

PROLOGUE



PONTUS EUXINUS, SEPTEMBER AD 51

MOONLIGHT SHEENED THE Stygian-dark surface of the Pontus Euxinus and reflected up, silver and bright, into the pained eyes of Titus Flavius Sabinus. He groaned as he leant over the rail of a trireme, bobbing at anchor, water slapping its hull, opposite the mouth of the Tyras River. The moon's reflection was elongated on the swell and then fractured into many replications before re-emerging and contracting back into a near-perfect likeness, as the ship rose and fell in time to the crash of breakers rolling onto the shore just a hundred paces to larboard and starboard.

The constant gyrations of the one point of light in his vision did nothing to alleviate the upheaval within Sabinus' wracked innards. With another strained convulsion, he sent a thin splatter of bile and red wine down the already tarnished planking to drip onto the rearmost pair of the vessel's sixty double-banked starboard oars. His groans blended in with the creaking of straining rope and wood.

From his position next to the two steering-oars at the stern of the ship, the trierarchus affected not to notice the involuntary, high-pitched flatulence that accompanied Sabinus' latest heave, nor did he comment on the fact that he had chosen to vomit on the windward side of the ship; the Governor of the imperial provinces of Moesia, Macedonia and Thracia could be sick wherever he liked on his command as far as the trierarchus was concerned. Indeed, during the two-day run from Novidunum, the home port of the Danuvius Fleet, a hundred or so miles from the river's delta, to this desolate spot on the Euxine's coast, the Emperor's representative had chosen a variety of places in which to spew – not all of them overboard.

Taking quick, shallow breaths, Sabinus cursed the ill-fortune that had forced him to embark on a ship and remain on-board for

far, far longer than the contents of his stomach; he had never made any claim to being a mariner. Nevertheless, with his appointment as governor, three years previously, came a responsibility not just to the Emperor but to the Empire itself. If the intelligence that he had learnt from an agent amongst the Getic and Dacian tribes, to the north of the Danuvius, was reliable, the Empire – or at least, the eastern part of it – could be in serious peril.

There had been no question of mistrusting the report; the agent was loyal to Tryphaena, the former Queen of Thracia. The great-granddaughter of Marcus Antonius, Tryphaena was a Roman citizen and fiercely loyal to the Empire. Although she now lived in Cyzicus on the coast of the province of Asia – since she had abdicated at Caligula's request – she made it her business to be well informed about the affairs of her former subjects and their enemies. If Tryphaena's agent made a report concerning a threat to the Empire then it was to be taken very seriously.

By the time the man had made the hazardous, overland journey to Novidunum to give Sabinus his account of the arrival of an embassy from Vologases, the Great King of Parthia, to the Kings of the trans-Danuvian tribes, the news was already four days old. Sabinus had then taken the three biremes and single trireme in the harbour and sailed down to the Euxine. There he had headed north up the coast to lay off Tyra, a Greek colony under the sway of the Dacian King Coston, who was no friend of Rome.

Some duties were so critical that they could not be delegated; Sabinus knew that if he reported to the Emperor Claudius, or, more importantly, to the Empress Agrippina and her lover Pallas, the true powers in Rome, that he had sent a subordinate to intercept the Parthian mission but they had slipped through his grasp, then that failure would be seen as Sabinus'. At least if he were unsuccessful he would have no one to blame but himself; but Sabinus had no intention of being so. He could guess what had been discussed. There was nothing that the Dacian, Getic, Sarmatian and Bastanae Kings, all gathered, according to the agent, in a camp on the grasslands fifty miles west of Tyra, had that was of any interest to Parthia other than one unifying attribute: a hatred of Rome. As that hatred spilled over Rome's

northern borders, Parthia, Rome's bitterest enemy to the east, would either sweep west to try once again to take the coast of Syria and gain access to Rome's sea for the first time since Rome came east; or, head north, through the Roman client kingdoms of Armenia and Pontus to gain access to the Euxine.

Either way, Rome's eastern provinces were under threat.

However, Sabinus now had within his grasp an opportunity to find out the timing and direction of such a bold move; with knowledge of how, where and when the blows would fall they could be deflected. It was of vital importance, therefore, that the ambassadors were captured and interrogated as they sailed from Tyra, whose dim lights could be seen on the southern bank of the Tyras estuary.

With another retch and unintentional breaking of wind – one dry this time, the other less so – Sabinus pushed himself upright, sweating despite the cool breeze blowing in from the sea. He watched, in reflection, the ever-shifting image of the half-moon swallowed by a dark bank of cloud; the silver-lined edge undulated on the water's surface for a few moments before fading and becoming one with the darkening sea. Sabinus looked up; the cloud had blocked all light in the sky for the first time since they had begun their dusk to dawn vigil three nights ago. By day they would heave-to just over the horizon, out of sight of the watch-towers of Tyra, but within interception range of any ship that sailed from the estuary to follow the coastline back round to whatever friendly port the Parthians had embarked from. But Sabinus doubted that the Parthians would sail by day as the agent had informed him that they had arrived at Tyra in the dead of night; that, Sabinus knew, was no mean feat for even the most experienced naval trierarchus. Besides, he was under no illusions that, despite their precautions, their presence had not gone undetected and so the Parthians would be waiting for complete darkness, a time such as now, before venturing out to sea.

Still supporting himself on the rail, Sabinus turned towards the trierarchus. 'Have the rowers stand to, Xanthos, and signal the three biremes to prepare for action.' As the trierarchus relayed the order down to the oar-deck below, Sabinus wiped a

trail of vomit from his chin and looked towards the bow; he could just make out the shapes of the half-century of marines, sitting around the *carroballista* mounted on the deck, respecting the standing night-time order for complete silence. He signalled to the centurion commanding them with a hand gesture that they should rise and prepare themselves. From below came the muted sounds of the ship's one hundred and twenty rowers taking their places, one man each on the lower bank of oars and two on the upper. Trying to clear his head, blurred by nausea, Sabinus glanced down and saw the oars being aligned ready for the initial pull that would propel the vessel forward as the first few drops of rain spattered onto the sea and hit the ship's deck with a slow, irregular drumming.

With the ship readied, Sabinus adjusted his red woollen cloak so that it warmed his arms; he tightened the red sash around the midriff of his bronze back- and breastplates and adjusted the shoulder belt in order that his sword hung straight on his right hip. Having replaced his helmet and tied the chinstrap, he picked up his standard-issue semi-cylindrical shield, walked as steadily as possible forward to the bow and stood next to the marine centurion, beneath the towering *corvus* that they would use to board an enemy ship, and prepared to wait for the remaining three hours of the night, peering into the gloom that deepened as the rain intensified.

It was just an intuition at first. There was nothing visible through the torrent and no sound carried over its incessant beating on wood and water but, with less than an hour until dawn, Sabinus was sure that they were not alone. He wiped the rain from his eyes and squinted into the continuing deluge; it was a black wall of water occasionally penetrated by a glimmer of light from the town over a mile away. But then a new sensation pierced his consciousness: a sound, very faint, but certainly a sound other than the driving rain and the creak of timber and stretching rope as the ship strained against the power of the sea. There it was again, long and low. Sabinus counted to five and the noise was repeated; there could be no doubt now: it was a

steady rhythm, the massed grunts of exertion of scores of oarsmen pulling in time.

He turned, raised his arm at the trierarchus and signalled to move forward. Deck-hands at either end of the ship hauled on ropes and pulled in the anchors and, within a few moments, the shrill note of the stroke-master's pipe heralded the first heave on the oars; they were under way.

'Have your men load the ballista, Thracius,' Sabinus ordered the marine centurion, 'and check that the deck-hands are manning the corvus and standing by with grappling hooks.'

Thracius saluted and went about his business as the trireme gained momentum with each successive, quickening stroke. Around Sabinus the ship burst into activity as the *carroballista's* torsioned arms were wound back; deck-hands manned the pulley system that would release the spiked corvus to slam down and pinion an enemy ship, creating a bridge, while marines checked their kit and sailors were stationed along the rails and in the bow with grappling hooks at the ready. The straining groans of the oarsmen intensified as they pulled on creaking sweeps, accelerating the huge vessel; they were augmented by those from the three biremes, one to either side and one behind, creating a cacophony of human effort that Sabinus knew could warn the Parthians of their presence. But that did not concern him; there was nothing that he could do about it as it was impossible for so many men to row in silence. What did concern him, however, was spotting the enemy ship before it evaded them; he stared forward into the night, his nausea forgotten, as the ram below him churned the black waters to foaming grey.

And then it was there; a darker shadow on a dark sea, dimly silhouetted by the port's few lanterns behind it. Shouts from about the ship indicated that other members of the crew had also spotted the spectral blur. Imprecise and non-linear but certainly tangible, it grew more distinct with every grunted heave on the oars as the trireme sped forward towards its prey. Sabinus had given the trierarchus orders to intercept and ram and he felt the ship shift its course slightly to do just that. He smiled to himself and then, with a jolt, realised that the shade was not singular but,

rather, split into three as one dark mass fanned out to starboard, another to larboard, leaving the third, the central one, less than fifty paces away, on collision course with the trireme. To either side a bireme split off to intercept the two fleeing ships.

'Release!' Thracius shouted. With an abrupt crack the two arms of the ballista slammed forward, hurling the bolt into the oncoming shadow; its impact registered with a hollow thump but no screams followed.

'Brace!' Thracius roared as the distance between the two vessels lessened dramatically; his men knelt on one leg, bracing themselves with their shields and javeline-like *pila*.

From the stern came a shouted order amplified by a speaking trumpet; it was followed by the mass rasping of oars being hauled inboard to avoid crippling damage should the enemy attempt to rake down one side. Sabinus gripped the rail and went down on his knees as the approaching shadow resolved itself into the outline of a trireme of equal size. And it was with equal weight and equal groaning of timbers that the two vessels ploughed into each other, colliding with their starboard bows. The corvus was released to screech down on its pulleys and crunch through the enemy's rail, shattering it; but the ships were not aligned and the foot-long spike grazed down the side of the hull, failing to penetrate the deck. Their momentum drove the ships on, their rams ricocheting off curved hulls to slew them around, both to their larboard, in opposite rotations, out of control, their crews sprawled out on the deck.

Raising his head over the rail, Sabinus saw that the Roman vessel was spinning on its axis, right to left, its stern heading directly for that of the Parthian's as it rotated, slowly, majestically, inexorably, in the contrary direction as if joining in some strange nautical dance. 'Thracius, take your men back and try and secure us to them with ropes as we hit.'

The centurion picked himself up from the deck, shouting at the sailors with grappling hooks and his men to follow him. Sabinus watched with detached interest as the two ships swung towards each other. With a shuddering impact and the high-pitched grinding of labouring wood, they slammed together at

roughly the point that Sabinus had vomited earlier. Thracius and his men tumbled to the ground only to get up again an instant later at the centurion's bellowed commands as, from out of the darkness behind the trireme, surged the third Roman bireme, under full oars and at ramming speed. On it came, the groans of its labouring rowers clearly audible with every swift stroke, its bow ploughing a temporary furrow through churning water directly towards the Parthian's beam.

And without loss of momentum the smaller ship drove into the trireme, punching its bronze-faced ram through the solid timbers of the hull, a foot below the water-line, with an explosive report that drowned the sound of human exertion and the forces of nature. Pushing deep into the Parthian's belly, the bireme's primary weapon ripped through its innards with an eruption of water until its bow, crunching into the vessel's side, prevented further penetration but set the ship rocking, back and forth, grinding on the impaling ram and opening up the wound even more.

Then the grappling hooks hurtled through the air as Thracius formed up his men in preparation for boarding. The ropes were secured as the first arrows thumped in from the trapped ship, cracking into the marines' shields or hissing unseen across the trireme and on into blackness; here and there a cry as a crewman spun to the deck with a fletched shaft quivering in his convulsing body. With a throat-rasping, inchoate roar, Thracius jumped up onto the rail and hurled himself onto the enemy ship; without any hesitation his men followed him as dark figures struggled to form up into a line of defence across the Parthian deck.

Sabinus got to his feet and walked back towards the stern. He was in no rush; it was not his business to risk life and limb in the menial task of clearing an enemy ship and, besides, Thracius and his men seemed to be doing a very competent job of it, having formed up in two lines and slammed into the defenders. Rain sheeted across the heaving deck on gusts of wind, further diluting the blood that slopped onto the soaked planking as iron clashed with iron, resounded on leather-bound wood and sliced through flesh and bone to the piteous screams of the maimed and dying.

To the rear of the marines, the Parthian steersmen and trier-archus lay dead beneath the steering-oars along with a couple of archers caught in the open as Thracius' men had stormed the ship. Near the corpses, their Roman killers, a half-dozen marines, stood guard over the companionway leading down to the oar-deck; with long spears the marines stabbed at the terrified Parthian crew trying to escape the water flooding in below in order to prevent them from coming up behind their comrades, who were now pushing back the eastern, trouser-wearing defenders with the savage discipline that Sabinus expected of regular close-order Roman troops. Finding the route to safety barred, many of the rowers squeezed through the oar-ports to take their chances in the sea. Beyond them, the bireme was backing oars in an attempt to extricate itself from the crippled and visibly listing Parthian vessel; the blades whipped up the already roiling water so that men now floundering found their screams choked and their struggles useless. Many were sucked under while others suffered grim head wounds as the sweeps cracked into their skulls and faces. With the teeth-freezing squeal of grating and tearing wood on wood, the bireme edged back.

Sabinus vaulted the rail and landed on the stricken ship; he drew his sword and strode towards the line of the melee, which had now almost reached the mainmast, past the many dead and wounded left in its wake. The ship lurched, as the bireme managed to pull itself free, and then settled, tilted markedly towards the side with the gaping rend. Sabinus stumbled but righted himself; his stomach heaved again with the rocking of the ship. A slight movement of a dying man just to his left caused Sabinus to pause and press the tip of his sword into the man's throat, grinding the blade left and right, not wanting to be attacked from behind by an enemy feigning incapacity. He withdrew his weapon, with a gurgle of air bubbling through thick liquid, and went to move on but then stopped abruptly. He peered down at the man's face in the gloom. It was bearded; but with a full, Greek-style beard, not the more shaped version sported in Parthia. He looked down at the man's legs: he was wearing eastern trousers and yet they were not partially covered

by a long tunic. He glanced around; all the enemy dead wore trousers but none of them had eastern-style tunics or beards, nor were they armed in the Parthian manner – scale armour, wicker shields, bows and short spears and swords – but, rather, in the Greek style of the northern Euxine – oval *thureos* shield, javelin and short sword. Sabinus cursed under his breath and then ran back to where the enemy trierarchus lay; he had a beard the colour of copper, natural, not dyed. That settled it: he was definitely not Parthian.

This was not the ship carrying the embassy.

As panic rose in his throat he ran to the rail and looked out; to larboard he could make out that one of the escort ships had been grappled by a bireme, but to starboard he could see nothing. Behind him Thracius' troops broke the remaining resistance of the ships' marines.

'I want prisoners!' Sabinus shouted as the centurion hacked and slashed his way into the retreating enemy, his men reaping bloody harvest to either side. He sprinted into the rear of the marines and barged his way through, manhandling men out of the way, screaming at them to take prisoners, until he reached Thracius. 'Prisoners! I must have a couple of prisoners.'

The centurion turned back to him and nodded, his eyes wide with killing-joy and his face and arms smeared in blood; he shouted at the men to either side and they charged forward, following up the defeated foe. Sabinus trailed them, checking the bodies of the fallen to see if there was enough life left in one to be able to furnish him with the information he was now desperate for. He cursed himself for allowing his seasickness to cloud his mind: in his weakened state, he had assumed that the Parthian embassy would just try to sneak past his flotilla and had not considered the possibility of a diversion. Which of the other two ships held the ambassadors?

Then that word suddenly echoed in his head: diversion, diversion. Bile surged in his throat and this time it was not from the ship's motion: he had been duped; none of these ships contained the Parthians. He ran forward to the bow where Thracius and his men were disarming the last two dozen or so of the enemy; he

looked out to the north as the first vestiges of dawn warmed the thick cloud blanket above.

'Where do you want to question them, sir?' Thracius asked, thrusting a prisoner down onto his knees, pulling his hair back and placing a bloodied blade on the exposed throat.

Sabinus stared, forlorn, at the sleek little liburnian, just visible in the growing light, under full sail and oars, running past them a quarter of a mile away at a speed that neither the trireme nor the biremes could hope to match for very long. 'I don't need to any more. Finish them.'

A scream of terrified pleading erupted from the prisoners as the first was despatched, and Sabinus felt a stab of disgust at himself for ordering their deaths solely out of pique at being outsmarted. 'Hold, Thracius!'

The centurion arrested his stroke as the tip of his sword pricked the throat of a second shrieking prisoner and looked back at his superior.

'Throw them into the water; they can take their chances with the rest. Then get your men back to our ship.'

As the marines obeyed the order, Sabinus walked back to the trireme, calculating just how he would frame what he knew would be a very difficult letter to Pallas, Claudius' favoured freedman and the real power behind the throne of a drooling, malleable fool. Not even his brother Vespasian, who, thanks to the influence of Pallas, was due to become suffect-consul for the last two months of the year, would be able to protect him from the wrath of those in power.

And their wrath would be justified.

Sabinus was under no illusions; he had failed catastrophically and the embassy was now on its way to report back to the Great King in his capital, Ctesiphon, on the Tigris.

There would be no way to hide his guilt. It was a certainty that Pallas also had agents amongst the Dacians and news of the embassy and Sabinus' failure would reach him within the next month or two. It was also a certainty that Narcissus and Callistus, Pallas' fellow freedmen and rivals whom he had outmanoeuvred, by making Agrippina empress, and relegated to second place in

Claudius' pliable estimation, would also hear of Sabinus' failure. They would be sure to use it as a political weapon in the vicious infighting that pervaded the imperial palace.

Sabinus cursed the weakness of the Emperor that gave rise to such combustible politics and he cursed the men and women who took advantage of that weakness for their own gain; but most of all he cursed his own weakness: the nausea he felt each time he stepped onto a ship. Tonight that weakness had addled his mind and caused him to make a mistake.

Because of that weakness he had failed Rome.

PART I



ROME, DECEMBER AD 51

CHAPTER I

PERSISTENT AND SHRILL, the cry echoed around the walls and marble columns of the atrium; a torment to all who endured it.

Titus Flavius Vespasianus gritted his teeth, determined not to be moved by the pitiful wail as it rose and fell, occasionally pausing for a ragged breath before bellowing out again with renewed, lung-filled vigour. The suffering that it conveyed had to be borne and Vespasian knew that should he not have the stomach for it he would lose the ongoing battle of wills; and that was something that he could not afford to do.

A new cacophony of anguish emitted from the writhing bundle in his wife's arms, its movements caught in the flickering glow of the log fire spitting and crackling in the atrium hearth. Vespasian winced and then held his head high and crooked his left arm before him as his body slave draped his toga over and around his well-muscled, compact frame, watched by Titus, Vespasian's eleven-year-old son.

With the heavy woollen garment eventually hanging to his satisfaction and the howls showing no sign of abating, Vespasian eased into the pair of red leather, senatorial slippers that his slave held out for him. 'The heels, Hormus.' Hormus ran a finger around the back of each shoe so that his master's feet fitted snugly and then stood and backed away with deference, leaving Titus facing his father.

Doing his best to remain calm as the din reached a new level, Vespasian contemplated Titus for a few moments. 'Does the Emperor still come every day to check on his son's progress?'

'Most days, Father; and he also asks me and the other boys questions, as well as Britannicus.'

Vespasian flinched at a particularly shrill bawl and strove to ignore it. 'What happens if you get them wrong?'

'Sosibius beats us after Claudius has gone.'

Vespasian hid his less than favourable opinion of the *grammaticus* from his son. It had been Sosibius' fallacious allegations at the Empress Messalina's behest, three years earlier, that had set in train a series of events that had ended up in Vespasian bearing false witness against the former Consul, Asiaticus, in order to protect his brother, Sabinus. Using Vespasian as a willing tool, however, Asiaticus had had his revenge from beyond the grave and Messalina had been executed; Vespasian had been present as she shrieked and cursed her last. But Sosibius was still in place, his fabricated charges corroborated by Vespasian's false testimony. 'Does he often beat you?'

Titus' face hardened into a strained expression, startling Vespasian by its similarity to his own, older version. The thick nose not so pronounced, the earlobes not so long, the jaw not so heavy and with a full head of hair rather than his semi-wreath about the crown; but there was no mistaking it: Titus was his son. 'Yes, Father, but Britannicus says that it's because his step-mother, the Empress, has ordered him to.'

'Then deny Agrippina that pleasure and make sure that Sosibius has no cause to beat you today.'

'If he does it'll be the last time. Britannicus has thought of a way to have him dismissed and at the same time insult his stepbrother.'

Vespasian ruffled Titus' hair. 'Don't you get involved in any feud between Britannicus and Nero.'

'I'll always support my friend, Father.'

'Just be sure that you don't make it too public.' Vespasian took the boy's chin in his hand and examined his face. 'It's dangerous; do you understand me?'

Titus nodded slowly. 'Yes, Father, I believe I do.'

'Good, now be off with you. Hormus, see Titus out to his escort. Are Magnus' lads waiting?'

'Yes, master.'

As Hormus led Titus away the bawling continued. Vespasian turned to face Flavia Domitilla, his wife of twelve years; she sat

staring into the fire doing nothing to try to soothe the babe in her arms. 'If you really want my clients to mistake you for the wet nurse when I let them in for the morning *salutio*, my dear, then I suggest that you plug little Domitian onto one of your breasts and sing Gallic lullabies to him.'

Flavia snorted and carried on staring at the flames. 'At least then they'll think that we can afford a Gallic wet nurse.'

Vespasian pushed his head forward, frowning, unable to credit what he had just heard. 'What are you talking about, woman? We've got a Gallic wet nurse; it's just that this morning you've chosen not to call for her and instead you seem to be intent on starving the child.' To emphasise the point he picked up a piece of bread from his recently abandoned breakfast, dipped it in the bowl of olive oil and then chewed on it with relish.

'She's not Gallic! She's Hispanic.'

Vespasian suppressed a sigh of exasperation. 'Yes, she is from Hispania but she is a Celt, a Celtiberian. She's from the same race of huge tribesmen that all the *finest* women in Rome choose to have breastfeed their sons; it's just that when her ancestors crossed the Rheneus they didn't stop in Gaul, they carried on over the mountains into Hispania.'

'And therefore she produces milk so thin that a kitten wouldn't survive on it.'

'Her milk is no different from any other Celt's.'

'Your niece swears by her Allobroges woman.'

'How Lucius Junius Paetus chooses to indulge his wife is his own affair. However, to my mind, allowing a baby to go hungry because its wet nurse isn't from one of the more fashionable Celtic tribes is the act of an irresponsible mother.'

'And to my mind dragging a wife to live in the squalor of the Quirinal Hill and then not allowing her to purchase the staff that she needs to look after the family is the act of an uncaring and heartless husband and father.'

Vespasian smiled to himself but kept his face neutral now they had got to the nub of the matter. Two and a half years previously Vespasian had used his good standing with Pallas, as the freedman

had manoeuvred himself to the most powerful position in Claudius' court, to remove Flavia and their children from the apartment in the imperial palace where they had lived for most of Vespasian's four years as legate of the II Augusta in Britannia. The accommodation had been offered by Claudius ostensibly so that their two sons could be educated together and also so that Messalina, Claudius' then wife, would have a companion in the palace. However, Vespasian knew that the Emperor had been manipulated into making the offer by Messalina's brother, Corvinus, so that his old enemy could have the power of life and death over Flavia and their children. After Messalina's violent end, Pallas had kept his word to persuade Claudius to allow Vespasian to move his family to a house in Pomegranate Street, on the Quirinal Hill, near to that of his uncle, the senator Gaius Vespasius Pollo.

Flavia had resented this.

'If you call protecting my family from the ravages of imperial politics uncaring; and if you call being prudent with money so as not to be subject to the fripperies of the ladies of fashion heartless, then you've understood my character perfectly, my dear. It is bad enough that Titus goes to the palace each day to share Britannicus' education but that was Claudius' price for allowing me to move you out; having executed the boy's mother he didn't want his son to be deprived of his little playmate as well. Surely our son being educated alongside the Emperor's is enough to satisfy your vanity, despite the danger that puts him in; surely that makes up for all this *squalor*?' He indicated with a lazy hand the good-sized atrium around them. Although he would freely concede its decoration was not up to the standards of the palace – it having been built 150 years before, during the time of Gaius Marius – what it lacked in splendour with the mosaic floor's geometric black and white motif or the faded pastoral frescoes, designed to fool the beholder into thinking that they were looking through windows, it made up for with his wife's extravagance. It was filled with furniture and ornaments that Flavia had acquired during her lavish spending sprees while under Messalina's profligate influence.

Vespasian still shuddered every time he surveyed the room's décor surrounding the *impluvium*, the pond with a fountain of Venus at its centre: low, polished-marble tables on gilded legs covered with glass or silver ornaments, statuettes of fine bronze or worked crystal, couches and chairs, carved, painted and upholstered. It was not because of its vulgarity – he could cope with that even though it offended his country-born taste for the simple things in life – it was because of the amount of wasted money that it represented. 'Surely having all the other women jealously arguing amongst themselves as to whether Agrippina will kill Titus along with Britannicus as she clears the way for her son Nero to succeed his stepfather is enough to make you feel special and the centre of attention; like any self-respecting woman would wish for?'

Flavia clutched the bundle of their two-month-old son so tightly that for a moment Vespasian was worried that she would do him some damage. Then she relaxed and stood, holding the child to her breast with tears in her eyes. 'After all that I've done for you, for us, you should accord me a little respect, Vespasian. You are one of the sitting Consuls; I should be able to deport myself as the wife of a consul and not some lowly equestrian upstart ...'

'Which, when you consider the matter, is what we both are.'

Flavia's mouth dropped open but no sound emerged.

'Now, my dear, I'm going to open the door to all this squalor for my clients; they will greet me not only as the master of this squalor but also as the Consul of Rome who can do great favours for them and they will ignore the fact that I come from a Sabine family that can only boast one member of the Senate before me and my brother, just as they will ignore my rough Sabine accent. And then, having dealt out private patronage, I shall, as Consul of Rome, publicly deliver one of Rome's greatest enemies to the Emperor for punishment. If you like, you and our daughter may come to watch, along with all the other women, and you can enjoy the false compliments that they give you. Or perhaps you're too afraid to show your face because your husband bought you a wet nurse who belongs to a tribe that is so out of fashion that she cannot even produce decent milk.'

Vespasian turned and signalled to his doorkeeper to open up; it was with some relief that he heard the brisk clatter of Flavia's retreating footsteps over the mewling of his youngest son.

Vespasian sat on his curule chair in front of the impluvium at the centre of the atrium; the gentle spatter of the fountain, issuing from a vase on Venus' shoulder, remained constant as the dawn light grew, adding a steely tinge to the lifelike, painted skin tones of her naked torso basking in the oil lamps' glow. Hormus stood behind him making notes on a wax tablet. To either side of him were posted the twelve lictors who would accompany him, as consul, everywhere in Rome, carrying the fasces, the axes bound with rods, as a symbol of his power to command and execute. However, it was not civic power that Vespasian was exercising now but, rather, personal power as the last and least important of his two hundred or so clients greeted him.

Vespasian nodded his acknowledgement to the man. 'I have no use for you today, Balbus, you may return to your business once you have escorted me to the Forum.'

'An honour, Consul.' Balbus adjusted his plain white citizen's toga and withdrew to one side.

'How many waiting for a private interview, Hormus?' Vespasian asked, looking around the room filled with respectful men talking in murmurs as they waited for their patron to leave the house.

Hormus had no need to consult his tablet. 'Three that you asked to stay and then a further seven who requested an audience.'

Vespasian sighed; it would be a long morning. However, as the Senate was not due to sit that day it was one of the few occasions that he had the time to deal with personal business before his public duties would call him away; and it was with great interest that he was looking forward to his public duties.

'And then there's a man who is not your client asking for an interview as well.'

'Really? What's his name?'

'Agarpetus.'

Vespasian was none the wiser.

‘He’s a client of the imperial freedman Narcissus.’

Vespasian raised his eyebrows. ‘A client of Narcissus’ here to see me? Is it a message or is he trying to ingratiate himself with me?’

‘He didn’t say, master.’

Vespasian digested this for a few moments before rising to his feet; formality dictated that he would have to see this man last, after his own clients, so it would be a while before his curiosity would be satisfied.

But first, business.

Followed by his slave, he walked with the slow dignity of the leading magistrate in Rome, past the men awaiting his favour, to the *tablinum*, the room curtained off at the far end of the atrium, and seated himself behind the desk. ‘I’ll deal with the three that I need favours from, first, Hormus; in order of precedence.’

‘What the Emperor did while he held the office of censor, four years ago, cannot be undone, Laelius,’ Vespasian said, having heard the final plea for favour from a balding citizen wearing a very finely woven crimson tunic under his plain white toga. A heavy gold chain glinted around his neck.

‘I understand that, *patronus*; however, the situation has changed.’ Laelius produced a scroll from the fold of his toga and stepped up to the desk to hand it to Vespasian. ‘This is a receipt from the Cloelius Brothers’ banking business in the Forum Romanum. It is for exactly one hundred thousand denarii, the financial threshold for admittance to the equestrian order. When Claudius stripped me of equestrian rank four years ago he was perfectly right to do so as, owing to a series of unwise investments, my combined wealth in property and cash had fallen well below the limit. But now, thanks to your brother, at your behest, securing me the contract to supply chickpeas to the Danuvius Fleet, I’ve reversed my fortunes and am now financially eligible for readmittance.’

Vespasian glanced at the receipt; it was genuine. ‘The Emperor may not revise the rolls for a few years yet.’

Laelius wrung his hands; there was a hint of desperation in his voice. 'My son is now seventeen; only as an eques can I hope to secure him a post as a military tribune and start him on the *Cursus Honorum*. In two or three years it'll be too late.'

For all his client's outward appearance of confidence Vespasian could perceive that Laelius was just another middle-aged man dogged by the spectre of impending old age with nothing to show for his life. But, if he could get his son started upon the succession of honours, the military and political career that could lead to a seat in the Senate, then he could justifiably claim to have done honour for his family by bettering it. Vespasian could understand his position well; it had been his parents' ambition for their family that had driven Vespasian and his brother Sabinus to the highest office that a citizen could achieve – barring, of course, becoming emperor; that was the prerogative of one family alone. 'Do I take it that there are two favours that you are asking me: firstly to use my influence with the imperial household to have Claudius enrol you in the equestrian order, and then to ask my brother to get your son a post as a military tribune in one of his two Moesian legions? Having already got him to award you the chickpea contract.'

Laelius winced and produced another scroll from his toga. 'I know I ask a lot, patronus, but I give a lot in return. I know that senators are forbidden to conduct trade; however, I know of no reason why a senator should not benefit from trade that is conducted by someone else. This is a legal document that would make you a sleeping-partner in my business with an interest of ten per cent of the profits.'

Vespasian took the scroll, perused it and then handed it over his shoulder to Hormus standing behind him. 'Very well, Laelius, if you make it twelve per cent I'll see what I can do.'

'Have Hormus make the alteration in the contract, patronus.'

'It will be his pleasure.'

Laelius bowed his head repeatedly in thanks and gratitude while rubbing his hands and calling down the blessings of all the gods onto his patron as Hormus escorted him out through the curtains.

Vespasian took a few sips of watered wine while he waited for his final supplicant of the morning, contemplating, as he did, just what a client of Narcissus' could want from him.

'Tiberius Claudius Agarpetus,' Hormus announced, showing in a clean-shaven, wiry man of evident wealth, judging by the heavily jewelled rings on each of his fingers and thumbs. He had the olive skin of the northern Greeks, which was stretched tight over his high-cheekboned, sharp-nosed face. Regardless of having two Roman names he disdained the toga, despite the formality of the occasion.

Vespasian did not offer him a seat. 'What can I do for you, Agarpetus?'

'It's more about what I can do for you, Consul.' The Greek spoke with a measured tone, his dark eyes never leaving Vespasian's nor showing a hint of feeling.

'What can a freedman do for me? I assume that you are Narcissus' freedman since you bear his names that he took from Claudius when he freed him in turn.'

'That is correct, Consul. Narcissus freed me two years ago and since then I have worked for him on a variety of delicate tasks involving the gathering of information.'

'I see. So you spy for him?'

'Not as such; I gather information from his agents in the eastern provinces and make assessments as to its veracity and importance so my patron only sees what he needs to see.'

'Ah, so you're a saver of time?'

'Indeed.'

'And a possessor of knowledge.'

'Yes, Consul; I am a saver of time and a possessor of knowledge.'

Vespasian could see where this was leading. 'Knowledge that could be of value to me?'

'Very much so.'

'At what price?'

'A meeting: you and your uncle with my patron.'

Vespasian frowned and ran a hand over his almost-bald crown. 'Why didn't Narcissus just ask us himself? He may be out

of favour with Claudius but he's still the imperial secretary and retains the power to summon a consul and a senator.'

'That is so, but he wants the meeting to be secret; so therefore it has to be away from the palace, away from the eyes and ears of the Empress and her lover.'

'Pallas?'

'As you know, my patron and Pallas are not on the best of terms ...'

'And as *you* know, my loyalty is to Pallas and I won't be a part of Narcissus' schemes against him.'

'Not even if Pallas would knowingly allow the Empress to block your career?'

Vespasian scoffed. 'Block my career? Does it look like it's blocked? I'm Consul.'

'But you will go no further; there'll be no province to govern, no military command, nothing, just political oblivion. My patron asks you to consider this: why were you made consul for only the last two months of this year?'

'Because my forty-second birthday was in November and so it wasn't until then that I was eligible. It was a great honour to be the Emperor's colleague in the office.'

'No doubt that non-entity Calventius Vetus Carminius thought exactly the same thing when he was Claudius' colleague for September and October; in fact I would suspect that he thought it even more of an honour than you did, seeing as he'd done nothing to merit the position.'

Vespasian opened his mouth to refute the claim and then closed it immediately, his mind racing.

Agarpetus pressed his argument. 'But surely it would have been a greater honour for the victorious legate of the Second Augusta to have been made consul in January next year? In only a few days' time you could have been the Junior Consul for a full six months, perhaps even with the Emperor as your colleague, and the year would have been named after you both. But no, you were given a crumb after all your loyal service in Britannia, just a crumb, a two-month consulship, just like the man you succeeded whom nobody had ever heard of; and do you know why?'

Vespasian did not answer; his mind was too busy.

‘The Empress hates you because of your son’s friendship with Britannicus; and Pallas is powerless to help you against such an enemy. It was she who persuaded her gullible husband that it would be a singular honour for you to be made consul in the very month that you were first eligible and it will be her who’ll block any appointment that may be mooted for you when you step down on the first day of January, three days hence. Your only hope for advancement is her demise, and loyalty to Pallas won’t bring that about. Narcissus, on the other hand ...’ Agarpetus trailed off leaving the last thought dangling.

Vespasian still said nothing as his mind worked and the truth of what he was being told became apparent. He did not argue with it because he realised that deep down he had always known; deep down he had been insulted by being given the consulship for the final two months of a year; deep down, he had known it to be a snub; deep down, the honour that he felt at being consul had been gnawed at by resentment. But he had kept all that buried – deep down. ‘How will she block me?’

‘Your brother has just failed Rome in quite a spectacular way ...’

‘What do you mean?’

‘This is the knowledge that we thought would be of interest to you; Narcissus will explain if you meet him. Suffice it to say that Sabinus’ mistake is excuse enough to halt all ambitions that any member of your family may have. Pallas cannot help you, so that leaves you with one option.’

Trust Narcissus to reach straight for the truth of the matter; trust him to know how to manipulate. Vespasian looked at Agarpetus, his decision made; it had not been hard to choose between obscurity and disloyalty. ‘Very well; I’ll meet Narcissus.’

Agarpetus gave the wry smile of a man who has had a prediction confirmed – his first change of expression. ‘He suggests that the safest place to meet would be at the tavern of the South Quirinal Crossroads Brotherhood; he believes that your friend, your uncle’s client, Marcus Salvius Magnus, is still the patronus there.’

‘He is.’

'Very good, his discretion is assured; Narcissus and I will be there tonight at the seventh hour as the city celebrates today's executions.'

'Good morning, dear boy!' Gaius Vespasius Pollo boomed as he waddled fast to fall into step next to his nephew, his expansive belly and buttocks and his sagging breasts and chins all swaying furiously to seemingly different beats. 'Thank you for inviting me to share the honour of conducting the prisoners to the Emperor.' Behind him his clients fell in with those of Vespasian to make an entourage of well over five hundred escorting them down the Quirinal Hill.

Vespasian inclined his head. 'Thank you, Uncle, for lending me your clients to add impact to my arrival in the Forum.'

'My pleasure; it makes a nice change to be preceded by lictors again.'

"Change pleases",' a voice quoted from just behind Gaius, 'and it makes a nice change for me and the lads not to have to beat you a path through the crowds, seeing as you have them do it professionally today; and don't they do it so well?'

'Indeed, and with more satisfaction too, I'll hazard, Magnus,' Gaius suggested, starting to sweat despite the dignified pace and the chill winter wind. 'After all, a lictor gets paid and therefore mixes business with pleasure.'

Magnus' battered ex-boxer's face screwed into an indignant frown and he looked slantendicular at his patron with his one good eye – the painted glass ball in his left eye socket stared futilely ahead. 'Are you saying that my lads don't enjoy beating a path for you, senator? Because you certainly pay us to do so, although, granted, not in the same way as the College of Lictors remunerates its members. However, you reward us in subtle and much more lucrative ways, which means that our business is far more satisfying, if you take my meaning?'

Vespasian laughed and squeezed his friend's shoulder; despite Magnus being nineteen years his senior and considerably below him socially, they had been friends since Vespasian had first come to Rome as a youth of sixteen. He and his uncle

knew far better than most just how satisfying Magnus found his business in the criminal underbelly of Rome as the leader of the South Quirinal Crossroads Brotherhood. ‘I do, my friend; and it pleases me that even at your age you still derive satisfaction from your work.’

Magnus ran a hand through his hair, grey with age but still thick. ‘Now you’re mocking me, sir; I may be sixty but there’s still some fight and fuck in me left – although I don’t see as well as I used to since losing the eye and that is becoming a bit of a problem, I’ll admit. I ain’t as sharp as I was and some of the surrounding brotherhoods are getting a whiff of that.’

‘Perhaps it’s time to think about retiring and taking life easy; take your patron’s example: he hasn’t made a speech in the Senate for three years now.’

Gaius brushed away a carefully tongued and dyed curl from his face and looked at Vespasian in alarm. ‘Dear boy, you wonder why, when the last speech I was forced to make was reading out a list of all the senators and equites accused of crimes with Messalina and condemned to death. That sort of exposure makes one very conspicuous and that’s how I still feel three years later, having not even countenanced the possibility of holding an opinion, let alone considered expressing one, during all that time.’

‘Well, I’m afraid that you may be dragged out of your self-imposed retirement, Uncle.’

The alarm on Gaius’ face intensified. ‘Whatever for?’

‘Not what but whom, Uncle.’

‘Pallas?’

‘I wish it were but I’m afraid it’s not.’

‘Is that wise?’ Gaius asked after Vespasian had finished recounting his meeting with Agarpetus. ‘If you refuse to meet him, there is still a chance that Pallas may be able to exert some pressure over Agrippina; he might get her to change her mind or at least not oppose you so vehemently just because your boy happens to be her stepson’s best friend. But once you go behind Pallas’ back to Narcissus then all trust and expectation of

loyalty is broken and we lose the best ally that this family has in the palace.'

'But that ally is the lover of my enemy.'

'And so therefore Pallas has become your enemy whilst Narcissus is Agrippina's enemy thus making him your friend? Dear boy, think: Pallas has done nothing more than protect his own position by allying himself with Agrippina; he has made the sensible choice seeing as Nero is a far more suitable candidate to succeed Claudius than Britannicus, purely because he's three years older. Claudius won't last more than two, perhaps three, more years; do you really think that a boy could rule?'

Vespasian considered the question as the party passed under a colonnade and entered the Forum of Augustus dominated by the vividly painted Temple of Mars Victorious resplendent in deep red and strong, golden yellow. Statues, togate or in military uniform, equally as brightly painted, stood on plinths around the edge of the Forum, their eyes – which exposed Magnus' false one for the cheap imitation it was – following the public about their business as if the great men commemorated still guided the city. 'No, Uncle, not without a regent,' he admitted eventually.

'And who would that be in Britannicus' case? His mother, thank the gods, is dead so that leaves his uncle, Corvinus, or Burrus, the prefect of the Praetorian Guard. No one can countenance either option so the weight of opinion is favouring Nero because, since his fourteenth birthday fifteen days ago, he has taken his toga virilis. If Claudius dies tomorrow we have a man to put in his place.'

'If Nero becomes emperor, Agrippina will see to it that I'll never hold office again.'

'Then pull Titus away from Britannicus and the problem is solved.'

'Is it? Claudius would be offended; what happens if he surprises us all and lives for another ten years?'

It was Gaius' turn to contemplate the question as they passed through into Caesar's Forum where the Urban prefect and lesser civic magistrates could be petitioned in the shadow of a great

equestrian statue of the one-time dictator himself. ‘That would be unfortunate,’ Gaius conceded, ‘but highly unlikely.’

‘But not impossible. If I’ve earned Agrippina’s enmity, would you deem it wise to try to buy her friendship by earning Claudius’ as well?’

‘If you put it like that, then no.’

‘So what choice do we have other than going to meet with Narcissus tonight?’

Massed cheering broke out as Vespasian’s twelve lictors came out into the Forum Romanum, their appearance announcing the arrival of one of the Consuls at the Senate House to the thousands of citizenry come to witness the greatest day in Rome since the Ovation of Aulus Plautius four years previously. This would be the day when Rome’s great enemy, the chieftain who had led the resistance to her latest conquest, would pay for his temerity and die before the Emperor.

But first, in the absence of his imperial senior colleague who waited at the Praetorian camp, outside the Viminal Gate, it was Vespasian’s task to make the sacrifice and read the auspices; it was important that the gods declare the day auspicious for the business of the city to be carried out. Vespasian had no doubt that it would be so.

Blood spurted in heartbeat bursts into the copper basin beneath the white bullock’s gaping neck. The beast’s eyes barely focused, stunned as it was by the Father of the House’s mallet blow to its forehead made an instant before Vespasian, a fold of his toga covering his head, wielded the knife. Its forelegs and shoulders began to shudder, blood flowing down them. Its tongue lolled from its mouth and it voided its bowels with a steaming splatter as the juddering limbs collapsed, bringing the victim to its knees in front of the Senate House. Standing arrayed on the steps in order of precedence, the five hundred senators currently residing in the city looked on with a solemn dignity as this ancient ceremony was enacted, as of time immemorial, in the very heart of Rome.

Vespasian had stepped back, keeping well away from the various discharges emitting from the bullock – it would be

considered a bad omen for the presiding Consul to have his toga sullied and the whole ritual would have to be repeated. The Father of the House supervised the removal of the filled basin by two public slaves just before the animal slumped to the ground, its heartbeat fast diminishing as it made the transition from living flesh to inanimate carcass.

Vespasian repeated the formulaic words over the dead beast, entreating Jupiter Opitmus Maximus' blessing on his city, just as they had been intoned by incumbents of his office since the founding of the Republic. Four more public slaves rolled the body onto its back and stretched its four limbs in preparation for the belly incision.

The stench of steaming, fresh viscera assaulted Vespasian's nostrils as his honed blade slit open the gift to Rome's guardian god; the crowd, packing the Forum and beyond, held its collective breath. After a series of careful, expert incisions Vespasian lifted out the still warm heart and, having presented it to his fellow senators and then to the equites at the front of the huge throng, placed it to sizzle and hiss in the fire burning on Jupiter's altar before the open wood and iron doors of the Curia.

Two public slaves on either side pulled back the ribcage and Vespasian began the tricky task of detaching the liver without staining his toga. Having presided over many sacrifices he knew that the key to this was steady work; with methodical patience, the organ was soon removed intact and placed on the table next to the altar. Using a cloth put there for the purpose, Vespasian wiped the liver clean of blood and ran his hand over the surface. In an instant he froze and felt his heart attempt to leap into his mouth; his chest heaved with a couple of laboured breaths and his eyes stared fixedly at a blemish, almost purple on the red-brown flesh. But a blemish has no regular or specific shape and that was not true of the mark on the liver's surface caused, it seemed, by two veins coming almost to the surface together; it had a well-defined form, almost as if it had been branded on, in much the same way as a slave-owner would brand his possession: with a single letter. And it was the letter that had startled him; small but prominent, it was the letter with which his cognomen

began. What he saw before him was the letter 'V'. But more than that, the mark was in almost the exact centre of the liver just to the left of the thin central lobe; in the area that the ancient Etruscan diviners considered sacred to Mars, his guardian god.

Knowing that an omen, found on a liver gifted to Jupiter in Rome's name, so blatantly referring to him, as the master of the sacrifice, could be open to many interpretations – most of them incurring the jealousy of those in power – Vespaian turned the liver over and examined a reassuringly unblemished underside. Then, taking care to place his thumb over the potentially treasonous mark, he lifted the organ and showed it to the Father of the House and declared the day propitious for the business of Rome. But the image of the mark played before his eyes.

'So be it,' the Father cried in an aged, reedy voice as Vespaian placed the liver on the altar fire. 'Bring out the prisoners!'

There was movement around the Tullianum, the prison at the foot of the Capitoline Hill, next to the Germonian Stairs, in the shadow of the Temple of Juno on the Arx above it. Soldiers of the Urban Cohorts cleared an area in front of the single door before a centurion, with the transverse white horsehair crest on his helmet fluttering in the light breeze, rapped on the door with his vine cane.

The crowd hushed in anticipation.

A few moments later the door opened and a line of manacled prisoners shuffled out and still the crowd stayed silent, waiting for the one man they had all come to see.

And then a bulky figure filled the open doorway to Rome's only public prison, his head bowed as he passed through into the open. There was a massed intake of breath; he was not miserably clad and beaten down like the wretches before him. Quite the contrary; he wore the clothes and held the demeanour of a king.

'Very clever,' Gaius murmured, 'the grander you dress him the higher you elevate him, and the greater Claudius looks when he tears him down and humbles him.'

Vespaian gazed at the prisoner standing there, his bronze winged helmet reflecting the weak sun, his hands manacled but his chest blown out and proud beneath a weighty chain mail

tunic as the crowd's reaction grew into a cacophony of booing and hissing. There stood the man whom he had not seen since that night, five years before, when he had led his army out of the shadowed north and come within moments of catching the II Augusta manoeuvring into position. There stood the man who had almost destroyed a legion, Vespasian's legion.

There stood Caratacus.