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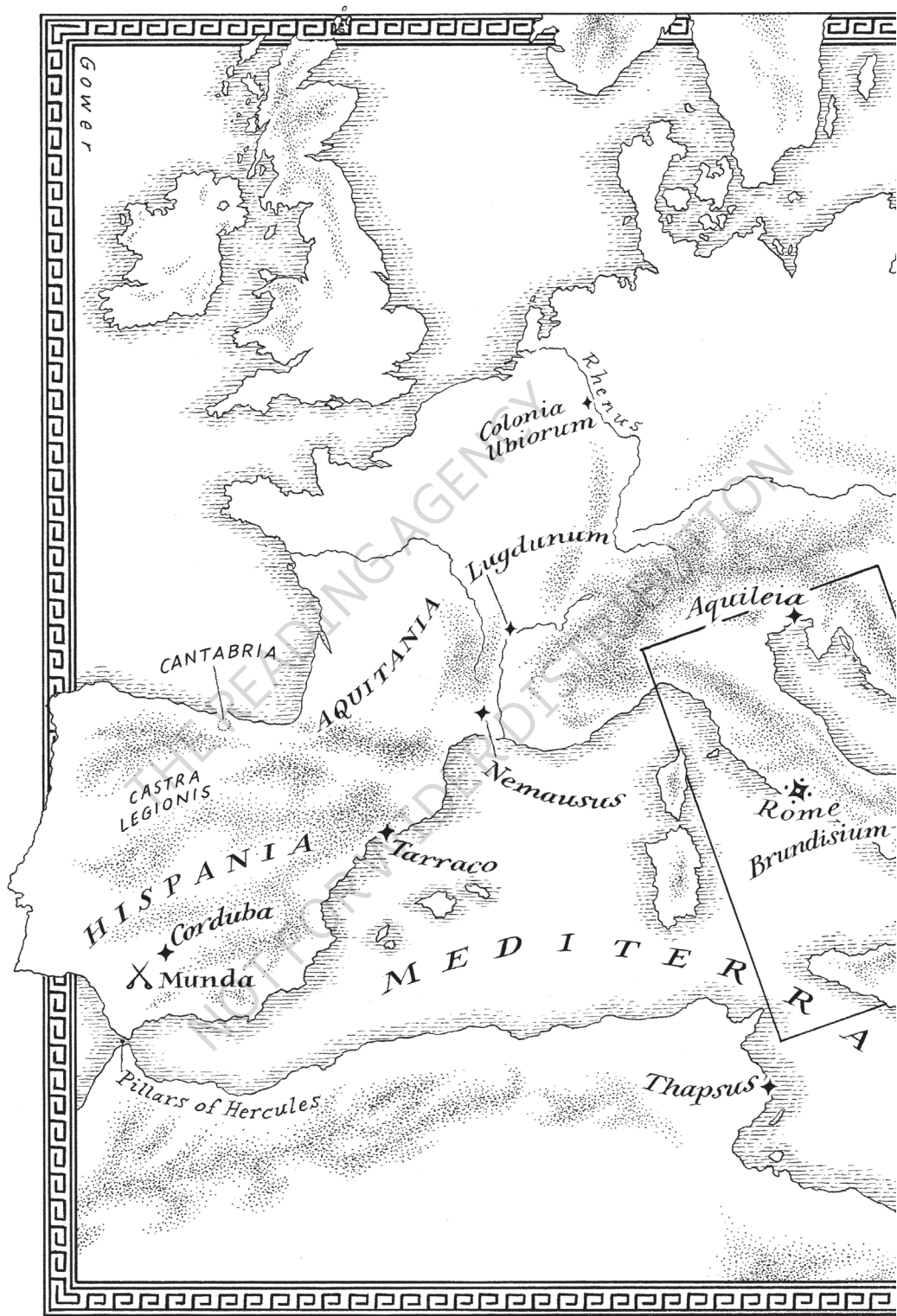
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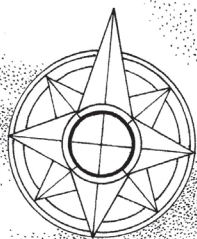


To Gill, again

THE READING AGENCY
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AGRIPPA'S WORLD





I

I came into the world feet-first – a dangerous way to arrive.

Aegri partus, the doctors call it. A painful birth.

My mother did not survive.

My first two names are Marcus Vipsanius. But no one, however intimate, has ever used them. I am known – and have been for fifty years, ever since I was hauled by my heels from my mother's corpse – as *Agrippa*.

As soon as I was old enough to understand the meaning of my name, I pestered my family to discover who had bestowed it.

I wonder about it still.

Was it my father, who was always cold towards me? Did he imprint upon my forehead a brand heated red-hot by grief and resentment, while I lay helpless and unknowing in my cot?

Or was it my older brother and sister, struck motherless, who heard the words *aegri partus* whispered by grieving adults, and whose childish voices ran the words artlessly together to form a name that stuck?

All claimed not to remember, and the answer now lies beyond discovery. In any case, it does not matter.

What matters are its effects.

When I left the nursery in my seventh year and went out into the world of schoolboys, with their natural cruelty and taunts – *Agrippa, Agrippa, mother-killer!* – I was obliged to learn how to defend myself. Blessed from the start with a sturdy physique, and with the remote and brooding expression of a fighter, I would take on anyone who crossed me. Even on the rare occasions when I was beaten, I gained a reputation for reckless aggression that ensured I was left alone.

In time, the name ceased to be a mark of shame and became a badge of invincibility. I had survived a dangerous birth. I had defied Nature. My strength was supernatural. Over the years, this reputation has grown and hardened like armour around me, through all the wars in which I have fought – so much so that the mere name *Agrippa* spreading from man to man across a battlefield has often been enough to make an enemy sue for peace.

And it is this reputation that has led me, by an unexpected turn of events, at the age of fifty, to begin setting down my memories – something I swore I would never do.

One's name shapes one's character.

One's character determines one's destiny.

Three months ago, at the end of autumn, word reached me in Rome of an uprising in Illyricum, that rugged forested region immediately beyond the eastern Alps, infested with hostile tribes.

Augustus was in Greece. It therefore fell to me to decide what action to take. I immediately consulted our old mutual friend Maecenas.

I had fought in Illyricum with Augustus twenty years before. It had taken us two campaigning seasons to subdue the barbarians. I did not relish returning to fight them again in what would soon be the depths of winter. I was no longer in my prime. I had a suppurating ulcer in my right leg, the latest manifestation of an illness I cannot shake off. For the first time in my life, I felt exhausted. Moreover, my wife had just become pregnant with our fifth child. Ever mindful of my mother's fate, I wished to be with her during her confinement.

But to leave matters to fester in Illyricum risked losing all our former gains and could render north-eastern Italy vulnerable to invasion. Maecenas advised me that I should go at once and take control of the situation. Reluctantly I concluded that – as usual – he was right.

I asked him to keep an eye on Julia. He gave me a knowing look and promised that he would.

That night I told Julia.

My third wife is twenty-three years my junior, the only child Augustus has ever succeeded in fathering. We have been married for seven years. Our union was arranged purely as a matter of state policy, to provide male heirs for the succession. Even so, we were happy enough together, certainly at the beginning. Now, after producing four children – two girls and two boys – she complains of being weary of her role as what she calls 'the imperial broodmare'.

I promised I would return within six months at the latest, to be with her for the birth. She took the news better than I had expected. We passed a tender few days together before

the preparations for my departure were completed. Then I donned the red cloak of a general on active service and set off for the north.

The governor of Illyricum, M. Vinicius, an experienced soldier, already had at his disposal a force of seven legions: some thirty-eight thousand infantry and cavalry. I decided it was therefore only necessary for me to travel with a small escort.

We made fast time, frequently changing horses, riding from dawn till dusk. I was glad of my cloak, which concealed my bandaged leg, although I had to set my jaw whenever I dismounted so that my officers should not see my condition. When the doctor changed my dressing each evening, I had to clench my teeth to stop myself from crying aloud and alerting them.

By the time we reached the frontier at Aquileia, the first snows of winter were already falling across the mountains. The others were in favour of resting for a day or two. But that was never my way. I insisted we begin our crossing at once.

The following evening, I fell into a fever and had to be carried in a closed litter, half asleep and then wide awake whenever I was jolted by the pain. Of that journey through the Alpine passes I remember little. Fortunately, on the fourth day, as we began our descent onto the Illyricum plain, the fever passed, and I was just about able to haul myself back into the saddle.

The army was encamped near the town of Segestica, on the northern bank of the River Savus. Our scouts went

ahead to give notice of our approach, so that by the time we passed through the fortified gate, the legions had been assembled to welcome me. The roar as I removed my helmet and rode down the avenue between the centuries must have been audible for miles.

As soon as I had been shown to my tent, I summoned Vinicius and his staff, and asked for a full report of the situation.

According to our spies, the Germanic forces were hidden in the forest that lay across open country about three miles to the north. The best estimate of their strength was a hundred and ten thousand, roughly three times our number. We could either stay inside our stockade and wait for them to show themselves – we had plentiful supplies of food and water – or take the offensive.

What would Caesar have done?

I gave the order that we should prepare to attack the following day.

– And tell the men to make as much noise about it as they can.

That night it snowed. At dawn I was roused by the sentries with the news that a party of six barbarian horsemen was advancing towards our camp under a flag of truce. I gave the order to open the gate.

I received them in my tent, seated in my curule chair beneath my standard, my senior officers arrayed behind me.

They were clothed in animal skins. Their straggling hair and beards were matted into pelts. Their faces were heavily tattooed. They looked barely human. Their leader asked

through a translator in their guttural language if it was true that I was the Roman general Agrippa. I said that I was. He replied that out of respect for the way I had fought them twenty years previously, they were prepared to disperse their forces and try to settle their grievances by negotiation. They agreed to deliver hostages as a guarantee of their sincerity. It was all arranged very swiftly.

I ordered the army to stand down.

I stayed in the camp for a few more days, resting my leg, waiting for reports from our scouts that the enemy had indeed returned to their villages. It seemed they had. Vinicius asked if I believed they would keep their promise. I replied that they probably would – for now. But in the spring, they would be back, by which time we would have been able to bring in reinforcements. In the meantime, I proposed to return secretly to Rome, leaving my standard flying over my tent to maintain the pretence that I was still with the army. I told him to inform no one of my departure.

I left that night with my escort under cover of darkness.

We had to make haste to get back across the mountains before the snow closed the passes. We succeeded, and reached Italy four days later. It was important no one knew of my arrival. The German tribes had to be convinced I was still in Illyricum. My plan was to stop briefly in Rome, collect Julia and slip away unnoticed to our villa on the Bay of Naples, where the weather would be warmer, I could recover my health and she could have our baby.

The journey to Rome took another week. We reached the city at nightfall. I went at once to my house overlooking

the Tiber. My slaves were startled to see me. Worse than startled, I realised. Terrified. As I limped towards Julia's apartments, they scattered out of my path like pigeons and fluttered away down the shadowy passages.

I stopped outside her bedroom. I could hear voices. I opened the door a fraction and in the flickering lamplight and the glow of the fire saw all that I needed to see.

If it had been any other man, I would have drawn my sword, strode to the bed and finished him on the spot. But he was Tiberius Claudius Nero, the adopted son of Augustus, married to my daughter Agrippina, and the father of my grandson.

They were so engrossed, I closed the door without them noticing and left the house.

It is unseasonably cold on the Bay of Naples – incessant rain since the moment I arrived, the sky grey, the sea beyond my terrace dark. I am here alone. I have told the household staff to keep my presence secret. No one is to be admitted to my room, except my doctor. I take no food. I lie propped on my couch. My cloak serves as my blanket, my shield my desk. I cannot sleep. I think. I write. I remember.

PART ONE

Octavius

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II

The most significant event of my life, from which all the others were to flow, occurred shortly before my fourteenth birthday, when I was plucked from the rough and tumble of my grammar school and sent to an academy on the Palatine to further my studies in Greek, astronomy and mathematics.

How my father could afford the fees was a mystery. He was a fanatical Stoic, a follower of Cato. He disdained worldly matters and subsisted on a small income from a few shops and apartments he had inherited. I was the only pupil of plebeian rank. The others were all the sons of equestrian or senatorial families, with grand houses in Rome and estates in the country. They never asked me back to their homes after classes ended, and certainly I never thought of inviting them to our modest dwelling in the valley amid the tenements of Subura.

The only boy who was as unpopular as myself was a young lad half a year my junior, called Gaius Octavius Thurinus.

His name meant nothing to me. He was puny and round-shouldered, often absent through illness, and when he did attend, he kept himself aloof. He never spoke to me. I paid

him no attention. But one day when I arrived for the first lesson of the morning, I found him being set upon in the street by two much bigger boys.

I had been longing for a chance to fight ever since I arrived. I dragged them off him, knocked them both into the gutter and kicked them down the road. When I returned, expecting a word of thanks from their victim, he had gone.

Later that day, I asked another boy if he knew the reason why Octavius had been picked on. He looked at me as if I was a simpleton.

– Haven't you heard? His uncle has just invaded Italy!

– Who is his uncle?

– Julius Caesar!

I was dumbfounded. It was impossible to connect so feeble a figure as Octavius with the mighty conqueror of Gaul. When I got home that evening, I asked my father if it was true that Caesar had launched an invasion. He replied bitterly that it was, that Caesar was a treacherous, immoral gambler who had broken the most sacred laws and brought his army across the Rubicon to destroy the Republic and make himself dictator.

I did not mention that I had met his nephew – in fact, I discovered afterwards, Octavius was only his great-nephew – and I certainly did not mention the fight.

A tremendous panic now seized Rome. The fathers of most of my fellow students, like my own father, were loyal to the Senate. The city began to empty as they fled to join Pompey, supreme commander of the Senate's legions,

who had stupidly decided to abandon the capital and raise an army in the countryside. Soon our classes were only a quarter full.

To begin with, Octavius was also absent, and I wondered if he might have gone north to meet his uncle. But then one morning he slipped into the classroom, clearly nervous of his reception, and after looking around came over and took the place next to mine. For the remainder of the day he stayed as close to me as my shadow. Finally I decided to make a joke of it.

– You seem to have appointed me your bodyguard!

– I can pay you if you want.

I should have taken offence. Instead, I found myself laughing. I told him he could keep his money. And after that, we were friends.

Despite the difference in our social status, we discovered we had much in common. By temperament, we were both loners. I had lost my mother. He had no memory of his father, who had died when he was four years old after a long period of service overseas. I did not care for my stepmother. He did not like his stepfather. Our talents were complementary. He helped me with my classwork. I showed him how to fight.

Two months later, Caesar entered Rome, and lessons were suspended.

Terror spread across the city. I was forbidden by my father to leave the house. But I slipped out anyway and headed to the Forum in the hope of getting a glimpse of the man who had turned the world upside down. He was

rumoured to be inside the Temple of Saturn, the Republic's treasury, which was ringed with his troops, who were being watched by a large and silent crowd.

Soldiers up till then had been forbidden to enter the city while on active service. This was the first time I had seen so many gathered in one place. They were part of Caesar's legendary Thirteenth Legion – 'Gemina' – the veterans who had conquered Gaul and would follow him to the death. I can remember to this day the excitement I felt at the sight of their hard, thin faces staring straight ahead, pinched red in the cold; the dull glint of their chain mail and helmets, their shields and swords and lances; their smell of leather and steel and sweat. The only thing I wanted in life was to be one of them.

Presently there was a stir at the front of the crowd, and the doors of the temple opened. I managed to squeeze my way to the front in time to see a gaunt, grim, broad-shouldered figure emerge, bare-headed and almost bald, closely surrounded by bodyguards with drawn swords. There was no cheering or jeering, just a sullen silence on that chilly afternoon. The crowd shuffled back to let him through. He turned towards the Via Sacra, and I lost sight of him in the throng.

Years afterwards, I realised this must have been the famous occasion when he seized the state's reserves of gold and silver – fifteen thousand bars of the one, thirty thousand of the other – and told the youthful tribune who had been left in charge of the treasury that if he did not stand aside, he would kill him on the spot.

– And, young man, you know well enough that it wearies me more to say this than it would to do it.

My father was waiting for me when I returned home, and I was soundly beaten for disobeying his orders. But I did not flinch. As the blows fell, I gritted my teeth and thought of the men of the Thirteenth.

Such was my first glimpse of Caesar. It was to be my last for a long time. He did not linger long in Rome. Within a week he was gone, intent on crushing Pompey's forces, now mustering overseas. Out of the next two and a half years, he was in Rome for just eleven days.

The next morning, our lessons at the academy resumed, and with them, my friendship with Octavius.

He came into school bursting with stories of the hours he had spent with his uncle. Caesar had been away fighting in Gaul for the past nine years. It was the first time they had ever talked. They had dined together twice. They had walked in Caesar's gardens beside the Tiber. He had been shown the general's helmet, almost cleaved in two by a Gallic sword.

Caesar had no legitimate son of his own, although he was said to have fathered several by his many lovers. (His only child, Julia, who had been married to Pompey, had, like my mother, died giving birth.) Octavius's connection to him was entirely on the female side – he was the son of the daughter of Caesar's sister – and in truth therefore somewhat tenuous. But they were tied by blood, and clearly it had occurred to Octavius that if Caesar was to

prove victorious in the civil war, a glorious future might open before him.

This awareness changed him. Outwardly our friendship continued as before. But occasionally – if I went too far with a joke or grabbed him in a playful headlock – he would stiffen and give me a cold look, as if to remind me of his new dignity. Already I sensed my destiny might be entwined with his. I learned to curb my tongue.

And so we grew to maturity together, the years passing to the distant drumbeat of Caesar's victories. That summer, he subdued his enemies in Spain. The following March, as I turned fifteen and put on the toga signifying manhood, news came that he had landed in Epirus in north-west Greece in pursuit of Pompey. In September, we learned that he had annihilated Pompey's army at Pharsalus. What was left of the Senate bowed to the new reality and appointed him dictator in his absence.

It was around this time that G. Cilnius Maecenas entered our lives. (Such is his phenomenal memory that no doubt if he were here with me in Campania rather than back in Rome, he would be able to provide me with the exact date.) He was only five years older than us, but far more worldly. We had never encountered such an exotic creature before. His voice was high, his appearance feminine. He had long, curly golden hair and fingers bejewelled by rings. Although he claimed to be descended from the Etruscan royal family, he had little money and earned a living as a tutor in literature and philosophy. He was obsessed by genealogy and gossip and knew more about the ancestry of some of the

great families in Rome than they did themselves. A ridiculous figure. Yet he controlled his unruly pupils by his wit and cleverness quite effortlessly. He instilled in Octavius especially a lifelong love of poetry, although my literary tastes, to his despair, have always tended towards works on engineering and military history . . .

I digress.

Pompey by now was dead, murdered in Egypt by one of his own former officers. Yet still the fighting dragged on. For the first time I experienced the true agony of a civil war. Cato, the most implacable of the old Republicans, remained at liberty in Africa, and my elder brother, Lucius, to the pride of my father, was serving in the Republic's army. As Caesar's legions closed in to give battle, I still secretly wanted the dictator to win. But I also wanted Lucius to survive and come home.

News of Caesar's victory in Africa reached Rome in late April. As soon as his dispatch was posted in the Forum, I joined the crowd to read it. The Battle of Thapsus had been another massacre. Despite the Africans' use of elephants as cavalry, ten thousand of the Republic's army had been killed and thousands more taken prisoner. I hurried home to tell my father. I had never seen that unbending Stoic weep before. In the evening, he took me aside and spoke to me quietly.

– Will you ask your friend Octavius to enquire of his uncle if Lucius is still alive? And if he is a prisoner, whether Caesar will show mercy?

It must have been a bitter wound to his pride to have to

beg for his son's life from a dictator – and worse, to have to do so through me.

I promised to relay his message. The next morning, I raised it with Octavius. He said nothing, merely frowned and turned away. I feared I had overstepped the boundary of our friendship. But later, he sought me out.

– Forgive me, Agrippa. I needed to think it through. I have never requested a favour from my uncle before, and I cannot predict his reaction. But out of my fondness for you, I shall write to him today.

We did not refer to the matter again. Weeks passed. I heard nothing.

Gradually my father stopped pressing me for news. He spoke little now. He seemed greatly to have aged.

And then in the summer, word came that Caesar had returned from Africa and was approaching the gates of Rome. Octavius went out to meet him. The city was in tumult. That afternoon, the dictator addressed a great assembly of the people from the Rostra. I was too far away to hear him above the roars of adulation or even to see him clearly through the haze of heat and dust. Afterwards, he retired to his estate on the banks of the Tiber to rest, accompanied by Octavius and his family.

A few days later, I received a message from Octavius asking me to join him. I left immediately on foot, without telling my father where I was going.

Caesar's country property lay along the Via Campana, about a mile beyond the city walls. I remember how nervous I was, and how my anxiety mounted with every step.

The villa was heavily guarded. I handed Octavius's letter to one of the sentries at the gate and was told to wait while he went inside to make sure it was genuine. He returned accompanied by Octavius, who greeted me with an embrace and led me along the drive towards the largest of the several houses that lay scattered throughout the gardens. On the terrace of one of these, a curious collection of figures stood motionless in the sun, like a frieze on some ancient temple – men in pleated skirts, bronzed and naked from the waist up; women in flowing blue robes and elaborate golden headdresses.

I asked who they were.

– The King and Queen of Egypt, Ptolemy and Cleopatra, and their household.

– What are they doing here?

– My uncle's fucking her, of course. Didn't you know?

The exchange sticks in my mind because until then I had never heard Octavius use a crude expression.

– And what does his wife think of this arrangement?

He winked, and leered at me.

– His wife isn't here, is she?

– And the King of Egypt?

– He's Cleopatra's brother as well as her husband. He's only thirteen. He doesn't care what she does. They are a strange race.

We walked on through the villa and out into a courtyard where a fountain played. Beside it, a man in a straw hat and a loose white tunic was seated on a comfortable chair, his feet stretched out on a stool exposing hairless

sunburned legs, his head bent, reading. Two other men, holding documents – secretaries, I assumed – were standing nearby. Octavius nodded towards the reclining reader and pushed me forward.

– Caesar would like to speak to you.

I had half expected I might encounter him, but as we approached, my carefully prepared speech went out of my head, and I found myself gaping down at the dictator while Octavius introduced me.

Caesar looked up at me from beneath the wide brim of his hat. His face was half in shade. I could not see his eyes, but I could sense he was examining me. When he spoke at last, his voice was hard and rasping.

– So, you are Agrippa?

I stammered out some vaguely remembered lines that I was honoured to meet him.

– You petitioned us about your brother?

I cannot remember what I answered, or if I answered. Perhaps I simply nodded.

Caesar waited. At length, he ended the silence.

– It is customary to ask for mercy on one's knees.

I felt Octavius's hand on my shoulder again, gently pressing me down. But I could not do it. Looking back, it was foolish, adolescent, disrespectful – even so, I could not kneel. I suppose it had been bred into me in the schoolyard, to stand my ground whatever the consequences, even in the presence of the dictator.

Caesar removed his hat and scrutinised me. For the first time I felt the force of his gaze. He fanned his face. Finally

he beckoned to one of his secretaries, said something to him, and the man hurried off. He got to his feet.

– Tell your father Caesar sends his compliments.

And then he walked away, followed by his other secretary.

I stood alone with Octavius in the courtyard. It seemed to me I could not have made a worse impression. I started to apologise, but he cut me off.

– No need. I believe he likes you.

– How do you know that?

– Because you are still alive. And besides, look . . .

I turned.

From the interior of the villa, a figure limped – pale and haggard, dazed by his sudden emergence into the light, but still recognisable. My brother Lucius.