The Trick

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The Trick

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Summary

“Coriolanus,” Sejanus grabbed his shoulder again, and this time he was permitted. “Breathe. Breathe with me.”

He took exaggerated breaths, lifting the hand not on Coriolanus’ shoulder slowly up and down to demonstrate.

Coriolanus let himself be ‘calmed’ by the effort, his breathing eventually slowing to match the example. Sejanus continued modeling the exercise for several breaths after was necessary, as if he was worried Coriolanus would revert to his frenzied state without the Plinth’s guidance.

Or,

Coriolanus feigns a panic attack to prevent Sejanus from conspiring with a Twelve rebel.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The Peacekeepers were nothing if not mindful of their own morale. It was the third time since they'd arrived that Coriolanus and Sejanus' unit had been awarded passes to leave the base for the weekend. They had all rushed in a pack to the Hob with hopes to forget their responsibilities that night.

The Covey were performing, per usual, and their set was fairly similar to the last time they'd seen them, with a few new songs sprinkled in for variety.

Coriolanus' mind drifted from Lucy Gray's pleasant tone as he noticed abruptly the empty space to his left. He frowned, eyes scanning the large room before finding their target.

Sejanus leaned against the bar, conversing- no, *chatting* with a man only mildly familiar to Coriolanus, and not for a good reason. He was a bit older than them, maybe early twenties, and Coriolanus had seen on multiple occasions his public affiliation with Billy Taupe and a few other unsavory individuals. What was Sejanus thinking?

He had a general idea, of course, but it infuriated him nonetheless. After everything he'd done for Sejanus, he couldn't go one night without endangering them both.

He startled slightly as Sejanus suddenly made eye contact with him, and he looked away. His friend seemed to wrap up his conversation before collecting two bowls from the counter and walking towards their table.

"They had blackberries," Sejanus sat beside him once more, setting one of the bowls in front of him with an easy smile.

"I'm not hungry," Coriolanus bristled. How could his friend lie, albeit through omission, so easily while simultaneously holding himself as morally superior to everyone around him?

Sejanus frowned. "Are you okay?"

Coriolanus finally met his gaze again and found earnest concern in his friend's eyes, and not the sarcasm he would have expected from anyone else asking that question in this situation. No, he most certainly was not okay with what was going on right in front of his eyes- no sane person would be.

"Yes." He responded shortly, returning his focus to the stage where a few Covey were encouraging the crowd to clap along to their rhythm.

"Hey," Sejanus seemed to examine him. "You sure?"

Coriolanus was seething. *"Yes."*

Sejanus did not appear convinced, but he didn't push the issue.

Maude Ivory began singing to the beat as several others accompanied her with various instruments. Coriolanus found it difficult to focus on the lyrics over his louder anger. He

usually didn't bother to remember them, anyway, unless he knew he'd be asked his opinion on them later.

The song continued an impossibly long verse, but the presence beside him was distracting. It was clear that Sejanus was not paying any attention to the ballad.

Coriolanus followed his gaze to see the man he had previously been speaking to looking back, before disappearing behind a wall. Sejanus too casually grabbed his bowl, making his way to stand. "I'm gonna go return this."

Coriolanus knew exactly where he would be going. "Could you grab me another drink while you're up there?" He said quickly.

Sejanus hesitated, likely racking his head for possible lies to feed him. "Sure." He went to do so.

Coriolanus had to think quickly. He had no specific notion of what Sejanus was discussing with Billy Taupe's friend, but he knew he couldn't let it continue. He was desperate to force his friend to stay seated, or to leave the venue altogether.

The crowd's clapping quickened with the song's pace. There had to be something that would force Sejanus to stay. Coriolanus had to believe that there was some combination of words existing in language that would make Sejanus see reason. For now, he just needed his friend to give up on his meeting for tonight, and quickly- the rest could be sorted later.

What would make him stay? Coriolanus thought back to all the times he'd seen Sejanus act boldly. What was most important to him?

He thought of Sejanus with a sack of sandwiches, begging him to help coax Marcus into eating. He thought of him tensing at Arlo's hanging, later admitting he wouldn't have been able to shoot Lil. He thought of Sejanus at his bedside with Tigris after the bombing at the arena. Just a few minutes ago, his concern: *Are you okay?*

Coriolanus decided he would not be. He couldn't exactly set himself on fire, but he could imagine a similar investment in a non-physical kind of threat.

Sejanus was at the bar again, back turned. Coriolanus took the opportunity to bring his hands up, scrubbing at his eyes until they began to water. The people around him paid him no mind as they watched the Covey and a small group of couples dancing near the stage. The clapping continued.

Coriolanus ran his hands over his face roughly, hoping to redden his skin. He thought back to the few panic attacks he had witnessed in his life- of Tigris when she thought he was asleep, and Clemensia one time when they were children.

He began to quicken his breathing, finding the act more tiring than he expected. Coriolanus tried to match the tempo of the music, his breaths growing shallower.

He felt he had worked himself up sufficiently, and this thankfully coincided with Sejanus' return. His friend was yet to notice his self-induced state, seemingly too busy beginning his story. He set a mug of moonshine next to Coriolanus' not-yet empty one. "I should probably go, you know, make sure Beanpole hasn't passed out yet…"

Beanpole was across the room telling an over-exaggerated story to some Twelve girls, and it was way too early in the night for anyone to be passed out. Coriolanus couldn't look Sejanus in the eye without his anger revealing his true state of mind, so he couldn't see his reaction to the sudden change in mood. He heard his shock, however.

"Coryo?"

Coriolanus knew he had passed the point where he had to commit. He let his eyes flicker between a few spots on the cracked floorboards, not reacting to Sejanus' return. He heard him pull his stool closer before sitting.

"Coryo, look at me." Sejanus insisted.

Coriolanus' eyes trailed upwards slightly to see Sejanus' hand frozen about an inch from grabbing his arm. His friend didn't seem reluctant in his concern, but the method with which he could help him. It was imperative that the method be either staying by his side or leaving with him entirely.

Coriolanus blinked as roughly as he could, allowing the harshly obtained faux-tears to fall from his eyes as he looked at Sejanus in the most pitiful way he could muster.

Hook, line, and sinker. Sejanus' clear intention to leave seemed forgotten as his panicked eyes scanned Coriolanus, as if searching for a gunshot wound, or whatever else must have occurred to prompt this state of his meticulously controlled friend.

Maude Ivory hollered a loud, crescendoing finale to the song, and Coriolanus, lost in his own performance, harshly flinched.

Sejanus took this in a different way, one which Coriolanus welcomed as beneficial to his cause. He felt the Plinth's hand close gently around his wrist before he was pulled to his feet. "Let's get you out of here."

Coriolanus fixed his gaze on the floor again as he was guided, Sejanus' hand lightly against his back, towards the open door.

Without the need to steer himself, he was startled by a foreign pat on his shoulder as he passed a group of fellow peacekeepers.

"We knew Snow was a lightweight, but s'he hammered already?" The slight slur to his voice confirmed the private's hypocrisy.

Coriolanus bit back a wave of shame. This kind of public outburst, however designed, was contrary to his whole being. He had spent his whole life carefully crafting his every behavior, and it seemed to catch up to him the possible social consequences of this charade.

“Shut it, Bouras, you’re projecting again.” Came Sejanus’ response, his voice sharper than usual.

Coriolanus almost wanted to shove him away and leave him to deal with his own issues himself. Really, he was doing him an immense favor by risking his own image to save him from his self-inflicted troubles yet again, and still, he couldn’t just shut his mouth and keep out of the altercation.

“Oh, you’re no psychologist, Plinth, and it looks like your nursing skills’re more needed on Blondie here.” Coriolanus felt Sejanus tense.

This was already embarrassing, but it would be more so if either were given the opportunity to escalate this.

With no time to contemplate things, Coriolanus whimpered once, quietly enough that he was sure only Sejanus would hear it, before reverting to the quick, shallow breaths of a few moments prior. He felt the hand on his back tense further.

Sejanus quickly disregarded the drunken peacekeeper, saying nothing in response as they exited the building into the cold, humid night. Coriolanus maintained his despondent yet frantic facade, his breathing louder now outside the crowded building.

There weren’t any people in the immediate area, all seemingly inside enjoying the Covey’s sing-along.

Sejanus had led him around the front of the Hob, a few yards from the main door, and Coriolanus realized that he had no real plan now. He had, for the time being, achieved his goal. It didn’t really matter, he supposed, because so long as he stayed in character he didn’t have to be the one to deal with any sort of plan.

Nor should he have to, either. He had completed his moral obligation by going well beyond what most would do to help his bunkmate. No matter how many times Coriolanus had saved Sejanus in the past, it seemed he’d never return the favor by ceasing for one day his effort to get them both killed.

“Coryo—” Sejanus reached his hand up to Coriolanus’ shoulder and it was *astounding* he could still call him that term of endearment whilst actively endangering them both. Coriolanus leaned away from his touch.

He was honestly feeling a bit lightheaded from maintaining his faux-panicked state. Surely in most friendships, one shouldn’t have to exert oneself so much, go through so much effort with so little return.

“Coriolanus,” Sejanus grabbed his shoulder again, and this time he was permitted. “Breathe. Breathe with me.”

He took exaggerated breaths, lifting the hand not on Coriolanus’ shoulder slowly up and down to demonstrate.

Coriolanus let himself be ‘calmed’ by the effort, his breathing eventually slowing to match the example. Sejanus continued modeling the exercise for several breaths after was necessary, as if he was worried Coriolanus would revert to his frenzied state without the Plinth’s guidance.

Finally, it seemed his breathing was deemed satisfactory and they ceased their call-and-response. The hand bracing his shoulder to the wall loosened its grip, then dropped.

Coriolanus reached his hands up to wipe his face, and they came away wet. It seemed he had successfully irritated his eyes enough to produce a decent amount of tears.

“Here,” Sejanus dug through his pocket and offered Coriolanus his issued handkerchief.

If he had wanted that, he would’ve used his own. He accepted it anyway. If it made Sejanus feel good to be helpful, he could oblige. It could serve as positive reinforcement to allow him that after he’d made the right decision by leaving the Hob.

They were silent for several moments, the echoed chatter and slow fiddle tune from inside the only sounds outside of nature. Coriolanus didn’t know if it was worth the risk of suggesting they return inside- sure, he assumed his friend would be more likely to stay by his side now, but it would return Sejanus to the eyes of the rebel man and his crew. He didn’t have a better idea, but he didn’t want to risk a false assumption that his own safety would outweigh what Sejanus falsely saw as ‘the greater good’.

“Are you… How are you feeling?” Sejanus asked.

His eyes searched his face with sincere concern. Coriolanus felt suddenly that any thought of Billy Taupe’s lackey or whatever business they had been meant to discuss was nowhere near Sejanus’ mind anymore. This had worked out perfectly.

In his mind he celebrated, but he put on his most pitiful expression.

There were a few girls back at school who would purposefully lock their knees during assemblies and events where it was expected they would stand. They’d eventually swoon, sometimes into the arms of the nearest conveniently-available, attractive boy or girl for their care and attention. Coriolanus had always feigned concern, wanting to keep up a chivalrous, respectful appearance while internally rolling his eyes at their transparency. He was reminded of those girls by himself now, only their actions would have been a lot more respectable if they had been trying to prevent treason rather than get out of a long meeting.

He channeled the shamelessness of one of those schoolgirls as he forced his voice to waver. “I’m–I’m fine, Sejanus, really.”

His friend took the bait. “You don’t look fine,” He cringed at his own words. “I just mean, you should tell me what happened. You can talk to me, Coryo.”

Coriolanus didn’t really have a good response for what could have triggered such an outburst from him, because he really couldn’t think of anything that could, barring any extremes. “Nothing happened.” He deflected.

Sejanus frowned. “Was it something to do with Lucy Gray? Did one of Bouras’ crowd say something to you?”

These were the kinds of things Sejanus thought would cause such hysteria in him? It was almost insulting. “I said, nothing happened.”

“It can’t have been nothing,” Sejanus pried. He then seemed to remember himself, perhaps realizing that his prying was unwelcome. “I’m sorry. I’m only worried. Has… has this ever happened before?”

Coriolanus really wanted to get away from any sort of reasoning. “Do we have to discuss it, Sejanus?”

This sidestep only seemed to elevate his friend’s concern. “Yes, yes we do, Coryo– look at yourself!”

An old, primal instinct of self-image preservation took over and he scrubbed his face with the handkerchief, smoothing his clothes.

“No, that’s not what I—" Sejanus sighed, then seemed to debate himself internally. It was unclear whether he lost or won. “We can talk about it later. I’m just not sure how to help you if I don’t know what’s upset you. Do you need to go back to the barracks?”

Coriolanus considered this. It would certainly be the most effective way to shut down Sejanus’ fraternization, but he had been hoping to spend some time with Lucy Gray that night. She was going to ask questions if she noticed he’d run off in the middle of her cousin’s set without returning.

The decision was taken from him as a figure exited the main doors of the building. He made no noise, and Sejanus, back turned and oh-so-focused on Coriolanus, didn’t notice the eyes glaring at him. The man from earlier must have seen them leave, or come looking. He made no advances forward, only watching them. He was probably too wary to approach him when another peacekeeper was around, or too smart to approach him when someone with an ounce of common sense was around.

“Coryo…?” Sejanus’ eyes scanned his.

Coriolanus watched the man take out a cigarette and light it.

“Yes. The barracks. I should leave. You really don’t need to come with me, though. Please, go enjoy yourself.” He added, knowing the offer would not be taken up.

In fact, Sejanus looked offended at the idea. “No. I mean, of course, I’ll come with you. I could use an early night, anyways.”

Coriolanus frowned in performative courtesy. “Are you certain?”

“Of course,” Sejanus gently took his arm, leading him to the path although it was unnecessary now that they’d left the crowded building and he wasn’t feigning dissociation. “I could use the rest.”

If Sejanus saw his would-be associate observing them as they left, he didn’t show it. The entire ordeal was finished in quite a short amount of time. However temporarily, Coriolanus’ act had saved them both an unknowable amount of trouble.

He just hoped he wouldn’t be forced to repeat it.

End Notes

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