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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.

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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