

VESPASIAN

TRIBUNUNE OF ROME



ROBERT FABBRI

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CORVUS

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Author's Note

For Leo, Eliza and Lucas with all my love.

PROLOGUE



FALACRINA, EIGHTY MILES NORTHEAST OF ROME, AD 9



‘WITH THE GOOD help of the gods may success crown our work. I bid thee, Father Mars, to take care to purify my farm, my land and my family, in whatever way thou thinkest best.’

Titus Flavius Sabinus held his palms up to the sky in supplication to his family’s guardian god whilst reciting this ancient prayer. A fold of his pure white toga was pulled over his head in deference to the deity whose favour he invoked. Around him stood all his dependants: his wife, Vespasia Polla, held their newborn son; next to her was his mother, then his elder son, soon to be five. Behind them were his freedmen and -women, and then finally his slaves. They were gathered around the boundary stone at the most northerly point of his estate in the pine-resin-scented hills of the Apennines.

Titus finished the prayer and lowered his hands. His elder son, also named Titus Flavius Sabinus, stepped up to the stone and beat it four times with an olive branch. This done, the solemn procession around the perimeter of Titus’ land was complete and they started back towards the family homestead.

It had taken over eight hours since dawn to complete the circuit and, as far as the young Sabinus could tell, nothing untoward had happened. His father had said the right prayer at each corner of the estate; there had been no ill-omened flights of birds; no lightning had come from the cold, clear, late November sky; and the sacrificial ox, pig and ram had all followed placidly.

Sabinus led the ram; its horns were decorated with brightly coloured ribbons and its dull eyes looked around for what would be, unbeknownst to it, its last glimpses of the world.

The ram’s imminent death would have caused Sabinus no concern in normal circumstances. He had seen animals sacrificed or butchered many times and had even helped Pallo, the steward’s son, wring the necks of chickens. Death was a natural part of life. Yet he wanted to prevent this death since through it a new life, the life of his infant brother, would be purified. He wished that he could disrupt this ceremony, which was now nearing its climax, but he knew that to do so would bring down upon him the anger of the gods, and he feared them as much as he hated his new sibling. On the day of his brother’s birth, just nine days earlier, Sabinus had overheard his grandmother, Tertulla, bring the news to his father that an oak tree sacred to Mars, which grew upon the estate, had sprouted a shoot so thick that it seemed that another tree had appeared, not just a branch. When his sister had been born it had sent out only a short, thin, sickly shoot that had withered and died quickly – as had she. In his case the shoot had been long and healthy, promising a good fortune, but that was nothing compared to what this omen presaged for his brother. He heard Father shout his thanks to Mars for such a child, and promise his best ox, pig and ram for the lustration ceremony of purification where he would officially recognise the boy as his son and give him a name.

‘I’ll nurture this one with great care, Mother,’ Titus said, kissing her on the cheek. ‘This boy is destined to go far.’

Tertulla roared with laughter. ‘You’re going senile before I do, Titus. With the Republic dead and the Empire ruled by one man how far can a child from a family of equestrian farmers from the hills be allowed to go?’

‘You can laugh as much as you like, Mother, but if an omen points to greatness it is the will of the gods and not even the Emperor has the power to deny them.’

Since hearing that exchange he had been on the verge of tears every time he had seen his mother holding his brother. For nearly five years he had felt the exclusive love and protection of his family.

but now someone who was to share that love would be favoured over him.

He steeled himself as they finally neared the house; he knew that he had to play his part in the ceremony with the dignity befitting the Flavii, the ancient Sabine family into which he had been born. He would not disappoint his father Titus.

The procession entered the stable yard and assembled at the far end before a stone altar dedicated to Mars, upon which lay a pile of oil-soaked wood. To the right of it stood a flaming torch in an iron holder; to the left, on a wooden table, were placed an axe and a knife.

Sabinus made sure that the ram was standing waiting on his right-hand side, in the way that he had been shown, and then looked around at the gathering. Beside his father, holding the swaddled form of his new little brother, stood his mother. She was dressed formally in a black woollen dress or *stola* that fell to her ankles; a long, crimson mantle, her *palla*, which half covered her tightly braided jet black hair, wound around her body and draped over her left forearm. She felt Sabinus' gaze and looked over at him; her thin lips broke into a smile that lit up her slender face. Her dark eyes filled with love and pride as she saw her young son standing there in his toga, a diminutive image of her husband.

His grandmother stood next to her. She had travelled over from her coastal estate at Cosa, north of Rome, for the birth of the child and the naming ceremony. Now in her seventies, she still wore her hair in the fashion popular in the last years of the Republic, curled at the fringe and pulled tight over her head then fastened into a bun on the nape of her neck, accentuating the roundness of face that she had passed on to both her son and grandsons.

Behind the family were the freedmen and -women from the estate. Salvio the estate steward, who always contrived to have honeyed cake or a dried fig to give to Sabinus each time he saw him, held the ox's halter. His twenty-year-old son Pallo stood next to him holding the pig's lead. Both the animals waited docilely, the light breeze playing with the coloured ribbons that they too had been decorated with. Behind them there were twenty or so other men and women whose existence Sabinus was aware of, but whose names and duties were unclear to him.

Then there were the slaves, almost fifty of them, whom he generally treated as being invisible, but today they were present to witness the naming of the new son of the family and to share in the feast that would follow.

Titus approached the altar, bowed his head and muttered a brief private prayer; he then retrieved the burning torch from its stand and plunged it into the oil-soaked wood. The flames caught instantly, giving off an acrid black smoke that spiralled up into the sky.

'Father Mars, permit my harvests, my grain, my vineyards and my plantations to flourish and come to good issue, to which intent I have bidden these offerings to be led around my land. Preserve in health my mules, my shepherds and my flocks. Give good health to me, my household and to my newborn son.'

Vespatia gently placed the swaddled bundle into his arms. Sabinus watched in stony silence as his father lifted the baby.

'In thy presence and witnessed by Nundina, goddess of purification, I accept him into my family and I name him Titus Flavius Vespasianus, and I declare him to be a freeborn citizen of Rome. With this *bullā* I place him under thy protection.'

He slipped a silver charm on a leather thong over the baby's head; this he would wear to ward off the evil eye until he came of age.

Titus handed the infant back to his wife and picked up from beside the altar a jar of wine and three flat, crisp cakes made from flour and salt. He poured a few drops of wine and crumbled a cake on the head of each victim. Picking up the axe he approached the ox and, touching the blade on the beast's neck, raised it for the killing stroke. The ox lowered its head as if consenting to its fate. Momentarily disconcerted by the animal's seeming willingness to be sacrificed Titus paused and

looked around. His wife caught his eye and with a slight widening of hers urged him on. He called out to the clear, blue sky: ~~'To the intent of purifying my farm, my land and my ground and by way of~~ expiation, I make the offering of this, the finest ox on my estate. Father Mars, to the same intention I deign to accept this gift.'

With a sudden brutal motion the axe sliced through the air. The ox shuddered once as the razor sharp blade cleaved clean through its neck, half severing its head, sending out jets of crimson that sprayed over Sabinus and those others, both animal and human, close by. All four legs buckled simultaneously and it crumpled to the ground, dead.

Spattered with blood, Titus discarded the axe and picked up the knife. He approached the pig that stood next to Pallo, seemingly unconcerned by the violent death that had just been dealt so close to it. He repeated the prayer over the doomed animal and then placed his left hand under its jaw, pulled its head up and with a quick, vicious tug slit its throat.

It was now the ram's turn. Sabinus wiped some warm, sticky gore from his eyes and then placed his hands on either side of the ram's back and held it firmly as the prayer was repeated once more. The ram lifted its head and bleated once towards the heavens as Titus drew the knife sharply across its throat. Blood flowed immediately, coating the ram's forelegs as they juddered and folded beneath it. Sabinus supported the dying creature, which made no attempt to struggle, as it bled to death. Its back legs soon gave out, followed, a few beats later, by its heart.

Salvio and Pallo rolled the sacrifices on to their backs for Titus to make the long incisions down each belly. The assembled household held its collective breath as the two men heaved open the carcasses and strained to pull back the ribcages. The rank stench of viscera filled the air as Titus plunged his hands into the entrails of first the ox, then the pig, then the ram and, with great dexterity, removed the hearts, which he threw on to the fire as offerings to Mars. Now completely drenched in blood he sliced out the livers and placed them on the wooden table. His eyes widened in astonishment as he wiped the organs clean; he gestured to the congregation to come closer and examine the livers that he held up, one by one. On the surface of each were large blemishes. Sabinus' heart leapt; they were not perfect. He had seen enough sacrifices to know that a liver with an unnatural mark on it was the worst omen that could be found; but to find marks on all three was surely a catastrophe. Mars was not going to accept this runt of a sibling.

As he drew nearer Sabinus could clearly make out the shapes of each mark. However, it would be many years before he would truly understand their significance.

PART I



AQUAE CUTILLAE, FIFTY MILES NORTHEAST OF ROME, AD 25



CHAPTER I

VESPASIAN CAUGHT THE aroma of crisp roasting pork as he drove his horse the last few hundred paces up the hill to the farmhouse on his parents' new estate at Aquae Cutillae. Ahead of him the westering sun still held some warmth; it caressed the stonework and terracotta tiles of the low buildings, accentuating the different shades of red, amber and copper, causing the complex to glow amidst the dark conifers and fig trees that surrounded it. It was a beautiful place to come home to, situated high in the foothills of the Apennines, overlooked by mountains to the north and east, and overlooking the plain of Reate to the south and west. It had been his home for the last three of his almost sixteen years, since his family had moved there with the money that his father had made from farming taxes for the Empire in the province of Asia.

Vespasian kicked his heels into his mount's sweating flanks, urging the tired beast to greater haste in his desire to be home. He had been away for three exhausting days rounding up and moving over five hundred mules from their summer pastures on the eastern edge of the estate to fields closer to the farm buildings, in preparation for winter. Here they would spend the colder months, with access to shelter and feed, safe from the snows and high winds that would whistle down from the mountains. In the spring they would be sold to the army, by which time a new batch would have been foaled and the whole process would start again. The mules had, of course, not wanted to go and a long struggle had ensued, which Vespasian and his companions had won by sheer bloody-mindedness and judicious use of the whip. The satisfaction he felt upon completing the task had however been tempered by the number of mules that were missing from the final stock-take.

He was accompanied by six freedmen and Pallo, who had taken over as estate steward after his father Salvio's murder two months earlier on the road between Aquae Cutillae and the family's other estate at Falacrina, where Vespasian had been born. Since that incident they had never travelled alone or unarmed, even within the estate. Aquae Cutillae was surrounded by hills and gullies and as such was perfect country for bandits and runaway slaves to hide out in. They preyed on the livestock from the estate and on the traffic that plied the Via Salaria that ran along its southern edge from Rome to Reate and then on across the Apennines to the Adriatic Sea. Nowadays only a fool would travel without bodyguards, even so close to a major town like Reate, which was just visible on top of a hill nine miles to the west.

The smell of cooking grew stronger as they drew closer to the farm and the bustle of household slaves became apparent. Thinking that the activity around the house seemed livelier than usual, Vespasian turned to Pallo and grinned. 'It looks like my parents are laying on a feast to celebrate the return of the heroic mule-wranglers from their annual struggle with the four-legged enemy.'

'And no doubt we'll be invited to paint our faces red and be given a triumphal parade around the estate,' Pallo replied. His young master's high spirits were infectious. 'If only we'd shown mercy and brought some captives home to sacrifice to Mars Victorious in grateful thanks for our victory.'

'Mercy?' Vespasian cried, warming to the theme. 'Mercy for a foe as ruthless and terrible as we have faced? Never; it would lead to mule uprisings all over the estate and before long they would be leading us in triumph, and you, Pallo, would be the slave riding in the mule-general's chariot tasked with whispering into his long ear, "Remember, you are only a mule!"' Vespasian rode through the heavy wooden gates of the homestead followed by the laughter and mock-braying of his comrades.

The farm buildings were set around a rectangular courtyard, sixty paces by thirty, with the main house on the right forming one side, and the stables, storage rooms, freedmen's lodgings, workshop and the field slaves' barracks the other three. With the exception of the stable block, which had the house slaves' quarters on the first floor, all the buildings were single storey. The courtyard was full of

people, either slave, freed or free, all busy but careful to bow their respects to the younger son of the master as ~~Vespasian passed. He dismounted and giving his horse to a waiting stable boy asked him~~ what the commotion was in aid of. The young lad, unused to being directly addressed by a member of the family, flushed and stuttered in thickly accented Latin that he did not know. Realising that probably no one outside the immediate family would be able to tell him what was going on, Vespasian decided to wait and ask his father, who would no doubt call for him after he had received his steward's report on the state of their livestock. He nodded to the boy and headed into the main house by the side door straight into the *peristylum*, the courtyard garden surrounded by a covered colonnaded walkway off which his room lay. Any hopes that he had of avoiding his mother were dashed as she appeared out of the *tablinum*, the reception room leading to the atrium.

'Vespasian,' she called, stopping him in his tracks.

'Yes, Mother,' he replied warily, meeting her stern gaze.

'A message from your brother arrived whilst you were away playing at being a farmer. He is returning home; we expect him this evening.'

Her dismissive tone immediately soured his excellent mood. 'So the preparations are not in honour of my return from three days in the field?' he asked, unable to resist goading her.

She looked at him quizzically. 'Don't be impertinent; what makes you think that you would be honoured for doing menial tasks around the estate? Sabinus has been serving Rome; the day you decide to do the same rather than skulk up here in the hills fraternising with freedmen and mules is the day that you can expect some honour. Now go and get cleaned up. I expect you to behave civilly towards your brother this evening, though I doubt that anything has changed in the way you feel about him over the years that he has been away. However, it would do you no harm to try and get along with him.'

'I would do, Mother,' Vespasian replied, running a hand through his sweaty, short-cropped, dark brown hair, 'if he liked me, but all he ever did was bully and humiliate me. Well, I'm four years older and stronger now so he had better watch himself, because I won't stand for it like an eleven-year-old boy any more.'

Vespasia Polla peered at her son's round, olive-skinned face and noticed a steely determination in his normally good-humoured, large brown eyes; she had never seen that before.

'Well, I'll speak to Sabinus when he arrives and ask him to do his part in keeping the peace, as I expect you to do yours. Remember, it may be four years since you last saw him, but it is eight for your father and me as we were already in Asia when he joined the legions. I don't want your fighting to ruin our reunion.'

Giving him no chance to reply she disappeared off in the direction of the kitchen. No doubt to terrorise some lowly kitchen slave, Vespasian thought as he went to his room to change, his good humour now completely destroyed by the unwelcome news of his brother's imminent return.

Vespasian had not missed Sabinus at all for the four years he had been serving as a military tribune, the most junior of the officer ranks, with the Legio VIII Hispana in Pannonia and Africa. They had never got on. Vespasian didn't understand or care why, it was just a fact: Sabinus hated him and he, in return, loathed Sabinus. However, they were brothers and nothing could change that, so they kept their dealings confined to frosty formality in public, and in private – well, Vespasian had learnt at a very young age to avoid being alone with his brother.

A bowl full of warm water had been set for him on the chest in his small bedroom. He pulled the curtain across the entrance, stripped and set about rinsing off the dust accumulated from three long days' mule-wrangling. That achieved, he rubbed himself dry with a linen sheet and then pulled on and belted a clean white tunic with the thin purple stripe down the front that indicated his equestrian rank. Picking up a stylus and a new scroll he sat down at his desk that, apart from the bed, was the only other item of furniture in the small room, and began to record from notes on a wax tablet the number

of mules that they had transferred. Strictly speaking this was the farm steward's job, but *Vespasian* enjoyed record-keeping and stock-taking, and looked upon this task as good practice for the day that he inherited one of the family estates.

He had always thrived on estate work, although manual labour by someone of the equestrian class was frowned upon. His grandmother had encouraged his interest in farming in the five years that he and his brother had lived on her estate at Cosa whilst their parents had been in Asia. Throughout that time he had paid more attention to the doings of the freedmen and slaves working the fields than he had to his *grammaticus* or tutor. Consequently his rhetorical skills and knowledge of literature were sadly lacking, but what he didn't know about mules, sheep or vines wasn't worth knowing. The one area in which the *grammaticus* had been successful was arithmetic, but this was solely because *Vespasian* had recognised the importance of the subject for calculating profit and loss on the estate.

He had almost finished when his father came in without knocking. *Vespasian* stood up, bowed his head in greeting and waited to be spoken to.

'Pallo tells me that we have lost sixteen of our stock in the last month, is this right?'

'Yes, Father. I'm just finishing the numbers now but sixteen looks to be about right. The herdsmen say that they can't stop the brigands from pinching the odd one now and again; there's so much space to cover.'

'This is going to have to stop. Those bastards will bleed us dry. With *Sabinus* back we'll set a few traps for the vermin and hopefully nail some up. We'll soon see which they prefer, nails through the feet and wrists or keeping their fucking hands off my fucking property.'

'Yes, Father,' *Vespasian* ventured to his father's retreating back.

Titus paused in the doorway and looked back at his son. 'You did well, *Vespasian*,' he said in a calmer tone, 'to move all that livestock with so few men.'

'Thank you, Father. I enjoy it.'

Titus nodded briefly. 'I know you do,' he said with a regretful half-smile, then left.

Feeling buoyed by his father's praise *Vespasian* finished his calculations, confirming that they had indeed lost sixteen, tidied up the desk and lay on his bed to rest until his brother arrived. When he did so, a half-hour later, it was quietly and *Vespasian* slept through it.

Vespasian woke with a start; it was dark. Fearful that he was late for dinner he leapt from the bed and stepped out into the torch-lit peristylum. He heard his mother's voice coming from the atrium and headed in its direction.

'We must use my brother *Gaius*' influence to secure the boy a posting as a military tribune soon,' his mother was saying. *Vespasian* slowed as he realised that she was talking about him. 'He will be sixteen next month. If he is to go far, as the omens prophesied at his birth, he mustn't be allowed to spend any more time on the estate shying away from his duty to the family and Rome.'

Vespasian edged closer, intrigued by the mention of a prophecy.

'I understand your concern, *Vespasia*,' his father replied. 'But the boy's spent too much of his youth putting his energies into the estate, not into learning what he needs to survive amid the politics of Rome, let alone in her armies.'

'He will have the goddess *Fortuna* holding her hands over him to ensure that the prophecy is fulfilled.'

Vespasian struggled to contain himself; why was she being so vague?

'What about *Sabinus*?' *Titus* asked. 'Shouldn't we concentrate on him as the elder son?'

'You spoke to him earlier, he's a grown man now; ambitious and ruthless enough to make his own way, maybe even to progress beyond praetor, unlike my brother, which would be a great honour for the family. Of course we'll support him in every way we can, but we only need to support him, not

push him. Titus, don't you see that Vespasian is this family's route to renown? Now is our time. We've used the money that you made as a tax-gatherer in Asia well; you bought this land cheaply and you've developed it successfully. With that and what I brought as a dowry to our marriage, we were worth over two million sesterces at the last census. Two million sesterces, Titus. That and my brother's influence is enough to guarantee our family two places in the Senate; but they must be earned, which they can't be up here in the Sabine Hills.'

'You're right, I suppose. Vespasian should start out on his career; and I can see he'll need to be pushed. But not just yet. I have something in mind first, for him and for Sabinus now that he's back. There's nothing to be done until the next year's magistrates take up their positions in January.'

Vespasian was listening so hard that he failed to notice the figure creeping up behind him until he hand jerked back his hair.

'Sneaking around and eavesdropping, little brother? Your behaviour hasn't improved, has it?' the familiar voice of Sabinus drawled as his grip tightened on Vespasian's hair.

Vespasian jammed his elbow back into Sabinus' belly and wrenched himself free; spinning around to face his brother he ducked under a straight jab aimed at his nose and lashed out a return blow. Sabinus caught his fist and, with an iron grip, slowly forced his arm down, cracking his knuckles, twisting his wrist and forcing him on to his knees. Knowing that he was bested he ceased to struggle.

'You've got some fight in you now, have you?' Sabinus said, looking down at him malevolently. 'That almost makes up for your lack of manners; it's very impolite not to greet an elder brother after four years.'

Vespasian raised his eyes. Sabinus had changed; he wasn't the podgy sixteen-year-old who had terrorised him four years ago, he had become a man. He had replaced fat with muscle and had grown a couple of inches. His round face had slimmed to become squarer, but his brown eyes still had that malicious glint in them as they peered at Vespasian over the prominent, wide nose that was characteristic of all the males in the family. It looked as if military life had suited him. He held himself with a haughty dignity that stifled all the sarcastic remarks that Vespasian could think of in reply.

'I'm sorry, Sabinus,' he muttered, getting to his feet. 'I meant to greet you but I fell asleep.'

Sabinus raised his eyebrows at this contrite admission. 'Well, little brother, sleep is for the night; you'd do well to remember that now you are close to becoming a man. You've still got your country accent – most amusing. Come, our parents are waiting.'

He walked into the house, leaving Vespasian burning with shame. He had shown weakness to his brother and had been corrected and patronised by him; it was intolerable. Resolving never to be so effeminate as to take a daytime nap again he hurried after Sabinus, his mind turning on the intriguing mention of a prophecy. His parents knew of it, but who else? Sabinus? He doubted it; his brother would have been too young at the time and anyway, if he did know of it, he would never let on. Should he ask whom to ask? His parents – and admit that he had been eavesdropping? Hardly.

They entered the main house through the tablinum, and passed through into the atrium. Titus and Vespasia were waiting for the brothers, sitting on two colourfully painted wooden chairs, next to the *impluvium*, the pool that collected the rainwater that fell through the oblong opening in the centre of the ceiling. At each corner of the pool was a column that supported the weight of the roof. These were painted deep red in stark contrast to the pale greens, blues and yellows of the detailed stone mosaic on the floor illustrating the way that the family made its living and spent its leisure time.

The October night outside was chilly, but the atrium benefited from both the underfloor heating provided by the hypocaust, and a large log fire that blazed in the hearth to the right of the tablinum. The flickering light emitted by the fire and a dozen oil lamps illumed the haunting wax death masks of the Flavian ancestors that watched over the family from their recess between the hearth and the

lararium, the altar dedicated to the household gods. On the walls around the room, just visible in the dull light, were decorative frescos of mythological subjects painted in rich reds and yellows and punctuated by doorways that led to lesser rooms.

‘Sit down, boys,’ their father said cheerily, evidently enjoying having his close family all together again after eight years. The brothers sat on two stools placed opposite their parents. A young slave girl wiped their hands with a damp cloth; another brought them each a cup of warm, spiced wine. Vespasian noticed Sabinus eyeing the girls appreciatively as they left.

Titus poured a few drops of the wine on to the floor. ‘I give thanks to the gods of our household for the safe return of my eldest son,’ he said in a solemn voice. He raised his cup. ‘We drink to your health, my sons.’

The four of them drank, and then set their cups down on the low table between them.

‘Well, Sabinus, the army treated you well, eh? Not cooped up on garrison duty, but a proper war. I bet that you could hardly have believed your luck?’ Titus chuckled, proud to have a son who was already a blooded veteran at the age of twenty.

‘Yes, Father, you’re right,’ Sabinus replied, meeting his father’s eye with a self-satisfied grin. ‘I think we were all disappointed when I was assigned to the Ninth Hispana in Pannonia; with just the occasional cross-border raid to deal with it was going to be hard for me to excel there.’

‘But then Tacfarinas’ revolt in Numidia came to your rescue,’ Vespasia interjected.

‘We should thank the gods for rebellious kings with ideas above their station,’ Titus said, raising his cup and grinning at his elder son.

Sabinus drank the toast enthusiastically. ‘To Tacfarinas, the madman who threatened to cut off Africa’s grain supply to Rome and then sent emissaries to negotiate with the Emperor.’

‘We heard the story,’ Titus said laughing. ‘Apparently Tiberius had them summarily executed in front of him declaring: “Not even Spartacus had dared to send envoys.”’

Sabinus joined the laughter. ‘And then he sent us down to Africa to reinforce the Third Augusta, the only garrison in the province.’

As Sabinus carried on his tale Vespasian, unable to think of anyone who he could ask about the omen of his birth, found his mind wandering back to the problem of the mule-thieves. It had far more relevance to his life than martial tales of rebellions and long marches of which he had no experience and very little interest. Although Hieron, his Greek weapons and wrestling master, had left him reasonably proficient with sword – *gladius* – and javelin – *pilum* – and he could also lay most opponents in the ring on their backs, due to his stocky build and broad muscular shoulders, he felt that he was first and foremost a man of the soil; that’s where his battles would be fought, in the day-to-day struggle with nature as he strove to wring a profit from his family’s lands. Let Sabinus make his way in the world and rise up the *cursus honorum*, the succession of military and civilian offices.

‘I remember the feeling of marching to war,’ Vespasian heard his father say wistfully; he turned his attention back to the conversation. ‘Our spirits were high, confident of victory, because Rome will accept no other outcome; the Empire cannot countenance defeat. Barbarians surround us, and they must never be allowed to think of Rome as weak. They need to be shown that if they take Rome on there is only one outcome – and it will be inevitable: death for the men and enslavement for the families.’

‘No matter how many lives it costs?’ Vespasian asked.

‘A soldier must be willing to lay down his life for the greater good of Rome,’ his mother replied tersely, ‘in the sure knowledge that its ultimate triumph will keep his family, his land and way of life safe from those who wish to destroy us.’

‘Exactly my dear!’ Titus exclaimed. ‘And that is the principle that binds a legion together.’

‘And because of that our morale remained high for the two years we were there,’ Sabinus agreed.

'We knew we would all do everything thing it took to win. It was dirty war; no pitched battles, just raids, reprisals and small actions. But we rooted them out from their hiding places in the hills and group by group we dealt with them. We burned their strongholds, enslaved their women and children and executed all males of fighting age. It was slow, bloody work, but we persevered.'

'Ha, what did I say, Vespasian?' Titus' face lit up in triumph. 'Now Sabinus is back we have someone who knows how to deal with the vermin lurking in hills. We'll have those murdering mule-thieves up on crosses before too long.'

'Mule-thieves, Father? Where?' Sabinus asked.

'In the mountains to the east of the estate,' Titus replied. 'And it's not just mules; they've had sheep and a few horses, as well as murdering Salvio two months ago.'

'Salvio's dead? I'm sorry to hear that.' Sabinus paused, remembering with affection the kindly man and the treats that he had given him as a child. 'That in itself is cause for revenge. I'll take a party of our freedmen over there and show the scum how a Roman deals with their sort.'

'I knew you'd be eager to have a go at them. Well done, my boy. Take your brother along as well. It's time he saw something other than the rear end of a mule.' Titus smiled at Vespasian to show that he was only teasing him, but Vespasian had not taken offence; he was excited by the prospect of dealing out summary justice to the mule-thieves; it would benefit the estate. This was the sort of fighting that he was interested in, something real, close to home, not battling strange tribes in far-off places that he'd only vaguely heard of.

Sabinus, however, looked less than keen at the suggestion, but his father insisted.

'It'll be a chance for you to get to know each other as men and not squabbling brats, fighting every possible opportunity.'

'If you say so, Father.'

'I do. You can both go and have your own mini African campaign and nail up a few rebels, eh?' Titus laughed.

'If the boys can catch them with only a few freedmen to help,' Vespasia said, adding a note of caution to her husband's exuberance, 'it will be a far cry from fighting with the resources of a legion behind you.'

'Don't worry, Mother, I learnt enough in my two years in Africa about how to encourage plundered hungry rebels out into the open. I'll find a way.' Sabinus had an air of confidence that made Vespasia believe him.

'You see, Vespasia,' Titus said, reaching over the table and slapping his eldest son's knee, 'the army has been the making of him, as it was me and will be for Vespasian, very soon.'

Vespasian jumped up, looking at his father in alarm. 'I have no wish to join the army, Father. I'm happy here, helping to run the estate; it's what I'm good at.'

Sabinus scoffed. 'A man has no right to land if he hasn't fought for it, little brother. How will you hold your head up amongst your peers in Rome if you haven't fought by their side?'

'Your brother is right, Vespasian,' his mother argued. 'They will laugh at you as the man who farms land that he has never defended. It would be an intolerable shame to you and our family name.'

'Then I shan't go to Rome. This is where I belong and this is where I want to die. Let Sabinus make his way in Rome, I'll stay here.'

'And always live in your brother's shadow?' Vespasia snapped. 'We have two sons and both will shine. It would be an insufferable insult to the family gods for a son to waste his life on mere agriculture. Sit down, Vespasian; we shall have no more talk like that.'

His father laughed. 'Absolutely. You can't live your life here in the hills like some provincial country bumpkin. You will go to Rome and you will serve in her army, because it is my will.' He picked up his cup and downed the rest of his wine, and then stood up abruptly. 'As you know, a man

judged first and foremost by the achievements of his forebears.’ Titus paused and gestured around the funeral masks of their ancestors in their recess on the wall next to the *lararium*. ‘This being the case, I am a man of little worth, and you two, even less so.’

‘If we are to improve our family’s standing both of you will have to struggle up the *cursus honorum* as new men. This is difficult but not impossible, as Gaius Marius and Cicero both proved in the old Republic. However, we now live in different times. To progress we need not only the patronage of people of higher standing than ourselves but also the backing of officials in the imperial household and to get their attention you will have to impress in the two disciplines that Rome holds in highest esteem: military prowess and administrative ability.’

‘Sabinus, you have already proved yourself a capable soldier. Vespasian, you will soon follow the same path. But you have already shown an aptitude for administration, through your knowledge of the running of our family’s estates, a subject in which you, Sabinus, have shown very little interest.’

At this Vespasia looked directly at her sons, a faint smile of ambition flickered across her face; she could see where Titus was heading.

‘Vespasian’s first step will be to serve in the legions as a military tribune. Sabinus, your next step will be an administrative position in Rome with the *Vigintiviri* as one of the twenty junior magistrates. I propose that for the next two months you share your knowledge and teach each other. Vespasian will show you how the estate is administered. In return you will give him the basic military training received by common legionaries to enable him to not only survive, but also to thrive in the legions.’

Vespasian and Sabinus both looked at their father, aghast.

‘I will have no argument, this is my will and you will comply, however you may feel about each other. It is for the greater good of the family and, as such, takes precedence over any petty squabbles that you two may have. Perhaps it will teach you both to value each other in a way you have been unable to in the past. You will start once you have dealt with the mule-thieves. The first day Sabinus will be the teacher and the following day Vespasian, and so on until I am satisfied that you are both ready to go to Rome.’ Titus looked down at his sons and held their gazes each in turn. ‘Do you accept?’ he demanded in a voice that would only countenance one answer.

The brothers looked at each other. What choice did they have?

‘Yes, Father,’ they each replied.

‘Good. Let’s eat.’

Titus led the family into the *triclinium* where the couches were set for the evening meal and clapped his hands. The room was suddenly filled with bustling house slaves bringing in plates of food. Varo, the house steward, motioned them to wait whilst the family were made comfortable, by deferential slave girls, on the three large couches arranged around a low square table. The girls removed the men’s sandals and replaced them with slippers, then they laid napkins out on each couch in front of the diners and again wiped their hands. When all was ready Varo ordered the first course, the *gustatio* to be laid out on the table.

Sabinus surveyed the plates of olives, grilled pork and almond sausages, lettuce with leeks, and turbot fish pieces with sliced boiled eggs. Selecting a particularly crispy-looking sausage he broke it in half and then looked at his brother.

‘How many bandits are up there in the hills?’ he asked.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know,’ Vespasian confessed.

Sabinus nodded and placed some sausage into his mouth and started to chew noisily. ‘Then we better find out first thing tomorrow morning.’

CHAPTER II

‘THEY COME FROM over there,’ Vespasian said to Sabinus, pointing towards the craggy hills opposite. ‘In that direction there is nothing but hills and gullies for miles and miles.’

It was the third hour of the day; they had dismounted before a hill crest and then, keeping low, crawled the last few feet to the top and were now cautiously peering over. Below them was a large area of grassland that fell away, for about half a mile, down to a gully that divided it from the rocky slopes to the east. To their right was a wood that ran down from the crest of the hill halfway to the gully.

Sabinus surveyed the terrain for a while, formulating a plan.

The brothers had left soon after dawn, taking Pallo, half a dozen other freedmen and two dozen mules. Pallo, who had his father to avenge, had selected the men to go with them. They were all freedmen from the estate who worked as overseers of slaves, or foremen, or as skilled artisans. The younger three, Hieron, Lykos and Simeon, had, like Pallo, been born into slavery. The others, Baseos, Ataphanes and Ludovicus, a huge ginger-haired German, had all been taken prisoner in border skirmishes and had, for one reason or another, been spared execution only to be sold into slavery. They all had one thing in common: Titus had manumitted them all after loyal service to his family and they were now Roman citizens bearing the Flavian name and were ready to die for it if necessary. Each of them carried ten javelins in a bundle across their mounts’ backs and, hanging from a belt on their right, a gladius. They all had hunting bows except Baseos, an old, squat, slant-eyed Scythian, and Ataphanes, a tall, fine-boned, middle-aged Parthian; they both carried short, recurved compound bows, the type favoured by the horsemen of the East.

‘So, lads, this is where we’ll leave our bait,’ Sabinus said finally. ‘Vespasian, you and Baseos take the mules down the slope and tether them individually between the end of the wood and the gully. Then pitch a tent and build a good fire; use damp stuff, if you can, to make a decent amount of smoke. We want people to know that you are there.’

‘Pallo, you take Lykos and Simeon and skirt behind this hill and get yourselves into the gully a couple of miles to the north, and then work your way back down it to the far side of the field. Once you’re there get as close to the mules as you can, without revealing your position to any watchful eyes on the hills opposite. Me and the rest of the lads will make our way down to the edge of the wood and get as close to the mules as possible.’

‘Vespasian, give us an hour to get in position, then you and Baseos ride back up over the hill, as if you’re off hunting, and then double back down through the wood and join us. Then we’ll wait. If we’re lucky and we attract our quarry we’ll let them get to the mules, then charge them. Pallo and his lads will cut off their retreat over the gully and we’ll have them trapped. Right, lads, let’s get to it.’ Sabinus, pleased with himself, looked around the men: they nodded their approval. It seemed a very workable plan.

Vespasian and Baseos made their way down through the wood, leading their horses. The mules had been securely tethered on long ropes, the tent pitched and a good smoky fire set. Ahead they could see the edge of the wood where Sabinus and his group were waiting, their horses tied to trees. Vespasian sat down next to his brother.

‘I saw Pallo’s boys enter the gully about two miles north. I hope they weren’t seen by anyone else,’ Vespasian whispered.

‘Doesn’t matter if they were,’ Sabinus grunted. ‘There’s nothing to connect them to the mules, the

could be just another group of runaways out hunting.’

~~They settled down to wait. A hundred paces down the hill the mules were grazing peacefully. The day wore on and the fire began to die down until there was just a small wisp of smoke rising from it.~~

‘What happens when it gets dark?’ Vespasian asked, breaking a loaf of bread in two and offering half to Sabinus.

‘I’ll send a couple of the lads out to build up the fire and check the mules, but I’m hoping that you won’t have to wait that long,’ Sabinus replied, overcoming his natural antipathy to his brother and taking the proffered bread. ‘So, little brother, I shall teach you to be a legionary and you will teach me how to count mules or whatever it is that you do. You had better make it worth my while.’

‘It’s far more than mere stock-taking, Sabinus. The estates are huge; there’s a vast amount to administer. There are the freedmen who work for us: in return for a smallholding of their own they make farming tools in the smithy, shear the sheep, supervise the impregnating of the horse mares by the donkey stallions, look after the weaker new-born mules and lambs, oversee the slaves in the fields and so on.

‘Then there are the slaves themselves.’ Vespasian was warming to the theme despite the glazed look on his brother’s face. ‘They need to be put to work at different jobs, depending on the season: ploughing, pruning vines, harvesting wheat or grapes, threshing grain, pressing olive oil, treading grapes, making amphorae. It’s pointless having three hundred pints of wine or olive oil if you can’t store it; so it’s about thinking ahead, making sure that you’re using your work force efficiently and getting the most out of each man at any time of the year.

‘Then everyone has to be fed, clothed and housed, which entails buying in a large variety of goods. They have to be bought in advance at the cheapest time of the year for each item, so you need to know the local market. Conversely our produce needs to be sold at the most advantageous time of year for us. Think ahead, Sabinus, always think ahead. Do you know what we should be selling at the moment?’

‘I’ve no idea, but I assume that you are going to tell me.’

Vespasian looked at his brother with a grin. ‘You work it out, and then tell me tomorrow at our first lesson.’

‘All right, you smug little shit, I shall, but it won’t be tomorrow, tomorrow it’s my turn.’ Sabinus looked at Vespasian malevolently. ‘And we’re starting with a route march, twenty miles in five hours followed by sword drill.’

Vespasian rolled his eyes but didn’t retort. As he tore off some bread and popped it in his mouth he realised that, of the two of them, Sabinus was going to have much more scope for causing pain over the next couple of months than he had. He put that unpleasant thought from his mind and looked around, chewing on his bread.

The sun, well past its zenith, was now behind them, front-lighting the rocky slope on the other side of the gully. Vespasian peered towards it; as he did so a momentary sparkle caught his eye. He nudged Sabinus.

‘Over there, by that fallen tree,’ he whispered, pointing in the direction of the light. ‘I saw something glint.’

Sabinus followed the direction that his brother was pointing in; there was another flash. Through the heat-haze shimmer he could just make out a group of a dozen or so men leading their horses down a narrow track that wound through rocks and crags down towards the gully. Once they got to the bottom of the slope they quickly mounted up and started to follow the line of the gully a hundred paces south. Here it wasn’t so sheer and they managed to coax their horses down the bank, through the stream, and up the other side on to the Flavian pasture.

‘All right, lads, we’ve got company. We’ll wait until they’ve untethered most of the mules before

we rush them. That way they'll have their retreat impeded by loose animals. I want as much noise as you can make when we charge. Those of you who can shoot a bow from a moving horse do so, the rest wait until we're in javelin range, then let fly, and mind those mules.'

'Don't worry about them, Sabinus,' Pallo said darkly. 'I won't be wasting any javelins on the mules.'

The others grinned and went to retrieve their horses.

'You stay close to either me or Pallo, little brother,' Sabinus growled as they mounted up as quietly as possible. 'Father wants you back in one piece. No heroics. It makes no difference to us whether we get the bastards dead or alive.'

The idea that he personally might have to kill a man came as a shock to Vespasian; dealing out summary justice to brigands had not featured in his life thus far – a life that had been relatively sheltered – but he determined to acquit himself well as he pulled his horse up next to Sabinus; he would not give his brother cause to think worse of him than he already did. He gripped his mount hard with his thighs and calves and reached behind him to slip five of the light javelins from his supply. He kept four in his left hand, which also held the reins, the fifth he held in his right. He slipped his forefinger through the leather loop, halfway down the shaft, which acted as a sling on launch, greatly enhancing range and velocity. He was as ready as he would ever be. He glanced at the others, who were also checking their gear but with an air of studied nonchalance; they had all been through this before and he felt very much the novice. His mouth was dry.

They waited in silence, watching as the runaways advanced up the hill slowly so as not to startle the mules. Two of their number had stayed down at the gully, covering their retreat.

'Pallo and his lads will deal with them,' Sabinus said, relieved that the odds against them had gone down slightly.

Vespasian counted eleven of them. They were mounted on a variety of horses and ponies, all no doubt stolen from their estate or those nearby. They were dressed mainly in shabby clothes; some were wearing the trousers favoured by barbarians from the north and east. A couple had fine cloaks around their shoulders, presumably once the property of wealthy travellers who had fallen victim to their raids. None of the party had shaved in weeks; their ragged beards and long hair gave the group an air of menace that Vespasian imagined would hang over a tribal raiding party on the borders of the Empire.

They reached the mules. Six of the company dismounted and crept up to the tent. At a signal they stabbed their spears through the leather to skewer anyone hiding inside. Finding it empty they returned to the mules and started to untether them. The rest of their comrades circled slowly, keeping the anxious animals in a group, their javelins and bows ready to fell the mules' minds should they return.

Sabinus kicked his horse forward, yelling at the top of his voice as he broke cover. 'Get the bastards, boys, don't let any escape.'

The others followed him at full pelt, in dispersed order, yelling the different war cries of their own people. Within moments they were halfway across the open ground to the confused runaways. Those that had dismounted struggled to find their horses amongst the panicking mules, which dragged the tethers around entangling the legs of men, mules and horses alike.

Baseos and Ataphanes let fly their first arrows. Vespasian forgot to yell as he watched in awe as they drew, released, reloaded and drew their bows again with such speed that they were able to have two arrows in the air at any one time and still maintain perfect control of their mounts with just their legs.

The first shafts thumped into the chaotic crowd, felling two runaways and a mule that went down whinnying shrilly, kicking out at everything around it, causing the rest to start rearing and bucking.

panic.

~~'I said watch out for the fucking mules, you cretins,' Sabinus screamed at Baseos and Ataphanes as they wheeled their horses away to the left to pass around the top of the mêlée.~~

The mounted runaways had disentangled themselves from the chaos and turned their horses up to face the onslaught, releasing their arrows as they did. Vespasian felt the wind of one buzzing past his left ear and felt a wave of panic. He froze as Sabinus, Ludovicus and Hieron hurled their javelins. The momentum of the downhill charge gave added weight to the shots; two slammed into their targets with such force that one passed clean through a horseman's belly and on into the rump of his mount, leaving him skewered to the beast as it tried, in its agony, to buck its screaming rider off. The other exploded through a horse's skull; it dropped stone dead, trapping its rider beneath it, splattering Hieron and his colleagues with hot, sticky blood. This was enough for the remaining three, who turned and fled towards the gully that was now devoid of their two companions who had been left there as rearguard.

'Leave them to Pallo's lot,' Sabinus shouted as he and Ludovicus wheeled their horses back round towards the mules. Vespasian, burning with shame for having faltered, followed, leaving Hieron to deal with the unhorsed runaway who had now managed to pull himself free from his horse. He struggled to his feet, wiping the horse blood from his eyes, only to see Hieron's blade flashing through the air at neck height. His severed head fell to the ground and was left staring, in disbelief, at his twitching, decapitated body as the last of his blood drained from his brain and with it his life.

Baseos and Ataphanes had been busy. Three more of the runaways lay on the grass, feathered with arrows, and the sixth was making a break for it. Sabinus drew his sword and galloped after him. The slave looked over his shoulder and, although he must have known that he stood no chance of escape, put on another turn of speed – but to no avail. Sabinus was upon him in an instant and, with the flat of his sword, struck him on the back of the head, knocking him cold.

Vespasian looked down the hill towards the gully to see one of the three fleeing horsemen fall backwards off his mount, pierced by an arrow. His companions, seeing their escape blocked and the two erstwhile comrades lying on the ground with their throats ripped open, immediately wheeled their horses left and headed north, along the line of the gully, at full gallop. Vespasian urged his horse into a gallop, realising that they would escape unless he could cut them off. His desire to prevent the two men avoiding justice, heightened by the urgent necessity to redeem himself, produced a strange new sensation within him: blood-lust. The wind pulled at his horse's mane as he raced diagonally down the hill, closing in on the two riders. He was aware of Sabinus and Hieron following behind him, shouting at him to wait, but he knew that there was no time.

The angle between him and his targets quickly narrowed, he raised himself in his saddle and, with all his strength, launched a javelin at the lead rider. It buried itself deep in the horse's belly, sending the creature spinning head over hoofs to land on its rider, snapping his back with a sickening crunch. The second man had to check his speed to negotiate a path around the thrashing animal, giving Vespasian the advantage that he needed to draw level. His adversary slashed wildly with his sword at Vespasian's head. He ducked it and, at the same moment, launched himself at the now off-balance rider. They came crashing to the ground, rolling over and over each other, trying to find a firm grip on any part of their opponent's body, an arm, throat, hair, anything. Coming to a stop, Vespasian found himself underneath the runaway, winded and disorientated. As he struggled for air, a fist smashed into his face and he felt a searing pain and heard a sharp crack as his nose was flattened; blood sprayed into his eyes. Two rough hands closed around his throat and he realised that he was fighting for his life; the desire to kill was replaced by the instinct to survive. Terrified he twisted violently left then right in an unsuccessful effort to prevent his assailant tightening his grip. His eyes began to bulge. He peered through streaming blood at the man's face; his cracked lips tightened into a broken-toothed leer and

his rancid breath flooded Vespasian's senses. Vespasian's flailing arms slammed wild punches into the side of his head, but still the downward pressure on his windpipe increased. On the point of blacking out he heard a dull thud and felt his attacker shudder. Vespasian looked up. The man's eyes were wide open with shock and his mouth had gone slack; a bloody javelin point poked from out of his right nostril.

'What did I say about heroics, you stupid little shit?'

Vespasian focused through the blood and made out Sabinus, on foot, holding a javelin in two hands supporting the weight of the now limp runaway. Sabinus tossed the body contemptuously aside and held out his hand to help his brother up.

'Well, now.' He grinned maliciously. 'Whatever good looks you may have thought you possessed have been ruined by that little escapade. Perhaps that'll teach you to listen to your elders and betters in the future.'

'Did I kill the other one?' Vespasian managed to ask through a mouthful of blood.

'No, you killed his horse and then his horse killed him. Come on, there's one left alive to nail up.'

Vespasian held a strip of cloth, torn from the dead runaway's tunic, over his bleeding nose as he walked back up the hill; it stank, but that helped him to remain conscious. His head pounded with pain now that the adrenalin had subsided. He breathed in laboured gasps and had to lean on Sabinus. Hieron followed behind with the horses.

They reached the mules, which were calming down after their ordeal. Baseos and Ataphanes had rounded up those that had run off and had captured eight of the runaways' horses. Pallo and Simeon were busy tying the animals together into a column. Only two had been killed; four others had fled with wounds that would heal with time.

'Not a bad day's work, eh boys? Two mules down, eight horses up, Father won't have to take you to court for careless shooting,' Sabinus chuckled at Baseos and Ataphanes.

Baseos laughed. 'We'd have had three horses more to take back if you stick throwers had bothered to aim at the riders and not their mounts.'

Ataphanes clapped him on the back. 'Well said, my squat little friend, the bow is a far more effective tool than the javelin, as my grandfather's generation proved over seventy years ago at Carrhae.'

Sabinus did not like to be reminded of Rome's greatest defeat in the East, when Marcus Crassus and his seven legions had been almost annihilated in a day under the continuous rain of Parthian arrows. Seven legions' eagle standards had been lost on that day.

'That'll do, you lanky, hook-nosed horse-botherer; anyway you're here now, having been captured by proper soldiers who stand and fight, not shoot and run away. What happened, ran out of arrows?'

'I may be here but I'm free now, whereas the bones of your lost legions are still lying in the sand of my homeland and they'll never be free.'

Sabinus could not bring himself to rise to the argument; the lads had fought well and deserved to let off a bit of steam. He looked around for their prisoner, who was trussed up on his stomach still unconscious.

'Right, let's get him up on a cross and get home. Lykos, dig a hole to plant it in right here.'

Ludovicus and Hieron appeared out of the wood a short time later carrying two sturdy, freshly cut branches. With the tools that they had brought along especially for the purpose they cut two joints in the timber, then laid the cross out and started to nail it together. The noise brought the prostrate prisoner to; he raised his head to look around and started to scream as he saw the cross. Vespasian saw that he was a little younger than he.

'Sabinus, don't do this to him, he can't be more than fourteen.'

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