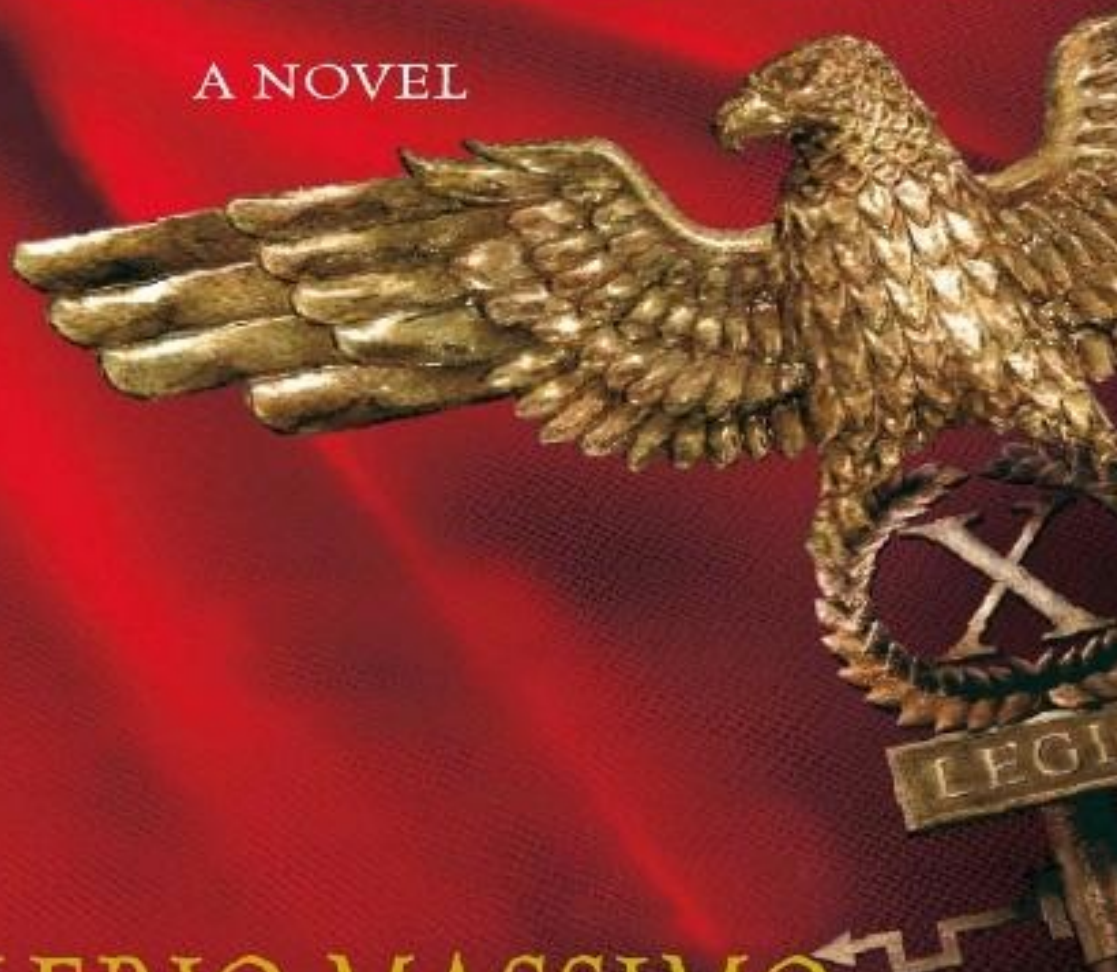


FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE LOST ARMY

THE IDES OF MARCH

A NOVEL



VALERIO MASSIMO
MANEREDI

VALERIO MASSIMO MANFREDI

THE IDES OF MARCH

Translated from the Italian by Christine Feddersen-Manfredi



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TO JOHN AND DIANA

Those who are about to die are dead, and the dead are nothing.

Euripides, *Alcestis*, 52

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Romae, ante diem VIII Idus Martias, hora prima

Rome, 8 March, six a.m.

THE DAY DAWNED GREY. The winter sky was heavy, leaden, the morning a mere hint of light filtering through the vaporous mass spreading over the horizon. Sounds were muffled as well, as dull and sluggish as the clouds veiling the light. The wind came down the Vicus Jugarius in uncertain puffs like the laboured breathing of a fugitive.

A magistrate appeared in the square at the south end of the Forum. He walked alone, but the insignia he wore made him recognizable all the same, and he was advancing at a brisk pace toward the Temple of Saturn. He slowed in front of the statue of Lucius Junius Brutus, the hero who had overthrown the monarchy nearly five centuries earlier. At the feet of the frowning bronze effigy, on the pedestal bearing his epitaph, someone had scribbled in red lead: 'Do you slumber, Brutus?'

The magistrate shook his head and continued on his way, adjusting the toga that slipped from his narrow shoulders at every flurry. He walked quickly up the temple steps, past the still-steaming altars and disappeared into the shadows of the portico.

A WINDOW OPENED on the top floor of the House of the Vestals. The virgins who maintained the sacred fire were busy with their duties, while the others were preparing to rest after their night-long vigil.

The Vestalis Maxima, wrapped all in white, had just left the inner courtyard and turned towards the statue of Vesta, which stood in the centre of the cloister, when the earth began to shake beneath her feet. The goddess's head swayed to the right and then to the left. The moulding behind the fountain cracked and a chunk broke off, falling sharply to the ground, the sound amplified by the surrounding silence.

As the Vestal raised her eyes to the wind and clouds, dull thunder could be heard in the distance. Her eyes filled with foreboding. Why was the earth trembling?

ON THE TIBER ISLAND, headquarters to the Ninth Legion, which was stationed outside the city walls under the command of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, the last shift was going off guard duty. The soldiers and their centurion saluted the Eagle and returned in double file to their quarters. The Tiber flowed turbulently around the island, her dark, swollen waters rising to wash over the bare branches of the alders that bent at her banks.

A HIGH-PITCHED, broken scream punctured the livid silence of dawn. A scream from the residence of the Pontifex Maximus. The House of the Vestals was practically adjacent and the virgins were thrown into panic. They'd heard the scream before, but each time it was worse.

Another scream and the Vestalis Maxima went to the door. From the threshold she could see the bodyguards, two enormous Celts, flanking the door of the Domus. They were apparently impassive. Perhaps they were accustomed to the screams and knew where they came from. Could they be coming

from him? From the Pontifex himself? The sound was distorted and mewling now, like the whine of an animal in pain. Hurried footsteps could be heard as a man approached the door carrying a leather bag and made his way past the two Celts, solid and still as telamons. He slipped into the front hall of the ancient building.

The rumble of distant thunder still sounded from the mountains and a stiff wind bowed the tops of the ash trees on the Quirinal. Three trumpet blasts announced the new day. The Vestalis Maxima closed the door to the sanctuary and gathered herself in prayer before the goddess.

THE DOCTOR was met by Calpurnia, the wife of the Pontifex Maximus. She seemed quite frightened.

‘Antistius, at last! Come this way quickly. We haven’t been able to calm him down this time. Silius is with him.’

Searching through his bag as he followed her, Antistius pulled out a wooden stick covered with leather and entered the room.

Lying on an unkempt bed and dripping with sweat, his eyes staring at nothing, his mouth drooling while his teeth were clenched tight and bared in a snarl, was the Pontifex Maximus, Dictator Perpetuo Caius Julius Caesar, in the throes of a seizure. The brawny arms of his adjutant, Silius Salvidienus, held him down.

Calpurnia lowered her eyes so that she wouldn’t have to see her husband this way and turned to the wall. Meanwhile, Antistius got on to the bed and worked the wooden stick between his patient’s teeth until he could force them apart.

‘Keep him still!’ he ordered Silius. ‘Still!’

He extracted a glass phial from his bag and placed a few drops of dark liquid on Caesar’s tongue. A short while, the seizures began to let up, but Silius didn’t release his hold until the doctor signalled that he could ease Caesar back down on to his back. The adjutant then gently covered him with a woollen blanket.

Calpurnia drew closer. She wiped the sweat from Caesar’s brow and the drool from his mouth, then wet his lips with a piece of linen soaked in cool water. She turned to Antistius.

‘What is this terrible thing?’ she asked him. ‘Why does it happen?’

Caesar now lay in a state of complete prostration. His eyes were closed and his breathing was laboured and heavy.

‘The Greeks call it the “sacred disease”, because the ancients believed it was the doing of spirits or demons or the gods. Alexander himself suffered from it, so they say, but in reality no one knows what it is. We recognize the symptoms and can only try to limit the damage. The greatest danger is that the person suffering an attack will bite off his tongue with his own teeth. Some have even been suffocated by their tongues. But I’ve given him his usual sedative, which fortunately seems quite effective. What worries me is the frequency of the attacks. The last one was only two weeks ago.’

‘What can we do?’

‘Nothing,’ replied Antistius, shaking his head. ‘We can’t do any more than we’ve already done.’

Caesar opened his eyes and slowly looked around. He then turned to Silius and Calpurnia.

‘Leave me alone with him,’ he said, gesturing towards the doctor.

Silius shot a puzzled glance at Antistius.

‘You can go,’ said Antistius. ‘There’s no immediate danger. But don’t go too far. You never know.’

Silius nodded and left the room with Calpurnia. He had always helped and supported her and was her husband’s – his commander’s – shadow. Centurion of the legendary Tenth Legion, a veteran with twenty years’ service, he had salt and pepper hair, dark, damp eyes, as quick as a child’s, and the neck of a bull. He followed Calpurnia out like a puppy.

The doctor put his ear to his patient’s chest and listened. Caesar’s heartbeat was returning

normal.

‘Your condition is improving,’ he said.

‘That doesn’t interest me,’ replied Caesar. ‘Tell me this instead: what would happen if I had such a fit in public? If I fell to the floor foaming at the mouth in the Senate or at the Rostra?’

Antistius bowed his head.

‘You don’t have an answer for me, do you?’

‘No, Caesar, but I understand you. The fact is that these attacks don’t give any warning. Or not that I know of.’

‘So they depend on the whims of the gods?’

‘You believe in the gods?’

‘I am the Pontifex Maximus. What should I tell you?’

‘The truth. I’m your doctor and if you want me to help you, I have to understand your mind as well as your body.’

‘I believe that we are surrounded by mystery. There’s room for anything in mystery, even the gods.’

‘Hippocrates said that this illness would only be called the “sacred disease” until its causes were discovered.’

‘Hippocrates was right but, unfortunately, the disease continues to be “sacred” today and will remain so, I fear, for some time to come. And yet I cannot afford to give any public display of my weaknesses. You can understand that, can’t you?’

‘I can. But the only one who can tell when an attack is coming on is you. They say that the sacred disease gives no warning, but that each man reacts differently to it. Have you ever had a sign or something that made you think an attack was about to take place?’

Caesar drew a long breath and remained silent, forcing himself to remember. At length, he replied, ‘Perhaps. Not any clear sign, nothing that is identical from one time to the next. But occasionally happens that I see images from other times, suddenly . . . like flashes.’

‘What kind of images?’

‘Massacres, fields strewn with dead bodies, clouds galloping, shrieking like Furies from hell.’

‘They might be actual memories, or simply nightmares. We all have them. You more than anyone, imagine. No one else has lived a life like yours.’

‘No, they’re not nightmares. When I say “images”, I’m talking about something I actually see in front of me, like I am seeing you now.’

‘And are these . . . visions always followed by attacks of this sort?’

‘Sometimes they are and sometimes they aren’t. I can’t say for certain that they are connected to my disease. It’s a sly enemy I’ve made for myself, Antistius, an enemy with no face, who pounces and strikes and slips away like a ghost. I am the most powerful man in the world and yet I’m as helpless as the face of this as the lowest of wretches.’

Antistius sighed. ‘If you were anyone else, I would recommend . . .’

‘What?’

‘That you withdraw into private life. Leave the city, public office, political strife. Others have done so before you: Scipio Africanus, Sulla. Perhaps the disease would let go of you if you let go of your daily battles. But I don’t suppose you’d ever follow my advice, would you?’

Caesar raised himself into a sitting position on the side of the bed, then swung his feet to the floor and stood up.

‘No. I can’t afford to. There are still too many things I must do. I’ll live with the risk.’

‘Then surround yourself with men you trust. Arrange things so that, if it should happen, someone will be there to cover you with a toga and there is a closed litter ready to take you where no one can see you. When the crisis has passed you will be able to return to what you were.’

doing as if nothing had happened. That's all I can say.'

Caesar nodded. ~~'It's good advice. You can go now, Antistius. I feel better.'~~

'I'd rather stay.'

'No. You must have other business to attend to. Send in Silius with my breakfast. I'll have something to eat.'

Antistius nodded. 'As you wish. Along with your breakfast, Silius will bring you a potion I'll make for you now. It will help to thin the humours of your spleen. That should provide some relief. Now, I'll be back and give those stiff limbs a little rest. When you feel stronger, a hot bath and a massage would be in order.'

There was no answer from Caesar and Antistius walked out with a sigh.

HE FOUND Calpurnia in the atrium, sitting in an armchair. She was still wearing her nightgown and she had not bathed or eaten. The signs of strain were evident on her face and in her posture. When she saw Antistius heading for the kitchen, she followed him.

'Well?' she asked. 'What do you think?'

'There's nothing new, but unfortunately I have the impression that the disease has taken hold. For the moment all we can do is seek to limit its effects. However, we can always hope that it will go away as suddenly as it started. Remember that Caesar is a man of great resources.'

'No man can weather so many storms of the body and spirit without suffering lasting damage. The past ten years have been as intense as ten lives and they've taken their toll. Caesar is fifty-six years old, Antistius, and yet he intends to embark on another expedition in the East. Against the Parthians.'

As the doctor was crushing seeds in a mortar and then setting them to boil on the stove, Calpurnia sat down. A maidservant began preparing her usual breakfast, an egg cooked under the embers and some toasted bread.

'And that woman is only making the situation worse.'

Antistius didn't need to ask to whom she was referring. Cleopatra VII, the Queen of Egypt, was living in Caesar's villa on the far side of the Tiber. He fell silent, knowing what would happen if he expressed any opinion at all on the subject. Cleopatra had even brought her child to the villa with her, a boy she'd dared to call Ptolemy Caesar.

'That whore,' Calpurnia continued, realizing that Antistius was not going to pick up on her invitation to join the conversation. 'I hope she drops dead. I've even had the evil eye put on her, but who knows what antidotes she's found to protect herself, and what philtres she's given my husband to drink to keep him bound to her.'

Antistius couldn't help but speak. 'My lady, any middle-aged man would be flattered to conceive a child with a beautiful woman in the bloom of youth. It makes him feel young, vigorous . . .'

Here his voice dropped off and he bit his tongue: not exactly the most diplomatic of things to tell a woman who had never been able to have children herself.

'Forgive me,' he added hastily. 'This is really no affair of mine. What's more, Caesar doesn't need to feel vigorous. He is vigorous. I've been a doctor my whole life and I've yet to see another man with such a hardy constitution.'

'Never mind. I'm used to hearing such things,' replied Calpurnia. 'What worries me is the enormous burden he is carrying. He can't keep this up much longer and I'm sure there are many men out there who would like nothing better than to see him on his knees. Many of those who feign friendship today would turn into bloodthirsty beasts tomorrow. I trust no one, you understand, would do that. Nobody.'

'Yes, my lady, I do,' replied the doctor.

He took his potion off the flame, filtered it and poured it into a cup that he set on the tray where the

cook was arranging Caesar's breakfast: fava beans, cheese and flatbread with olive oil.

Silius entered and took only the potion.

'Does he not want breakfast now?' asked Calpurnia.

'No. I've just spoken to him and he's changed his mind. He no longer wants to eat. He's gone out to the terrace.'

'YOUR POTION, Caesar.'

Caesar had his back to Silius, his hands on the balustrade. He was facing the Aventine Hill, from where a flock of starlings had risen like a dark cloud flying towards the Tiber.

He turned slowly, as if he'd only just realized that Silius was present. He took the steaming potion and set it on the parapet. After a few moments he lifted it to his lips and took a sip.

'Where is Publius Sextius?' he asked after he'd swallowed.

'Centurion Publius Sextius is in Modena, on your orders, Caesar.'

'Yes, yes, I know that, but according to my calculations he should be heading back by now. Has he sent a message?'

'No, not that I know of.'

'If a letter arrives from him, inform me immediately, at any time of day or night and no matter what I am doing.'

'You're expected shortly at the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus at the Capitol to offer sacrifice. If you're feeling strong enough, of course.'

Caesar took another sip of the potion and looked Silius in the eye.

'Of course. At times I forget I'm the High Priest of Rome and yet it should be my foremost concern. . . . No bath and no massage, then.'

'That depends on you, Caesar,' replied Silius.

'Remember: wake me, even if I'm sleeping.'

'Sorry?'

'If a message from Sextius arrives.'

'Of course. Don't worry.'

'It should be the first of my concerns . . .' he repeated, as if talking to himself.

Silius looked at him with a puzzled expression, trying to follow Caesar's meandering thoughts.

' . . . my priesthood, that is. And yet I've never believed that the gods care a whit about us. Why should they?'

'It's the first time I've heard you say such a thing. What are you thinking of, commander?'

'Don't you know why we burn victims on the altar day after day? It's so that the gods will see the smoke rising from our cities and remember not to trample them when they walk invisibly on the earth. Otherwise they would crush us as easily as we crush an ant.'

'What an interesting analogy, sir,' replied Silius. 'Antistius said to drink it all,' he added, pointing to the cup.

Caesar picked up the cup again and downed the potion.

'In fact, there is no smoke so black or so dense as that of scorched flesh. Believe me, I know.'

Silius knew as well. And he knew what his commander was thinking of. Silius had been at his side at Pharsalus and at Alexandria, in Africa and in Spain. Ever since Caesar had crossed the Rubicon, the bodies he'd seen burning had been those not of uncivilized enemies but of citizens like himself. The bodies of Roman citizens. Burned into Silius's memory were images of the battlefield of Pharsalus covered with the corpses of fifteen thousand fellow citizens, including knights, senators, former magistrates. From his horse, Caesar had scanned the field of slaughter with the eyes of a hawk. He had said, 'It's what they asked for,' but in a low voice, as if talking to himself, as if to clear his conscience.

It was Caesar who shook Silius from his thoughts this time, saying, 'Come now. They're waiting for us and I still have to get ready.'

They went down together and Silius helped Caesar to wash and dress.

'Shall I call for the litter?' Silius asked.

'No. We'll go on foot. The stroll will do me good.'

'Then I'll call your guard.'

'No, don't bother. Actually, I'm thinking I should get rid of them.'

'Of your personal guard? Why would you do that?'

'I don't like the idea of going around my own city with bodyguards. That's what tyrants do.'

Silius regarded him with amazement but said nothing. He blamed Caesar's strange attitude and behaviour on his illness. Could the disease be influencing the way he thought?

'After all,' Caesar continued, 'the senators have approved a *senatus consultum* in which they swear to shield me with their own bodies if my person should be threatened. What better defence could I ask for?'

Silius was dumbfounded. He couldn't believe what he was hearing and was already thinking of how to prevent Caesar from taking such a foolhardy decision. He asked to be excused, went down to the ground floor and instructed several of the servants to follow them at a distance with a litter.

THEY WALKED down the Sacred Way, passing in front of the Temple of Vesta and the basilica that Caesar was building with the spoils of his campaign against the Gauls. Although he had dedicated it two years before, driven by a sense of urgency even then, the work had not yet been completed.

It was a magnificent structure nonetheless, clad in precious marble, with a wide central nave and two aisles. The basilica was one of the gifts that Caesar had offered the city, but certainly not the last. Since his return from Alexandria, Rome no longer satisfied him. The city had grown in a disorderly, unharmonious way, building upon building, creating an impression of unseemly clutter. The imposing roads, majestic palaces and extraordinary monuments of Alexandria, which excited the admiration of visitors from every part of the world, were utterly lacking in Rome.

The Forum to their right was beginning to fill up with people, but no one noticed Caesar because he'd pulled his toga over his head and his face wasn't visible. They passed in front of the Temple of Saturn, the god who had ruled during the Age of Gold, back when men were happy with what the soil and their flocks offered them. Back when men lived in simple wooden huts, sleeping soundly after a modest meal shared around the with their wives and children, before waking to birdsong.

Silius found himself thinking that the age destiny had reserved for him was quite different: an age of ferocity and greed, of incessant conflict, civil strife, the slaughter of Romans by other Romans, citizens banished, exiled, sentenced to death. A violent age, an age of war and betrayal. And hatred between brothers was the fiercest and most implacable hatred of all, Silius mused, as he glanced over at Caesar's face, which was carved by the shadows of the toga that fell at the sides of his head. He wondered whether this man might truly be the founder of a new age. An age in which these seemingly endless hostilities would run their course and open on to an era of peace so lasting that it would make men forget how much blood had been spilled and how tenaciously their rancour had gripped them. He raised his eyes to the grand temple which dominated the city from the top of the Capitol.

The sky was dark.

Romae, in via Sacra, a.d. VIII Id. Mart., hora secunda

Rome, the Sacred Way, 8 March, seven a.m.

A MASSIVE BATTLE STEED came forth from the main gate of Alesia, its proud rider dressed in gleaming armour and wearing the *phalera* he had been awarded for bravery and valour.

Caesar waited, cloaked in red, seated on the magistrate's chair outside the camp fortification surrounded by his officers and legionaries.

The city bastions were packed with a mute, unbelieving crowd, who watched as their supreme leader went forth to give himself up.

The great warrior rode his horse once around the man who had defeated him, then dismounted and cast off his weapons. He threw them at Caesar's feet and sat down on the bare ground. By handing himself over to the Romans, he hoped to spare the city and the people he had ruled.

AGAIN: one of those flashes of memory that struck him with such force and frightening realism that he could not distinguish it from the physical world around him. He started when he heard Silius's voice.

'Are you not feeling well, commander?'

Caesar turned towards the Tullian prison. 'Why did I have Vercingetorix killed?' he murmured.

'What are you saying, commander? It's the law, everyone knows that. A defeated enemy is paraded behind the triumphal chariot and then strangled. That's the way it's always been.'

'But it's barbaric. Traditions . . . should preserve values worth preserving, not be a throwback to archaic, primitive times and ferocious customs.'

'I wouldn't say our times were any better.'

'No, they're not.'

'Commander, only one rule holds: "*Vae victis!*" Woe to the vanquished. One must seek victory always, as long as it is possible.'

'I just saw his ghost. Emaciated, with sunken eyes and a long beard. Madness in his eyes.'

'A man in your position should never be touched by remorse. Other men are held accountable for their actions, but you answer to no one, Caesar. You did what you felt was necessary. That's all. That's all there is to it. Remember when the battle seemed lost in Spain, at Munda? We were ready to die. Vercingetorix could have done the same and spared himself such an ignominious end. But deliberately taking your own life requires much more courage than slaying your enemies in the heat of battle.'

Without replying, Caesar continued on.

Silius hung back for a moment, watching as Caesar mounted the last ramp leading to the Capitol. His stride was energetic, resolute – a soldier's stride. He had weathered another attack and, anything, seemed more vigorous for it. Perhaps even now he was convincing himself that he could overcome this illness, just as he had overcome everyone and everything that had ever blocked his path.

The temple was open and the statue of Jupiter was visible inside. In reality only the head could be

seen at first, but as one walked up the ramp, the perspective changed and, little by little, the god revealed his chest, his arms, his groin, his knees. It was an ancient statue, its features harsh and angular, its beard stiff. An effigy designed to be frightening, or at least to inspire awe. Jupiter was flanked, in the chambers on either side, by statues of Minerva and Juno.

The two men approached the altar, where a small crowd was waiting. Some of them were senators, including several of Caesar's friends. Others, like Antony, were missing. His duties as consul must have been occupying him elsewhere.

The second and third rows were filled with commoners, all hoping for their share of the flesh after the sacrifice. The members of the Flamen College of Pontiffs, in full ceremonial attire, filed out from the temple door.

As soon as the Pontifex Maximus, his face still hidden from sight, reached the altar, the sacrificial animal was brought forward: a calf, three or four months old, with budding horns. One of the servants accompanying the animal carried an axe, the other held a tray of *mola salsa*, a mixture of salt and emmer flour, the food of the Romans' frugal ancestors. Caesar picked up a handful and sprinkled it on the calf's head. At his signal, the heavy axe fell on its neck with a clean stroke. The head rolled to the ground and the body collapsed, blood pumping out.

Ever since his return from the last war in Spain, Silius couldn't stand the smell of blood, not even if it came from an animal. He tried to take his mind off the scene by thinking about something else, but all he could come up with was the troubling news arriving from Syria and Spain, neither of which was completely pacified yet. He glanced up at the sky, which was getting darker and darker by the minute without dissolving into rain. Meanwhile, the thunder continued its low, distant roll over the mountains that were still capped with white.

The servants turned the calf on to its back and sliced open its chest and stomach so the haruspex could examine the bowels and interpret the omens.

Caesar was just a few steps away, seemingly absorbed in the scene, while his mind followed other paths. His illness. The expedition against the Parthians. The future of the state. Enemies still living, enemies who had died, the ghosts of the martyrs of the republic who tormented him still.

All at once, his gaze chanced upon the calf's lifeless head. He'd been careful to direct his eyes elsewhere, but that's where they'd been drawn, against his will.

Silius glanced over at him at that moment and their eyes locked. Both were thinking of the same thing: of Pompey's head, of the fixed stare of their great, defeated adversary. 'They had it coming' was what Caesar always said, time and time again. True, he'd offered Pompey an out, more than once, and Pompey had always refused, but the thought of the decapitated head of the great Roman preserved in brine was something that would never cease to weigh heavily on his heart.

And his mind.

Gossips had even been known to suggest that the young Egyptian king Ptolemy XIII – the husband and brother of Cleopatra – had relieved Caesar of a thankless but inevitable task by killing Pompey himself, thus giving Caesar the chance to publicly spill a few tears over his former son-in-law.

The haruspex had plunged his hands into the bowels of the sacrificial calf and was searching through the steaming entrails. His confident gestures suddenly grew confused and dismay was apparent in his eyes. He seemed to be on the verge of panic and the onlookers were becoming aware that something had gone wrong. Caesar noticed as well and drew closer to the haruspex. Silius also approached, overcoming his revulsion for the blood and the stench of slaughter.

'What is it?' Caesar demanded of the haruspex. 'What do you see?'

The ashen-faced priest stammered, 'The heart . . . I can't find the heart. It's a terrible omen.'

'Not another word from you,' growled Caesar.

Setting aside his toga and rolling his tunic sleeves up past his elbows, he sank his hands resolutely

into the animal's chest cavity. A dark gurgle and, for an instant, Silius thought he saw an anguished look of uncertainty in Caesar's eyes. But only for an instant.

Caesar had a basin of water brought to him so he could wash his hands and, as the water turned red, he said, 'It was covered with fat and was a bit smaller than normal. This man is incompetent and that makes him dangerous. Get rid of him. Now burn it all,' he ordered, to the consternation of the populace watching the sacrifice. 'The gods mustn't be kept waiting.'

He had another basin of water brought, finished washing and used the white linen cloth the servant held out to dry his hands.

Silius walked away and went up the steps towards the sanctuary portico. From there he could see the crowd of onlookers below, scattering and going off in different directions. A fire was lit on the altar and the animal was cut to pieces and burned in the flames. But that was of no interest to Silius; he wanted to be certain that the litter had been brought to the appointed place and that the men were alert and ready if needed.

He lingered, turning towards the interior of the temple, as if he meant to pay homage to the gods of the Triad standing straight and still in the shadows, when his attention was caught by something glittering on the purple cushion at the feet of the statue of Jupiter, so tall its head nearly touched the ceiling. It was a golden crown. A scroll carved into the wooden base proclaimed: TO JUPITER, THE ONLY KING OF THE ROMANS.

He glanced back at the altar, where Caesar was presiding over the traditional rites of purification which ended the sacrificial celebrations, then slowly walked down the steps again.

The clouds still hid the sun, parting here and there to show wisps of blue, only to close back instantly to grey. Silius waited on the south side of the steps until the Pontifex Maximus had finished saying his goodbyes and then accompanied him back to the Sacred Way. The litter followed at a respectful distance.

From the Forum they could hear the buzz of the crowd that had begun to gather for the day's business: shouting from vendors in the shops and pedlars on the street, a magistrate at the Rostres calling for people's attention.

'If you found the heart, why didn't you pull it out?' asked Silius.

'Rooting around in the bowels of a butchered animal is disgusting and there was no need for it. The animal was alive, so it must have had a heart. Do you know the story of Anaxagoras's calf?'

'I don't believe I do, Caesar.'

'Back when Pericles was just entering politics, there was a calf born in Athens with a single horn. Pericles consulted a seer, who told him that it was an omen. It meant that the people's party, which had two leaders, Pericles and Ephialtes, would soon be led by one man alone and that man would be Pericles. Anaxagoras the philosopher was immediately summoned to give his interpretation. He opened the animal's skull straight away and examined its brain, where he found gross abnormalities. He explained the true reason why the calf was born with a single horn: because of a physical deformation. There's always an explanation, Silius. And if we can't find one, it doesn't follow that we're looking at a miracle, but simply at our own ignorance and inadequacy. All it means is that we are unable to understand the reasons for whatever has happened.'

They had reached the base of the ramp, where the Sacred Way turned right towards the Temple of Saturn and the basilica. Caesar went to sit under the Ficus Ruminalis, which was just coming into leaf. Tradition had it that Romulus and Remus had been nursed by the she-wolf under this very fig tree. Caesar often chose to sit there quietly and listen to what passers-by were saying, without letting himself be recognized.

'What did you go into the temple for?' Caesar asked suddenly. 'To pray?'

'To read an inscription,' Silius replied. 'An inscription in front of a golden crown. I'd always heard'

about it and I was curious to see it for myself. It's the one everyone's been talking about, isn't it, commander?'

A few drops of rain thudded down and the smell of wet dust filled the air. Caesar didn't move; he knew the shower would soon end. Others ran for shelter under the portico of the basilica.

'Yes, that's the one that people couldn't stop talking about.'

'You had sent me on a mission to Capua that day, and when I got back I was never really able to piece together what had actually happened. I heard at least half a dozen different versions.'

'Which just goes to show that recovering the historical truth of an event is impossible. Not only the power of each individual's memory different, but the very thing that draws the attention of one man will completely escape that of another. Even if we concede that an individual is acting in good faith, he will remember only what made an impression on him, not what actually happened before his eyes. So, then, which version did you believe?'

'That you were attending the Lupercalia festival. Antony offered you the king's crown twice and twice you refused it. You arranged for it to be gifted to Jupiter, the only king of the Romans.'

'False,' replied Caesar.

Silius looked up in surprise. 'Do you mean to say you accepted it?'

'No. But that's not the way it happened. If Antony had truly offered me the king's crown, do you think he would have done so without obtaining my permission first, or without me asking him to do so?'

'It's possible that you asked him in order to have the opportunity of turning it down in front of a great number of people. To allay suspicions in a public way.'

'That's an intelligent explanation. You could dedicate yourself to politics, make a career of it, if you were a member of the senatorial or equestrian order.'

'That's not my intention, commander. I have the privilege of living next to you every day and that's enough for me.'

'Nonetheless, your hypothesis does not hit the mark. What happened was entirely unanticipated and the way events played out was governed, at least partly, by chance. I was seated at the tribune on the parade ground, the Campus Martius, watching the Lupercal priests running around with their strips of newly skinned goat hide and flicking them at women of fertile age. Antony was among them, running around half-naked . . .'

'Hmm. I can't imagine people were happy to see that.'

'You're right! You should have seen the faces of those who were around me. They were utterly scandalized. Cicero, most of all Cicero. You know, I can't blame him. Antony is my fellow consul and – from time immemorial – no one has ever seen a consul, in office, running around half-naked with a goatskin whip in his hand. In any case, it wasn't Antony who made the first move. It was Licinius, a friend of Cassius Longinus. Cassius himself was also there, along with Publius Casca.'

'Don't like any of them much,' mused Silius.

Caesar seemed not to have heard and said, 'Well, Licinius approached me and put the crown at my feet. The crowd in front of me started clapping wildly and calling for Lepidus, who was right there beside me, to place it on my head. But those who were further away – as soon as they realized what was happening – were in uproar. Believe me, it wasn't applause or enthusiasm. They were yelling out in protest and outrage. Lepidus hesitated.'

Silius didn't comment. Instead, he seemed to be watching a small group of acrobats who were entertaining passers-by and begging for coins.

Caesar continued, 'I didn't make a move. At this point Cassius approaches and puts the crown on my knees. The same reaction from the crowd – part applause and part booing. It's clear that those who were clapping had been asked, and paid, to do so. I realized that the whole scene had been staged and

was determined to find out who was behind it. I looked into the faces of those around me, so I could commit them all to memory, but most of them were my friends – officers, veterans of my military campaigns, people I'd aided and assisted in every way.'

'I wouldn't count too much on their friendship if I were you,' Silius remarked.

'The crown Cassius had set on my lap started to slip and then fell to the ground. I won't deny that I did nothing to stop it from slipping. And that was the crucial moment. I knew that the man who stooped to pick it up and offer it to me once again would be the man who was most bent on my ruin.'

Silius admired Caesar's acumen and was struck by what an extraordinary man Caesar was. The spectre of the disease had faded entirely. Or at least no traces of the episode lingered. Caesar always became animated when he was talking about a critical moment in his life. The more difficult, deceitful, or dangerous the game was, the more it excited him.

'And?' Silius prompted.

'That was when the unforeseeable happened. Antony ran up at just that moment – panting, overheated, drenched in sweat. He saw the crown fall to the ground and he stopped. He picked it up, climbed the steps of the tribune and put it on my head. Can you believe it? He'd spoiled the whole thing! I was so furious I ripped it off my head and flung it away. But I knew I had to say something. An event of such significance could not end like that without a word from me. And so I got up, raised my hand to ask for silence and, when I had it, I said, "The Romans have no king but Jupiter and it is to him that I dedicate this crown." Then applause thundered through the parade ground, waves of applause as my words reached those who were furthest away. But I was looking carefully at the faces of the people nearest me to see which of them looked disappointed or irritated by my gesture.'

'Well? Who reacted?'

'No one. I saw nothing of the sort. But I'm sure someone there was cursing fate, exactly as I was. When Antony set off at a run again without even having realized what he'd done, I believe, and so the ceremony was ended. That's the story behind the inscription you saw at the temple.'

Caesar rose to his feet then and began walking again towards the Domus. Silius was careful never to leave his side, well aware that he was Caesar's only bodyguard. He was very worried by the fact that Caesar had dismissed his Hispanic guard and could not fathom why he'd decided to make such a move. Caesar's explanation did not convince him, so he tried to imagine what might be behind such a decision. Perhaps the incident at the Lupercalia festival had influenced him: only kings – or tyrants – were accompanied by a personal guard. Perhaps, by making such a grand gesture, Caesar thought he could allay any suspicions about his ambitions. At least that explanation made sense. Silius hated to think that he'd given up on his bodyguard because of his illness. After all, Caesar was a nobleman, a man of power accustomed to risking it all, both in politics and on the battlefield. He would perceive suicide as a natural option if he felt that all was lost. But if he'd really rather die than show signs of weakness in public, he would surely use his own dagger.

There was another possibility. Caesar's intelligence was matched only by his cynicism, so perhaps he'd dismissed his official guard and established a second, invisible force who could watch over him while passing unnoticed.

There was a further unanswered question on Silius's mind: what was Publius Sextius – the centurion known as 'the Cane' – up to? Caesar himself had sent the officer north, to Cisalpine Gaul. But Silius faithfully fulfilled his given task of maintaining contact with Publius Sextius, who was currently in Modena, and passing on any news to Caesar, he remained puzzled about the true nature of the man's mission. All he knew was that any dispatch from the north was of top priority. The messages were in code, obviously, and could be read only by the high commander himself.

Publius Sextius the war hero. The most valiant soldier of the republic. When Caesar had celebrated his Quadruple Triumph in Rome, Publius Sextius had paraded bare-chested to show off his

decorations: the ghastly scars that criss-crossed his chest.

~~He was the senior centurion of the Twelfth Legion and had survived incredible ordeals. During the campaign in Gaul, in the battle against the Nervii tribe, he had fought on unflaggingly despite numerous wounds, barking out orders, inciting his legion to regroup and launch a counter-attack. The day finished in victory. After the battle, he was moved to a military camp where he could recover from his injuries, but when the camp came under siege, food and supplies were cut off for days on end. Nonetheless, when the enemy succeeded in breaking through the gate, there he was at the entrance of his tent in full armour. What he did next was the stuff of legends. Although he could barely stand, he convinced the others to join him in fighting off the enemy. When he was wounded again in close combat, his men managed to pull him out of the fray and drag him to safety.~~

Reduced to skin and bones, more dead than alive, he struggled through a long convalescence, regained his strength and returned to his place in the ranks. It was men such as Publius Sextius who had built the Roman Empire. And there were plenty more like him on both sides of the political divide, separated by their beliefs and by their allegiances during the Civil War.

Publius Sextius had earned his nickname, 'the Cane', because he never parted with the emblem of his rank: the sturdy cane of a grapevine, used to toughen up the young recruits. A man of unshakeable loyalty, he was one of the very few people Caesar knew he could trust blindly. He was indestructible, a man who didn't know the meaning of fear. The mission he was carrying out must be of exceptional importance, because Caesar asked for news of him constantly. Silius couldn't help but wonder exactly what was he doing up north. What task had the centurion been entrusted with?

As Silius followed this train of thought, he realized they'd already reached the doors to the Domus with the litter following about twenty steps behind them.

Before entering, Caesar turned towards him and said, 'Remember, at any hour of the day or night.'

'Of course, commander.' Silius nodded. 'At any hour of the day or night.'

And while Caesar was being welcomed by the gatekeeper, Silius went to his office to check on the commander's appointments scheduled for that day.

Just then the storm that had been threatening since dawn finally broke in an explosion of roaring thunder and pelting water. The big square emptied instantly and the marble pavement became as shiny as a mirror under the pouring rain.

Mutinae, a.d. VIII Id. Mart., hora secunda

Modena, 8 March, seven a.m.

THE FOG THAT rose from the rivers, from the earth and from the rain-damp meadows had veiled everything: the fields and the vineyards, the farms scattered through the countryside, the stables and haylofts. Only the tips of the tallest trees emerged – the ancient oaks, elms and maples that had seen Hannibal and his elephants pass this way. Now the bare silent giants watched over the colonized land which bore the marks of Roman centuriation: the plots were edged by long rows of poplar trees and by boundary stones identified by consecutive numbers and by direction.

Here and there farmers were at work pruning the grapevines which dripped milky tears, the sap already flowing through their veins in anticipation of the still-mute spring. Towards the west rose the walls of the city, their dank blocks made of grey hewn stone from the Apennines. To the south loomed the snowcovered peak of Mount Summano, a towering pyramid with a blunted top.

Suddenly a figure materialized in the fog – a man of sturdy build, his head and shoulders covered by a military cloak. He held a cane in one hand and wore heavy, mud-caked boots. He advanced on foot leading his horse by the reins, down a path which led to a modest brick building whose curved clay roof tiles were adorned at the centre by a Gorgon's mask. It was a small rural sanctuary dedicated to the nearby spring, which shot out of the ground a cubit high before gurgling away into a ditch which became lost to sight as it snaked through the countryside.

The man stopped at the temple wall and looked around as if he were expecting someone. The sun appeared through the misty haze as a pale disc, casting a milky light on the scene. The fields seemed deserted.

All at once, a voice rang out behind him.

'Fog is a friend to certain encounters and in this land it is never lacking.'

'Who are you?' asked the man in the cloak, without turning.

'My code name is Nebula, my friend. No stranger to fog myself, as my name attests.'

'What news do you have for me?'

'I'll need a password before I can give you any. Better to be prudent in such times.'

'Aeneas has landed.'

'That's right. Which means I'm speaking with a living legend: front-line centurion Publius Sextius of the Twelfth Legion, known as "the Cane", hero of the Gallic War. They say that at Caesar's triumph you paraded bare-chested to show off your battle scars. It seems to be impossible to kill you.'

'Wrong. We're all mortal. You just have to strike at the right spot.'

Publius Sextius turned to face his interlocutor.

'No. Don't,' said the voice. 'This is dangerous work. The fewer people see my face the better.'

Publius Sextius turned back towards the countryside. Stretching out before him were long rows of maples, to which the grapevines were tied. Dark against the brilliant green meadows.

‘Well, then?’

‘Rumours.’

‘That’s all you have to tell me? Rumours?’

‘These are quite consistent.’

‘Get to the point. What rumours are you talking about?’

‘One month ago someone approached the authorities of this city to obtain their support for the Cisalpine governor who will be named next year. These same authorities are in close contact with Cicero and other influential members of the Senate.’

A dog barked from a farmhouse that was wrapped in fog, making it look as if it was further away than it was in reality.

He was promptly answered by more barking and then a third dog joined in. They stopped suddenly and silence fell again.

‘Sounds like ordinary politicking to me. In any case, what does that have to do with my mission?’

‘More than it may seem,’ replied Nebula. ‘The Senate have already decided who they will appoint governor. Why are they seeking the support of the local authorities for this coming year? But that’s not all. You’ll have noticed that there is construction work going on in the city.’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘They are reinforcing the city walls and building emplacements on the turrets for war machines. War against whom?’

‘I have no idea. Have you?’

‘If they’re not expecting an invasion from outside, and I don’t think they are, it’s likely that what they’re afraid of is a new civil war. And that suggests a very specific scenario. Quite a disturbing one. I might add.’

‘A scenario where Caesar is out of the picture, is that what you’re trying to say?’

‘Something of the sort. What else?’

‘Who will the new governor be?’

‘Decimus Brutus.’

‘Almighty gods!’

‘Decimus Brutus is, at this moment, assistant praetor and therefore, as I’ve said, has already been designated to take the office of governor next year. So why would he need to build up local support or reinforce the walls of Modena unless he knows that Caesar will no longer be around?’

Publius Sextius snorted and a burst of steam issued from his nose. It was still quite cold for the season.

‘Sorry, but I’m still not convinced of what you’re saying.

‘Couldn’t the work on the walls just be ordinary maintenance?’

‘There’s more,’ continued Nebula.

‘All right. Now we’re getting somewhere. Let’s hear.’

‘This is information that will cost you.’

‘I don’t have much money with me, but I do have this,’ said Publius Sextius, his hands flexing the cane that was a symbol of his rank.

‘What do you suppose I care about that?’ shot back Nebula.

‘Don’t think you can intimidate me. I’ve been doing this for a long time.’

‘I’m not leaving here until you tell me what I need to know. I was assured that I would be getting important information from you and get it I will. You decide how.’

Nebula fell silent for a long moment, weighing his options. When he began to speak again, it was a different voice, as if he were another person. ‘Give me whatever you can, please. I need money. I’ve spent a fortune to get this information and risked my neck as well. I’ve had to take out a loan and if

don't pay them back they'll slaughter me.'

'How much do you need?'

'Eight thousand.'

Publius Sextius opened one of the bags hanging from his horse's rump and handed over a satchel.
'Five thousand. It's all I have for now, but if you give me the information I need you'll get twice that.'

'Publius Sextius is known as a man of his word,' said Nebula.

'That's the truth,' replied the centurion.

'Six months ago, at Narbonne, after the Battle of Munda, while Caesar was still in Spain, someone was working on a plot to murder him.'

'I've heard the rumours.'

'We all have. But I have proof not only that the plot was put into effect but also that it may still be active.'

'Names.'

'Caius Trebonius.'

'I know him. And?'

'Cassius Longinus and Publius Casca, and maybe his brother. Those are the names I'm sure of. I also believe that Caesar himself knows something, or at least suspects something, though he's not letting on. But there's one name he doesn't know and this is the true shocker. At Narbonne, Trebonius asked Mark Antony if he wanted to join the party.'

'Watch out, Nebula. Words are stones.'

'Or daggers. In any case, Antony refused the invitation and has never made any further mention of it.'

'How can you be certain?'

'If Antony had spoken, do you suppose Trebonius would still be around?'

'All right. But how much can we conclude from that? What I'm interested in is knowing whether this plot is still active. I want proof. The rumour is out and it's impossible that Caesar hasn't heard of it. What you've told me regarding Antony disturbs me. Did you hear about what happened at the Lupercalia?'

Nebula nodded. 'Everyone knows about it.'

'Fine. In the light of what you've just told me, Antony's behaviour is suspect. He offered Caesar the king's crown in front of the people of Rome. I would call that provocation, or, worse, a trap. Caesar's reaction confirms it. Antony is no fool. He wouldn't have done such a thing without a reason. One thing is certain: if Caesar had known what Antony was planning before it happened, he would have stopped him.'

'I could learn more, but I need time.'

'There's no saying we've got the time. The situation might come to a head at any moment.'

'You may be right about that.'

'Well, then?'

'There is a solution. Don't wait here any longer. You leave now for Rome, taking a route that will allow me to reach you with messages and information.'

'That's unlikely. I'll be moving fast.'

'I have ways and means.'

'As you wish.'

'In the meantime, I'll look for more proof.'

'Do you have something specific in mind?'

'Yes. But it's still entirely hypothetical. In any case, before I take action of any sort, there's something very important that I need to know.'

‘What’s that?’

‘Who sent you here? Who are you working for?’

Publius Sextius hesitated a moment before answering, then said, ‘For him. For Caesar.’

‘What is your mission? To find out if a plot exists?’

‘Not as such. My immediate instructions are to contact several army officers who have informed that they have infiltrated at the court of the Parthian king. I’m to provide Caesar’s general staff with advance information regarding the routes the expedition will take, procure special maps and see that they get to Rome.’

‘So then what are we talking about?’

‘My task is twofold. I’m also to discover if there is a plot and who the conspirators are. First name, last name, clan name, family name.’

‘Is it Caesar who wants to know?’

‘This may surprise you, but no. It’s a very high-ranking person who happens to be extremely interested in Caesar’s state of health. Add to that that I’m just as interested. I’d give my life for him.’

‘Fine. Even if you won’t tell me his name, the fact of this person’s “extreme interest”, as you say, is a further sign that the plot may very well be active and ready to go into effect at any moment.’

‘Caesar is preparing an expedition against the Parthians. It’s plausible to think that this might be the best moment to act against him. If he were to win, his prestige would increase beyond measure.’

‘You’re right. And Decimus Brutus should be departing with him, as the second in command of the Twelfth Legion . . .’

Publius Sextius bowed his head in a pensive gesture. The screeching of birds broke through the fog before he saw their dark shapes streaking like shadows across the heavy, humid sky.

‘Decimus Brutus . . . one of his best officers. One of the few friends he trusts,’ he whispered. ‘Who could have convinced him to . . .’

Nebula drew closer and Publius Sextius could hear the sound of three or four steps on the gravel path.

‘His friend Cassius, probably, or his namesake Marcus Junius Brutus. Or both.’ Publius Sextius felt like turning round but stopped himself.

‘Why, though? Caesar has never harmed either Marcus Junius Brutus or Cassius Longinus. He spared both of their lives! Why should they want him dead?’

Nebula didn’t answer at once, almost as if it were difficult for him to understand what Publius Sextius was getting at. A barely perceptible breath of air made the fog quiver as it rose from the ditches and the furrows in the ploughed earth.

‘You’re a true soldier, Publius Sextius. A politician would never ask that question. It’s precisely because he spared their lives that they may want to kill him.’

Publius Sextius shook his head incredulously. He couldn’t deny that things were beginning to add up. Trebonius inviting Antony to take part in a conspiracy. Antony just a few days earlier offering Caesar the king’s crown in front of a vast, excited crowd who reacted badly. Decimus Brutus acting as though there were a civil war to prepare for . . . Vague signals that were now suddenly becoming very clear.

‘We must warn Caesar immediately,’ Publius Sextius said suddenly. ‘There’s not a moment to lose.’

‘It’s best he be informed as soon as possible,’ agreed Nebula. ‘Even if it’s not certain that the conspirators’ plans are close to being carried out. There are further leads I need to follow up. I’ll let you know when to make the next move.’

‘Help me get to the bottom of this affair and you won’t be sorry. I promise you it will be the best deal you ever made. You’ll be able to retire and live in comfort for the rest of your life.’

There was no answer.

‘Nebula?’

He turned round slowly. Nebula seemed to have melted away, leaving no trace. Or was he behind one of those trees lined up in rows, watching him? Or inside the temple, perhaps, in some hiding place only he knew about, chuckling at Publius Sextius’s astonishment at such a vanishing trick? As the centurion scanned the land all around, he noticed a leather scroll tied with a string lying on the temple steps. He picked it up and opened it. It was a map of the route he was to follow to get to Rome.

At that moment the sun finally began to break through the fog and stripe the ground with shadows. Publius Sextius put a couple of fingers in his mouth and whistled, then watched as a bay horse promptly trotted up. He jumped on to its back and spurred the horse on.

‘No need to break your neck, centurion!’ rang out a voice.

‘It won’t be today, or even tomorrow.’

But Publius Sextius had already disappeared from sight.

Nebula came out from behind a stack of bundled twigs left by the men pruning the grapevine. ‘Then again, maybe it will,’ he said to himself.

Mutinae, in Caupona ad Scultemnam, a.d. VIII Id. Mart., hora tertia

Modena, the Scoltenna River Inn, 8 March, eight a.m.

THE RIVER RUSHING nearby, swollen by recent rains, was just as loud as the buzz of the regulars and the customers planning to spend the night. Nebula entered after wiping his boots on the mat at the entrance and crossed the nonetheless muddy floor of the inn, settling into a spot in a corner at the back near the kitchen. The person he was waiting for was not long in arriving.

‘Well? How did it go, then?’

‘There are two missions, not one. Both are vital for the man who holds supreme power in our republic.’

‘Where is your man now?’

‘He’s racing faster than the wind along the shortest route that leads back to Rome.’

‘What does that mean?’

Nebula gave a sigh, but said nothing.

‘All right. How much do you want?’

‘To get this information I was forced to go into debt and risk my very life.’

‘What a bastard you are, Nebula. Spit it out and let’s get this over with.’

‘He’s following a map that I made for him. I’m the only one who knows the route.’

‘How much?’

‘Ten thousand.’

‘Forget it.’

Nebula shrugged. ‘Too bad. That means I’ll have to make a hasty retreat before my creditors send me to the underworld. Into Pluto’s arms. But if I die, it’s all over, just remember that.’

‘Come outside,’ growled the other man, a veteran of the civil war who had fought on Pompey’s side. His arms had more scars than the paws of a wolf caught in a trap.

Outside, they walked over to a cart under the close watch of a couple of nonchalant but clearly armed thugs.

‘You can put the money on my mule,’ said Nebula, handing him a copy of the map.

The man stuck it into his belt, then smiled smugly. ‘Now that I think about it, it seems that two hundred ought to be enough.’

‘Do you really imagine you can screw Nebula? An idiot like you?’

The smirk disappeared from the other man’s face.

‘You think you’re so clever. You’ll be giving me all of it, down to the very last penny. There’s a key for reading the map and the fellow who’s got it works for you lot at the Medias horse-changing station. Weasel-faced guy named Mustela. He’s in with me on this, you see, and he’ll open his mouth only after you’ve given him my receipt for payment, which you’ll find in the usual place. By then I’ll be long gone. Oh, and by the way, Mustela is included in the price. He’ll do the walking, because you’d never manage it on your own.’

The man nodded, cursing under his breath, and transferred the money, all of it, on to the mule packsaddle. Nebula then mounted and set off at an easy trot.

‘I forgot to tell you,’ he added. ‘As soon as you have the receipt you’d better get a move on, because Mustela won’t wait long.’

Romae, in Domo Publica, a.d. VIII Id. Mart., hora quinta

Rome, the residence of the Pontifex Maximus, 8 March, ten a.m.

THE STORM had abated and, having gathered up his papers, Silius went from his office to Caesar’s.

‘There are documents here to be signed, commander.’

‘What are they?’ asked Caesar, raising his eyes from the scroll he was writing on.

Silius couldn’t help but notice that he was doing the writing himself, in contrast to his usual practice. Since the day they’d met, Silius had always seen him dictating his thoughts. During the Gallic campaign he’d even heard Caesar, on horseback, dictating two letters at the same time, for two different recipients. But since Caesar had returned from Spain he’d taken to doing his own writing, and he worked on correcting and revising his *Commentaries*.

‘All acts to be submitted to the Senate for their approval: decrees, appropriations, payments for the army, special financing for paving a road in Anatolia . . . the usual. And there’s correspondence.’

Caesar looked up sharply with an inquisitive expression.

‘Not from him, commander. Don’t worry. As soon as something comes in, it will be on your table the blink of an eye. Or it will find you wherever you are.’

Caesar continued writing, hiding his disappointment. ‘Who are the letters from, then?’

‘Pollio, in Cordova . . .’

‘Right.’

‘Plancus, in Gaul . . .’

‘Anything marked urgent?’

‘Pollio. The situation in Spain is still difficult.’

‘Let me see.’

Silius handed him Pollio’s letter, sent seventeen days earlier. Caesar broke the seal and gave the missive a quick look. Silius noticed his wide brow furrowing.

‘Nothing serious, I hope?’

‘Everything that happens in Spain is serious. Pompey’s followers are still strong and still looking for a fight, despite it all. At Munda I was ready to commit suicide.’

‘Yes, commander. I was there too, but in the end we pulled through.’

‘So many deaths, though . . . They’ll never forgive me for that. Thirty thousand Romans cut into pieces by my men.’

‘They had it coming, Caesar. They asked for it.’

‘I see you like reminding me of my own words.’

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