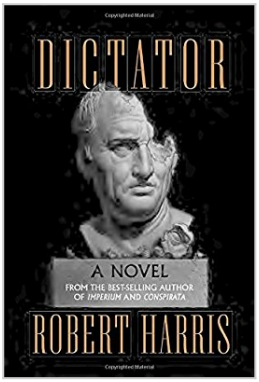

Dictator: A novel (Ancient Rome Trilogy)

By Robert Harris

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***Imperium* . . . *Conspirata* . . . and now *Dictator*—the long-awaited final volume of Robert Harris's magnificent Ancient Rome Trilogy**

At the age of forty-eight, Cicero—the greatest orator of his time—is in exile, separated from his wife and children, tormented by his sense of failure, his great power sacrificed on the altar of his principles. And yet, in the words of one of his most famous aphorisms, "While there is life, there is hope."

By promising to support Caesar—his political enemy—he is granted return to Rome. There, he fights his way back to prominence: first in the law courts, then in the Senate, and finally by the power of his pen, until at last, for one brief and glorious period, he is again the preeminent statesman in the city. Even so, no public figure, however brilliant and cunning, is completely safeguarded against the unscrupulous ambition and corruption of others.

Riveting and tumultuous, *Dictator* encompasses some of the most epic events in ancient history—the collapse of the Roman Republic and the subsequent civil war, the murder of Pompey, the assassination of Julius Caesar. But the central problem it presents is a timeless one: how to keep political freedom unsullied by personal ambition, vested interests, and the erosive effects of ceaseless, senseless foreign wars. In Robert Harris's indelible portrait, Cicero attempts to answer this question with both his thoughts and his deeds, becoming a hero—brilliant, flawed, frequently fearful yet ultimately brave—both for his own time and for ours.

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Editorial Review

Review
One of the Best Books of the Year: *The Guardian, The Herald* (Scotland), *The Sunday Times* (London), and *The Spectator*

“Harris is incapable of writing an unenjoyable book. . . . He captures the senselessness of triumviral intrigue magnificently, not relenting as the players meet their gruesome ends.”
—Maxwell Carter, *The Wall Street Journal*

“To render convincingly a period as remote as that of Cicero’s is a stiff challenge for a novelist to meet, but it is the measure of Harris’s achievement that we experience a 2,000-year-old crisis as though we were reading about it in a contemporary memoir. . . . Yet the real triumph of *Dictator* is how successfully it channels what is perhaps the supreme fascination of ancient Rome: the degree to which it is at once eerily like our own world and yet profoundly alien. The challenges faced by Cicero will be recognizable to many a contemporary senator: welfare dependency; the legacy of illegal wars; anxiety that a venerable constitution is no longer fit for its purpose. . . . If it is indeed a mirror that *Dictator* holds up to the present, then the reflections it offers are unsettling and admonitory. This is historical fiction that is the very opposite of escapist.”
—Tom Holland, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Harris gives ancient history the feel of an ongoing thriller, a true-life *Game of Thrones.* But for all the pyrotechnics, his depth and fidelity put him in league with Marguerite Yourcenar.”
—Boris Kachka, Vulture

“Cicero’s was a life rich in gravitas and drama, and Harris depicts it with erudition and élan. . . . Harris seems to have mastered every telling aspect of the world and the conflicts he dramatizes. . . . The new novel’s predecessors—*Imperium* and *Conspirata*—made ancient history exciting. *Dictator* goes even further, imparting wisdom and consolation.”
—Dennis Drabelle, *The Washington Post*

“Masterly . . . Harris’s version of the events preceding Caesar’s assassination is persuasively realized, and he renders the terrifying uncertainty of its aftermath with such skill that the ensuing betrayal and destruction of the Roman Republic can almost draw a tear. . . . the emotional heft is deeply satisfying.”
—Toby Clements, *The Telegraph* (London)

“[Harris] has a pitch-perfect ear for class snobbery, hypocrisy, parliamentary posturing and bluster. His best episodes bring crucial behind-the-scenes moments in Roman political skullduggery to colourful life. He writes with swaggering confidence. . . . Harris does not disappoint. His Caesar is a menacing, genocidal psychopath, but so charismatic that everyone in Rome, including Brutus and the other assassins, is left strangely bereft in the days of eerie crisis following the Ides of March. . . . I enjoyed *Dictator* enormously. Harris loves Cicero and communicates his own fascination with the epic showdown that constituted the fall of the Roman Republic. . . . A sensational political thriller . . . It is often funny and touching. I could not put it down.”
—Edith Hall, *The Guardian*

“[This is] one of the best political-military events in history and Harris takes full advantage of the time, the

place and the events. . . . this superbly structured and fast-paced novel brings the epoch alive, ties it in to current events and brings the cast of living characters—Caesar, Cleopatra, Mark Antony, et al. —to vivid brawling life. . . . Compared with this series of perfectly true events, Watergate really was a fifth-rate burglary and Richard Nixon's henchmen simply a gang of plumbers. You will read every one of its pages with relish."
—Margaret Cannon, *The Globe and Mail* (Canada)

"A remarkable literary achievement . . . A trilogy that is likely to stand alongside the works of Robert Graves and Mary Renault as an enduring imaginative vision of the ancient world."
—Stephanie Merritt, *The Guardian*

"There's a huge amount to enjoy in this Roman romp."
—Sam Leith, *Financial Times*

"A tremendous creation . . . Harris always tells a great story."
—Natalie Haynes, *Independent* (London)

"With *Dictator* Robert Harris brings his Cicero trilogy to a triumphant, compelling and deeply moving conclusion. The three novels are surely the finest fictional treatment of Ancient Rome in the English language. They are distinguished by mastery of the sources, sympathetic imagination, political intelligence and narrative skill. Harris has the unusual ability to combine amplitude with rapidity. . . . [*Dictator*] is a wonderful, dramatic story, wonderfully told. Even a reader who knows it well will be gripped, and respond to the tragedy. The author's research has been fully absorbed. He writes . . . as if he were crouched under a table, an unsuspected listener to the conversation. Everything rings true. . . . This last novel is complete and satisfying in itself. You don't have to have read the two previous ones to enjoy it . . . however if you come fresh to *Dictator*, you will surely want to go back to its predecessors."
—Allan Massie, *The Scotsman*

"[A] superb novel . . . compelling . . . thrilling . . . Informed by Harris's wide reading of classical texts and his intimate knowledge of current intrigue, [*Dictator*] proves that when it comes to ruthless politics, there's nothing new under the sun. It confirms Harris's undisputed place as our leading master of both the historical and contemporary thriller."
—Nigel Jones, *The Daily Mail*

"Masterful . . . Harris rises dramatically to the occasion . . . [*Dictator*] makes a moving end to Harris's superb trilogy, which does full justice to one of Rome's most interesting, complex and humane statesmen, whose pragmatic political treatises proved so influential during the renaissance and enlightenment."
—Peter Jones, *Evening Standard*

"[A] triumphant conclusion . . . chilling . . . Harris's depiction of Caesar impresses, but it is his portrait of his ambivalent hero that gives *Dictator* its real strength. . . . Harris has offered such richness of characterization and depth of vision. There is never any shortage of fiction about Ancient Rome, but Harris, in this book and its prequels, makes nearly all his competitors seem slightly simple-minded and unsophisticated."
—Nick Rennison, *The Sunday Times*

"A fitting end to a magnificent trilogy. . . . Does not disappoint—*Dictator* is just as sinuous, clever and compelling as the earlier books. . . . Hugely moving."
—Paul Connolly, *The Metro*

“Harris is not only a hugely successful writer of popular novels but a powerful writer about political practice. He starkly displays Cicero’s view of how the Roman Republic tottered from three-man to two-man to one-man rule, the stands of principle and struggles of compromise. . . . Harris has a delightful mastery of the political then-as-now.”
—Peter Stothard, *The Spectator*

“Robert Harris is an incomparable storyteller. Whether he is writing about Bletchley Park, Soviet Russia, the Dreyfus Affair or contemporary hedge-fund management, he builds up a convincing picture of the society he is describing. That is certainly true of his four novels about the Ancient World. . . . It’s a brutal tale of murder and mayhem and a tour de force of research and imagination which once again underlines Harris’ position as one of the UK’s leading writers of popular fiction.”
—Vanessa Berridge, *The Daily Express*

“Thrilling . . . The events and political upheavals of these years are some of the most complicated in ancient history. Undaunted, Harris remains impressively faithful to the ancient sources, embellishing the gaps with terse dialogue, exhilarating exchanges and witty observations of some of the lesser-known senators. . . . His novel often feels like the best kind of narrative history, at once frenetic but measured in its assessment of the characters who brought the Republic to an end.”
—Daisy Dunn, *New Statesman*

“Marvelously entertaining . . . [a] cracking good read . . . This is historical fiction that respects both history and fiction. . . . Harris’s recitation of these events is gripping, vivid and generates huge suspense even though the outcome is, ahem, well-known to history. . . .”
—Greg Dixon, *New Zealand Herald*

“[Harris is] the king of the political thriller. His dense plots, in which he deploys a masterly ability to organize complex material, require readers to pay close attention to elaborate twists and intricacies; his cool, crisp, unadorned style elevates the genre to a status that bridges the gap between commercial and literary fiction.”
—Caroline Baum, *The Sydney Morning Herald*

“A whopper of a yarn . . . highbrow beach reading.”
—Nicholas Reid, *Stuff* (New Zealand)

“Astonishing . . . striking . . . compelling.”
—Philip White, *The Huffington Post UK*

“Thrilling . . . [Cicero’s] story will powerfully stir the heart and mind, for it presents the coda to a life lived with intelligence and courage. . . . Harris never loses sight of his themes, or his protagonist’s relevance for today.”
—Sarah Johnson, *Booklist*

“Charming as well as engrossing . . . wise but not pedantic, moral but not sanctimonious, courageous but wary of the grandstanding of the martyr. In Harris’s hands, the principle actors emerge fully rounded. . . . Harris has written smart, gripping thrillers . . . but his Cicero novels are more akin to Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* in their subjects—men of towering intellect and humanity—and in their visceral evocation of history.”
—*Kirkus Reviews (starred review)*

“As skillful as it is sobering . . . With its complex historical context and searing scenes of violence, *Dictator*

is not easy reading. Yet its gripping dramas and powerful themes—the fragility of democracy and the fallibility of human beings among them—richly illuminate the conflicts of its era in our own."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"In *Dictator,* Harris musters all of his literary might and delivers a saga worthy of Cicero's quill. . . . *Dictator* considers questions of ancient and modern political relevance while keeping the reader on the edge of their seat. . . . Harris brilliantly brings each of his characters to life with a stroke of his perfectly poised brush. . . . While much has been written about Cicero over the past two millennia, *Dictator* will surely stand on its own as one of the best, a truly masterful work. Harris brings Cicero to life like no other historical fiction writer has before. One can't help but think that the old man himself would be proud with the portrait Harris skillfully paints. This isn't just a book; it's an event you won't want to miss."
—Carly Silver, About.com

About the Author
ROBERT HARRIS is the author of nine best-selling novels: *Fatherland, Enigma, Archangel, Pompeii, Imperium, The Ghost Writer, Conspirata, The Fear Index,* and *An Officer and a Spy*. Several of his books have been adapted to film, most recently *The Ghost Writer,* directed by Roman Polanski. His work has been translated into thirty-seven languages. He lives in the village of Kintbury, England, with his wife, Gill Hornby.

I

I remember the cries of caesar's war-horns chasing us over the darkened fields of Latium—their yearning, keening howls, like animals in heat—and how when they stopped there was only the slither of our shoes on the icy road and the urgent panting of our breath.

It was not enough for the immortal gods that Cicero should be spat at and reviled by his fellow citizens; not enough that in the middle of the night he be driven from the hearths and altars of his family and ancestors; not enough even that as we fled from Rome on foot he should look back and see his house in flames. To all these torments they deemed it necessary to add one further refinement: that he should be forced to hear his enemy's army striking camp on the Field of Mars.

Even though he was the oldest of our party Cicero kept up the same fast pace as the rest of us. Not long ago he had held Caesar's life in the palm of his hand. He could have crushed it as easily as an egg. Now their fortunes led them in entirely opposite directions. While Cicero hurried south to escape his enemies, the architect of his destruction marched north to take command of both provinces of Gaul.

He walked with his head down, not uttering a word and I imagined it was because he was too full of despair to speak. Only at dawn, when we rendezvoused with our horses at Bovillae and were about to embark on the second stage of our escape, did he pause with his foot in the doorway of his carriage and say suddenly, "Do you think we should turn back?"

The question caught me by surprise. "I don't know," I said. "I hadn't considered it."

"Well, consider it now. Tell me: why are we fleeing Rome?"

"Because of Clodius and his mob."

"And why is Clodius so powerful?"

“Because he’s a tribune and can pass laws against you.”

“And who made it possible for him to become a tribune?”

I hesitated. “Caesar.”

“Exactly. Caesar. Do you imagine that man’s departure for Gaul at that precise hour was a coincidence? Of course not! He waited till his spies had reported I’d left the city before ordering his army to move. Why? I’d always assumed his advancement of Clodius was to punish me for speaking out against him. But what if his real aim all along was to drive me out of Rome? What scheme requires him to be certain I’ve gone before he can leave too?”

I should have grasped the logic of what he was saying. I should have urged him to turn back. But I was too exhausted to reason clearly. And if I am honest there was more to it than that. I was too afraid of what Clodius’s thugs might do to us if they caught us re-entering the city.

So instead I said, “It’s a good question, and I can’t pretend I have the answer. But wouldn’t it look indecisive, after bidding goodbye to everyone, suddenly to reappear? In any case, Clodius has burned your house down now—where would we return to? Who would take us in? I think you’d be wiser to stick to your original plan and get as far away from Rome as you can.”

He rested his head against the side of the carriage and closed his eyes. In the pale grey light I was shocked by how haggard he appeared after his night on the road. His hair and beard had not been cut for weeks. He was wearing a toga dyed black. Although he was only in his forty-ninth year, these public signs of mourning made him look much older—like some ancient, mendicant holy man. After a while he sighed. “I don’t know, Tiro. Perhaps you’re right. It’s so long since I slept I’m too tired to think any more.”

And so the fatal error was made—more through indecision than decision—and we continued to press on southwards for the remainder of that day and for the twelve days that followed, putting what we thought was a safe distance between ourselves and danger.

We travelled with a minimal entourage to avoid attracting attention—just the carriage driver and three armed slaves on horseback, one in front and two behind. A small chest of gold and silver coins that Atticus, Cicero’s oldest and closest friend, had provided to pay for our journey was hidden under our seat. We stayed only in the houses of men we trusted, no more than a night in each, and steered clear of those places where Cicero might have been expected to stop—for example at his seaside villa at Formiae, the first place any pursuers would look for him, and along the Bay of Naples, already filling with the annual exodus from Rome in search of winter sun and warm springs. Instead we headed as fast as we could towards the toe of Italy.

Cicero’s plan, conceived on the move, was to make for Sicily and stay there until the political agitation against him in Rome subsided. “The mob will turn on Clodius eventually,” he predicted. “Such is the unalterable nature of the mob. He will always be my mortal enemy but he won’t always be tribune—we must never forget that. In nine months his term of office will expire and then we can go back.”

He was confident of a friendly reception from the Sicilians, if only because of his successful prosecution of the island’s tyrannical governor, Verres—even though that brilliant victory, which launched his political career, was now twelve years in the past and Clodius had more recently been a magistrate in the province. I sent letters ahead giving notice of his intention to seek sanctuary, and when we reached the harbour at Regium we hired a little six-oared boat to row us across the straits to Messina.

We left the harbour on a clear cold winter morning of searing blues—the sea and the sky; one light, one dark; the line dividing them as sharp as a blade; the distance to Messina a mere three miles. It took us less than an hour. We drew so close we could see Cicero's supporters lined up on the rocks to welcome him. But stationed between us and the entrance to the port was a warship flying the red and green colours of the governor of Sicily, Gaius Vergilius, and as we approached the lighthouse it slipped its anchor and moved slowly forwards to intercept us. Vergilius stood at the rail surrounded by his lictors and, after visibly recoiling at Cicero's dishevelled appearance, shouted down a greeting, to which Cicero replied in friendly terms. They had known one another in the Senate for many years.

Vergilius asked him his intentions.

Cicero called back that naturally he intended to come ashore.

"That's what I'd heard," replied Vergilius. "Unhappily I can't allow it."

"Why not?"

"Because of Clodius's new law."

"And what new law would that be? There are so many, one loses count."

Vergilius beckoned to a member of his staff who produced a document and leaned down to pass it to me and I then gave it to Cicero. To this day I can remember how it fluttered in his hands in the slight breeze as if it were a living thing; it was the only sound in the silence. He took his time and when he had finished reading it he handed it to me without comment.

Lex Clodia in Ciceronem

Whereas M. T. Cicero has put Roman citizens to death unheard and uncondemned; and to that end forged the authority and decree of the Senate; it is hereby ordained that he be interdicted from fire and water to a distance of four hundred miles from Rome; that nobody should presume to harbour or receive him, on pain of death; that all his property and possessions be forfeit; that his house in Rome be demolished and a shrine to Liberty consecrated in its place; and that whoever shall move, speak, vote or take any step towards recalling him shall be treated as a public enemy, unless those whom Cicero unlawfully put to death should first spring back to life.

It must have been the most terrible blow. But he found the composure to dismiss it with a flick of his hand. "When," he enquired, "was this nonsense published?"

"I'm told it was posted in Rome eight days ago. It came into my hands yesterday."

"Then it's not law yet, and can't be law until it's been read a third time. My secretary will confirm it. Tiro," he said, turning to me, "tell the governor the earliest date it can be passed."

I tried to calculate. Before a bill could be put to a vote it had to be read aloud in the Forum on three successive market days. But my reasoning was so shaken by what I had just read I couldn't remember what day of the week it was now, let alone when the market days fell. "Twenty days from today," I hazarded, "perhaps twenty-five?"

“You see?” cried Cicero. “I have three weeks’ grace even if it passes, which I’m sure it won’t.” He stood up in the prow of the boat, bracing his legs against the rocking of the hull, and spread his arms wide in appeal. “Please, my dear Vergilius, for the sake of our past friendship, now that I have come so far, at least allow me to land and spend a night or two with my supporters.”

“No, as I say, I’m sorry, but I cannot take the risk. I’ve consulted my experts. They say even if you travelled to the very western tip of the island, to Lilybaeum, you’d still be within three hundred and fifty miles of Rome, and then Clodius would come after me.”

At that, Cicero ceased to be so friendly. He said coldly, “You have no right under the law to impede the journey of a Roman citizen.”

“I have every right to safeguard the tranquillity of my province. And here, as you know, my word is the law .?.?.”

He was apologetic. I dare say he was even embarrassed. But he was immovable, and after a few more angry exchanges there was nothing for it but to turn round and row back to Regium. Our departure provoked a great cry of dismay from the shoreline and I could see that Cicero for the first time was seriously worried. Vergilius was a friend of his. If this was how a friend reacted then soon the whole of Italy would be closed against him. Returning to Rome to oppose the law was much too risky. He had left it too late. Apart from the physical danger such a journey would entail, the bill would almost certainly pass, and then we would be stranded four hundred miles from the legal limit it prescribed. To comply safely with the terms of his exile he would have to flee abroad immediately. Obviously Gaul was out of the question because of Caesar. So it would have to be somewhere in the East—Greece perhaps, or Asia. But unfortunately we were on the wrong side of the peninsula to make our escape in the treacherous winter seas. We needed to get over to the opposite coast, to Brundisium on the Adriatic, and find a big ship capable of making a lengthy voyage. Our predicament was exquisitely vile—as no doubt Caesar, the original sponsor and creator of Clodius, had intended.

it took us two weeks of arduous travel to cross the mountains, often in heavy rain and mostly along bad roads. Every mile seemed fraught with the hazard of ambush, although the primitive little towns we passed through were welcoming enough. At night we slept in smoky, freezing inns and dined on hard bread and fatty meat made scarcely more palatable by sour wine. Cicero’s mood veered between fury and despair. He saw clearly now that he had made a terrible mistake by leaving Rome. It had been madness for him to quit the city and leave Clodius free to spread the calumny that he had put citizens to death “unheard and uncondemned” when in fact each of the five Catiline conspirators had been allowed to speak in his own defence and their execution had been sanctioned by the entire Senate. But his flight was tantamount to an admission of guilt. He should have obeyed his instinct and turned back when he heard Caesar’s departing trumpets and first began to realise his error. He wept at the disaster his folly and timidity had brought upon his wife and children.

And when he had finished lashing himself, he turned his scourge on Hortensius “and the rest of the aristocratic gang,” who had never forgiven him for rising from his humble origins to the consulship and saving the republic: they had deliberately urged him to flee in order to ruin him. He should have heeded the example of Socrates, who said that death was preferable to exile. Yes, he should have killed himself! He snatched up a knife from the dining table. He would kill himself! I said nothing. I didn’t take the threat seriously. He couldn’t stand the sight of others’ blood, let alone his own. All his life he had tried to avoid military expeditions, the games, public executions, funerals—anything that might remind him of mortality. If pain frightened him, death terrified him—which, although I would never have been impertinent enough to

point it out, was the principal reason we had fled Rome in the first place.

When finally we came within sight of the fortified walls of Brundisium, he decided not to venture inside. The port was so large and busy, so full of strangers, and so likely to be his destination, he was convinced it was the obvious spot for his assassination. Instead we sought sanctuary a little way up the coast, in the residence of his old friend Marcus Laenius Flaccus. That night we slept in decent beds for the first time in three weeks, and the next morning we went down to the beach. The waves were much rougher than on the Sicilian side. A strong wind was hurling the Adriatic relentlessly against the rocks and shingle. Cicero loathed sea voyages at the best of times; this one promised to be especially treacherous. Yet it was our only means of escape. One hundred and twenty miles beyond the horizon lay the shore of Illyricum.

Flaccus, noticing his expression, said, “Fortify your spirits, Cicero—perhaps the bill won’t pass, or one of the other tribunes will veto it. There must be someone left in Rome willing to stand up for you—Pompey, surely?”

But Cicero, his gaze still fixed out to sea, made no reply, and a few days later we heard that the bill had indeed become law and that Flaccus was therefore guilty of a capital offence simply by having a convicted exile on his premises. Even so he tried to persuade us to stay. He insisted that Clodius didn’t frighten him. But Cicero wouldn’t hear of it: “Your loyalty moves me, old friend, but that monster will have dispatched a team of his hired fighters to hunt me down the moment his law passed. There is no time to lose.”

I had found a merchant ship in the harbour at Brundisium whose hard-pressed master was willing to risk a winter voyage across the Adriatic in return for a huge fee, and the next morning at first light, when no one was around, we went on board. She was a sturdy, broad-beamed vessel, with a crew of about twenty, used to ply the trade route between Italy and Dyrrachium. I was no judge of these things, but she looked safe enough to me. The master estimated the crossing would require a day and a half—but we needed to leave quickly, he said, and take advantage of the favourable wind. So while the sailors made her ready and Flaccus waited on the quayside, Cicero quickly dictated a final message to his wife and children: It has been a fine life, a great career—the good in me, nothing bad, has brought me down. My dear Terentia, loyalest and best of wives, my darling daughter Tullia, and little Marcus, our one remaining hope—goodbye! I copied it out and passed it up to Flaccus. He raised his hand in farewell. Then the sail was unfurled, the cables cast off, the oarsmen pushed us away from the harbour wall, and we set off into the pale grey light.

at first we made good speed. cicero stood high above the deck on the steersmen’s platform, leaning on the stern rail, watching the great lighthouse of Brundisium recede behind us. Apart from his visits to Sicily, it was the first time he had left Italy since his youth, when he went to Rhodes to learn oratory from Molon. Of all the men I ever knew, Cicero was the least equipped by temperament for exile. To thrive he needed the appurtenances of civilised society—friends, news, gossip, conversation, politics, dinners, plays, baths, books, fine buildings; to watch all these dwindle away must have been an agony for him.

Nevertheless, in little more than an hour they had gone, swallowed up in the void. The wind drove us forwards strongly, and as we cut through the whitecaps I thought of Homer’s “dark blue wave/foaming at the bow.” But then around the middle of the morning the ship seemed gradually to lose propulsion. The great brown sail became slack-bellied and the two steersmen standing at their levers on either side of us began exchanging anxious looks. Soon dense black clouds started to mass on the horizon, and within an hour they had closed over our heads like a trapdoor. The light became shadowy; the temperature dropped. The wind got up again, but this time the gusts were in our faces, driving the cold spray off the surface of the waves. Hailstones raked the heaving deck.

Cicero shuddered, leaned forwards and vomited. His face was as grey as a corpse. I put my arm around his shoulders and indicated that we should descend to the lower deck and seek shelter in the cabin. We were halfway down the ladder when a flash of lightning split the gloom, followed instantly by a deafening, sickening crack, like a bone snapping or a tree splintering, and I was sure we must have lost the mast, for suddenly we seemed to be tumbling over and over while all around us great glistening black mountains of jet towered and toppled in the lightning flashes. The shriek of the wind made it impossible to speak or hear. In the end I simply pushed Cicero into the cabin, fell in after him and closed the door.

We tried to stand, but the ship was listing. The deck was ankle-deep in water. Our feet slid from under us. The floor tilted first one way and then the other. We clutched at the walls as we were pitched back and forth in the darkness amid loose tools and jars of wine and sacks of barley, like dumb beasts in a crate on our way to slaughter. Eventually we wedged ourselves in a corner and lay there soaked and shivering as the boat shook and plunged. I was sure we were doomed and closed my eyes and prayed to Neptune and all the gods for deliverance.

A long time passed. How long I cannot say—certainly it was the remainder of that day, and the whole of the night, and part of the day that followed. Cicero seemed quite unconscious; on several occasions I had to touch his cold cheek to reassure myself he was still alive. Each time his eyes opened briefly and then closed again. Afterwards he said he had fully resigned himself to drowning but such was the misery of his seasickness he felt no fear: rather he saw how Nature in her mercy spares those in extremis from the terrors of oblivion and makes death seem a welcome release. Almost the greatest surprise of his life, he said, was when he awoke on the second day and realised the storm was over and his existence would continue after all: “Unfortunately my situation is so wretched, I almost regret it.”

Once we were sure the storm had blown itself out, we went back on deck. The sailors were just at that moment tipping over the side the corpse of some poor wretch whose head had been smashed by a swinging boom. The Adriatic was oily-smooth and still, of the same grey shade as the sky, and the body slid into it with scarcely a splash. There was a smell on the cold wind I didn’t recognise, of something rotten and decaying. About a mile away I noticed a wall of sheer black rock rising above the surf. I assumed we had been blown back home again and that it must be the coast of Italy. But the captain laughed at my ignorance and said it was Illyricum, and that those were the famous cliffs that guard the approaches to the ancient city of Dyrrachium.

cicero had at first intended to make for epirus, the mountainous country to the south, where Atticus owned a great estate that included a fortified village. It was a most desolate region, having never recovered from the terrible fate decreed it by the Senate a century earlier, when, as a punishment for siding against Rome, all seventy of its towns had been razed to the ground simultaneously and its entire population of one hundred and fifty thousand sold into slavery. Nevertheless, Cicero claimed he wouldn’t have minded the solitude of such a haunted spot. But just before we left Italy Atticus had warned him—“with regret”—that he could only stay for a month lest word of his presence become known: if it did, under clause two of Clodius’s bill, Atticus himself would be liable to the death penalty for harbouring the exile.

Even as we stepped ashore at Dyrrachium, Cicero remained in two minds about which direction to take—south to Epirus, temporary refuge though it would be, or east to Macedonia, where the governor, Apuleius Saturninus, was an old friend of his, and from Macedonia on to Greece and Athens. In the event, the decision was made for him. A messenger was waiting on the quayside— a young man, very anxious. Glancing around to make sure he was not observed, he drew us quickly into a deserted warehouse and produced a letter. It was from Saturninus, the governor. I do not have it in my archives because Cicero seized it and tore it to pieces the moment I had read it out loud to him. But I can still remember the gist of what it

said: that “with regret” (that phrase again!), despite their years of friendship, Saturninus would not be able to receive Cicero in his household as it would be “incompatible with the dignity of a Roman governor to offer succour to a convicted exile.”

Hungry, damp and exhausted from our crossing, having hurled the fragments of the letter to the ground, Cicero sank on to a bale of cloth with his head in his hands. That was when the messenger said nervously, “Your Excellency, there is another letter?.?.?.”

It was from one of the governor’s junior magistrates, the quaestor Gnaeus Plancius. His family were old neighbours of the Ciceros from their ancestral lands around Arpinum. Plancius said that he was writing secretly and sending his letter via the same courier, who was to be trusted; that he disagreed with his superior’s decision; that it would be an honour for him to take the Father of the Nation under his protection; that secrecy was vital; that he had already set out on the road to meet him at the Macedonian border; and that in the meantime he had arranged for a carriage to transport Cicero out of Dyrrachium “immediately, in the interests of your personal safety; I plead with you not to delay by so much as an hour; I shall explain more when I see you.”

“Do you trust him?” I asked.

Cicero stared at the floor and in a low voice replied, “No. But what choice do I have?”

With the messenger’s help I arranged for our luggage to be transferred from the boat to the quaestor’s carriage—a gloomy contraption, little better than a cell on wheels, without suspension and with metal grilles nailed over the windows so that its fugitive occupant could look out but no one could see him. We clattered up from the harbour into the city and joined the traffic on the Via Egnatia, the great highway that runs all the way to Byzantium. It started to sleet. There had been an earthquake a few days earlier and the place was wretched in the downpour, with corpses of the native tribespeople unburied by the roadside and here and there little groups of survivors sheltering in makeshift tents among the ruins, huddled over smoking fires. It was this odour of destruction and despair that I had smelt out at sea.

We travelled across the plain towards the snow-covered mountains and spent the night in a small village hemmed in by the encroaching peaks. The inn was squalid, with goats and chickens in the downstairs rooms. Cicero ate little and said nothing. In this strange and barren land, with its savage-looking people, he had at last fallen into the full depths of despair, and it was only with difficulty that I roused him from his bed the next morning and persuaded him to continue our journey.

For two days the road climbed into the mountains, until we came to the edge of a wide lake, fringed with ice. On the far side was a town, Lychnidos, that marked the border with Macedonia, and it was here, in its forum, that Plancius awaited us. He was in his early thirties, strongly built, wearing military uniform, with half a dozen legionaries at his back, and there was a moment when they all began to stride towards us that I experienced a rush of panic and feared we had blundered into a trap. But the warmth with which Plancius embraced Cicero, and the tears in his eyes, convinced me immediately that he was genuine.

He could not disguise his shock at Cicero’s appearance. “You need to recover your strength,” he said, “but unfortunately, we must leave here straight away.” And then he told us what he had not dared put into his letter: that he had received reliable intelligence that three of the traitors Cicero had sent into exile for their parts in Catilina’s conspiracy—Autronius Paetas, Cassius Longinus and Marcus Laeca—were all out looking for him, and had sworn to kill him.

Cicero said, “Then there is nowhere in the world where I am safe. How are we to live?”

“Under my protection, as I said. In fact come back with me to Thessalonica, and stay under my very roof. I was military tribune until last year and I’m still on active service, so there’ll be soldiers to guard you as long as you stay within the frontiers of Macedonia. My house is no palace, but it’s secure and it’s yours for as long as you need it.”

Cicero stared at him. Apart from the hospitality of Flaccus, it was the first real offer of help he had received for weeks—for months, in fact—and that it should have come from a young man he barely knew, when old allies such as Pompey had turned their backs on him, moved him deeply. He tried to speak, but the words choked in his throat and he had to look away.....

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