?” he said. “Even you? Then fall, Caesar!” And covering his face with his cloak, Caesar died.

The senators fled. News of Caesar’s death spread quickly, and the city was in an uproar. Brutus was anxious to restore order, so when Caesar’s friend Mark Antony came to him, full of humility and willing to cooperate, he was relieved. Antony promised not to oppose the new government and asked only that he be allowed to speak at Caesar’s funeral. Brutus considered the request and agreed on the condition that Brutus himself speak first. In this way he could give good reason for the conspirators’ bloody act, he felt, and prevent the crowd from sympathizing with Caesar. But Mark Antony had other plans: he was determined to avenge his friend’s murder. He sent word to Caesar’s nephew, Octavius, to keep at a safe distance and bide his time.

On the day of the funeral, Brutus ascended a pulpit in the Forum and addressed the people. “Romans, countrymen, and lovers!” he said. “Hear me for my cause, . . . and . . . believe me for mine honor. . . . If there be any in this assembly any dear friend of Caesar’s, to him I say that Brutus’s love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; . . . as he was valiant, I honor him; but as he was ambitious, I slew him. . . . Who is here so . . . vile that will not love his country? If any, speak; for him have I offended.”

“None, Brutus, none,” cried the people, who, though they had once cheered Caesar, were now persuaded that Caesar had threatened their freedom.

Now Mark Antony entered, dressed in mourning and helping carry Caesar’s open coffin on a bier. Brutus announced that Antony had permission to give a eulogy. As Brutus departed, the crowd cheered him, some even shouting that he should be made the next Caesar. Antony entered the pulpit and spoke these words:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him;
The evil that men do lives after them,
The good is oft interred with their bones,
So let it be with Caesar. . . .
As the crowd listened, they began to think more kindly of Caesar. Antony went on:

He was my friend, faithful and just to me;
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honorable man. . . .
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept;
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff;
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honorable man.

The crowd began to get uneasy. How could this Brutus be so “honorable” if he had helped kill a leader who was so just and kind? Antony continued:

You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And, sure, he is an honorable man.

As Antony spoke, some people began to blame Brutus and the others for their actions. At length Antony seemed overcome with emotion. He called for the people to stand around the coffin. Then he held up Caesar’s torn, bloodstained cloak for all to see. He showed them where Cassius’s dagger had run it through, and Casca’s. As he showed them the rip made by Brutus’s dagger, he said, “This was the most unkindest cut of all.” Then he pulled the cloak aside to reveal Caesar’s pitiful face. This was more than the people could stand, and they began to weep sorrowfully. Some called for mutiny; some were ready to burn the house of Brutus.

Then Antony, to win the people to his cause once and for all, began to read Caesar’s will. It called for every Roman citizen to be given seventy-five drachmas. “Most noble Caesar!” they cried. “We’ll revenge his death.” Then the angry citizens rushed forth to burn the conspirators’ houses.

Cassius, Brutus, and their followers were forced to flee from Rome. They assembled troops to fight against the army of Antony and Octavius. When they were prepared to do battle, they faced a decision: should they wait for Antony and Octavius to make the first move, or should they attack? Cassius preferred to wait, but Brutus felt that the time was ripe for battle, for the enemy was growing stronger every day. “There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune,” he said. “On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it
serves, or lose our ventures.” Cassius agreed to Brutus’s plan. The next morning they would seek the enemy at Philippi.

Brutus spent a troubled night. As he sat awake, reading, a strange sight suddenly rose before him. It was the ghost of Caesar himself! “Thou shalt see me at Philippi,” warned the ghost; then it disappeared. The next day the two armies prepared for battle. Brutus took charge of the right wing, and Cassius of the left. Brutus’s soldiers fared well, but Cassius’s men were driven back. Convinced that all was lost, Cassius took his own life in the old Roman way. He ordered his servant to hold his sword. Then he thrust himself against the blade, crying, “Caesar, thus thou art revenged, even with the sword that killed thee.”

Brutus and the others continued to fight, but the armies of Antony and Octavius proved too strong for them. When Brutus knew at last that there was no hope of victory, he vowed to end his life as Cassius had done, rather than be captured. Brutus ran upon his sword and died.

When Antony found Brutus lying dead, he was moved with admiration. “This was the noblest Roman of them all,” he said to Octavius. “All the conspirators save only he did what they did in envy of great Caesar; only he acted in common good to all. His life was gentle, and the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, ‘This was a man!’”

The victorious generals buried Brutus with great dignity. Then they began restoring order to the troubled city of Rome.