



FALSE GOD OF ROME
VESPASIAN III

ROBERT
FABBRI





PROLOGUE



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AN ABRUPT KNOCK on the door woke Titus Flavius Sabinus with a start; his eyes flicked open. Momentarily unsure of his whereabouts, he jerked his head up off the desk and looked around the room. The muted light of the fading sun seeping in through a narrow open window was enough for him to be able to make out the unfamiliar surroundings: his study in the tower of the Antonia Fortress. Outside the window the Temple soared to the sky, dominating the view. Its high, white marble-clad walls glowed an evening red and the gold leaf that adorned its roof glittered with sunset. Such was the scale of the Jews' most holy building that it dwarfed the huge columns supporting the expansive quadrangle that surrounded it; they in turn made the multitude of figures, scuttling between them and back and forth across the vast courtyard that the colonnade encompassed, seem no larger than ants.

The tang of blood from thousands of lambs being slaughtered within the Temple complex for the Passover meal that evening infused the room's chill air. Sabinus shivered; he had become cold during his brief sleep.

The knock was repeated more insistently.

'Quaestor, are you in there?' a voice shouted from the other side of the door.

'Yes, enter,' Sabinus called back, quickly arranging the scrolls on the desk to suggest that he had been immersed in diligent work rather than taking a late afternoon nap to recover from his two-day journey to Jerusalem from Caesarea, the provincial capital of Judaea.

The door opened; an auxiliary centurion marched in and snapped to attention before the desk, his traverse-plumed helmet





held stiffly under his left arm. ‘Centurion Longinus of the Cohors Prima Augusta reporting, sir,’ he barked. His face was tanned and wrinkled as old leather from years of service in the East.

‘What is it, centurion?’

‘Two Jews are requesting an audience with the prefect, sir.’

‘Then take them to him.’

‘He’s dining with a Jewish prince from Iudemaea and some Parthians who’ve just arrived in the city; he’s drunk as a legionary on leave. He said that you should deal with them.’

Sabinus grunted; since being sent to Judaea ten days previously, to audit its tax revenues at the behest of his superior – the Governor of Syria, who held ultimate authority over Judaea – he had already had enough dealings with Prefect Pontius Pilatus to realise the truth of the statement. ‘Tell them to come back in the morning when the prefect is more approachable,’ he said dismissively.

‘I have, sir, but one of them is a *malchus*, or captain, of the Temple Guard sent by the High Priest Caiaphas; he was most insistent that the information that he has concerns something due to happen this evening, after the Passover meal.’

Sabinus sighed; although new to the province he had gleaned enough knowledge of the complex political infighting between Rome’s turbulent subjects to know that Caiaphas owed his position to Roman favour and was therefore the closest thing to an ally that he could expect to find among the mainly hostile Jewish population of this combustible city. With the city bursting with pilgrims it would be bad politics to upset an ally during the Passover that he and the prefect had both come to Jerusalem to oversee.

‘Very well then, centurion, show them up.’

‘Best you come down, sir, where we can keep them at a distance from you.’ Longinus pulled two short, curved knives from his belt. ‘We found these hidden in the clothes of the other man.’

Sabinus took the knives and examined the razor-sharp blades. ‘What are they?’





‘*Sicae*, sir; which would mean that he’s a member of the Sicarii.’

Sabinus looked blankly at the centurion.

‘They’re religious assassins, sir,’ Longinus continued by way of explanation, ‘they believe that they’re doing their god’s work by eliminating those they consider to be impure and blasphemers; that covers just about everybody who’s not a member of their sect. He’d think nothing of trying to kill you even if he died in the attempt. They believe that if they’re killed doing holy work then, when this Messiah who they’ve been awaiting for ages finally shows up, they’ll be resurrected along with all the other righteous dead, on what they call the End of Days, to live in an earthly paradise under their god’s laws forever.’

‘They make the Zealots seem like reasonable people,’ Sabinus observed, alluding to the Jewish sect that had hitherto been the most unreasonable bunch of religious extremists he had heard of.

‘There’s no such thing as reason in this arsehole of the Empire.’

Sabinus paused to reflect upon the truth of that statement. ‘Very well, centurion, I’ll come down; go and announce me.’

‘Sir!’ Longinus saluted and marched briskly out of the room.

Sabinus shook his head; he rolled up the scrolls containing the audit of Jerusalem’s tax revenues for the past year – the cause of his earlier slumber – adjusted his toga and then followed. Although it offended his *dignitas* to go down to meet the Jews rather than have them shown into his presence he knew enough of their nature to take the advice of this seasoned centurion; he did not want to become the victim of some suicidal religious fanatic.

‘My name is Gaius Julius Paulus,’ the shorter of the two Jews announced in an impatient tone as Sabinus entered the Fortress’s great hall. ‘I am a Roman citizen and a captain in the Temple Guard and I demanded to see the prefect, not his underling.’





‘The prefect is indisposed so you will talk to me,’ Sabinus snapped, taking an instant dislike to this self-important, bow-legged little Jew, ‘and show me the respect due to my rank as quaestor to the Governor of Syria, the prefect of Judaea’s direct superior, or otherwise, citizen or not, I’ll have you flogged out of the Fortress.’

Paulus swallowed and ran a hand through his thinning hair. ‘Forgive me, quaestor, I meant no offence,’ he said with a voice suddenly oozing obsequiousness. ‘I come with a request from the High Priest concerning the agitator and blasphemer Yeshua bar Yosef.’

‘Never heard of him,’ Sabinus said flatly, ‘what’s he done?’

‘He’s another one of those Messiah claimants, sir,’ Longinus informed him. ‘We’ve been trying to apprehend him for sedition since he caused a riot when he arrived in the city four days ago. He threatened the authority of Caesar by claiming that he was a king; quite a few people were killed, including three of my auxiliaries. Then he pissed off the High Priest by going to the Temple and offending just about everyone he could before turning over all the money changers’ tables.’

‘What are money changers doing in the Temple?’ Sabinus asked, genuinely curious.

‘The Jews think that our money is idolatrous as it has Caesar’s head on it, so they’re allowed their own Temple currency to buy sheep for sacrifice and such like. The changers make a tidy profit on the exchange rate, as you might imagine.’

Sabinus raised his eyebrows; he was ceasing to find anything surprising about these people. He turned back to the two Jews; the second man, tall, full-bearded with oiled, black hair flowing from beneath a headdress wound about his head, remained motionless staring at Sabinus with hate-filled eyes. His hands had been bound in front of him. He was no rough, country peasant. His long-sleeved, light blue robe fell to his ankles; it was clean and seamless, expensively woven as one piece of material, the sign of a wealthy man. The fine quality of the black and white mantle that he wore draped over his shoulders added to that impression.





‘What has this man to do with Yeshua?’ Sabinus asked Paulus.

‘He is one of his followers,’ Paulus replied with ill-concealed dislike. ‘He was with him for the two years that Yeshua spent causing trouble up in Galilee. He claims that after the Passover meal Yeshua will declare that the End of Days is at hand; he’ll proclaim himself the long awaited Messiah and lead a revolt against Rome and the Temple priests. Caiaphas is asking for the prefect’s permission to arrest him for blasphemy and to try him before the Sanhedrin, the religious court; this man has said that he will lead us to him tonight.’

Sabinus turned back to the other man. ‘What’s your name, Jew?’

The man carried on staring at him for a few more moments before deigning to answer. ‘Yehudah,’ he said, drawing himself up.

‘I’m told that you are a Sicarius.’

‘It is an honour to serve God,’ Yehudah replied evenly in near perfect Greek.

‘So, Yehudah the Sicarius, what do you ask for in return for betraying the man whom you’ve followed for two years?’

‘It’s for reasons of my own that I do it, not for reward.’

Sabinus scoffed. ‘A man of principle, eh? Tell me why you do it so that I can believe that it’s not a trap.’

Yehudah stared blankly at Sabinus and then slowly looked away.

‘I could have it tortured out of you, Jew,’ Sabinus threatened, losing his patience with the man’s lack of deference for Roman authority.

‘You can’t, quaestor,’ Paulus said quickly, ‘you’ll offend Caiaphas and the priests, who’ve asked you for help in apprehending a renegade. With more than a hundred thousand pilgrims here for the Passover, Rome needs the priests’ support to keep order; there has already been one riot in the past few days.’

Sabinus glared at the squat little Temple Guard, outraged. ‘How dare you tell me, a Roman quaestor, what I can or cannot do?’





‘He’s right though, sir,’ Longinus assured him, ‘and it won’t do to refuse a request for help from the priests; it ain’t how things are done here, especially as we owe them a favour.’

‘What for?’

‘Straight after the riot that Yeshua caused they handed over the murderers of the three auxiliaries to us; one of them, another Yeshua, Yeshua bar Abbas, is almost as popular with the people as his namesake. The prefect condemned all three upon his arrival yesterday; they’re due to be executed tomorrow.’

Sabinus realised that Longinus probably was correct: he had no choice but to acquiesce to Caiaphas’ request. He cursed Pilatus for having put him in this position by neglecting his duties through drink; but then reflected that it was probably the intolerable situation in the province that had driven him to it.

‘Very well then,’ he growled, ‘tell Caiaphas you may proceed with the arrest.’

‘He requests a Roman officer to accompany us,’ Paulus replied. ‘Without one we will be lacking in authority.’

Sabinus glanced at Longinus who nodded his agreement to that assessment. ‘Very well, I’ll come with you. Where should we meet?’

Paulus looked at Yehudah. ‘Tell him.’

The Sicarius raised his head and looked disdainfully at Sabinus. ‘We will be eating the Passover meal in the upper city, there is only one staircase up to the room so it would be easy to defend and was purposely chosen as such; but later we will be meeting new initiates outside the city walls. Meet me by the Sheep Gate at the start of the second watch; I will lead you to him.’

‘Why not grab him in the street as he leaves the room?’

‘It will be quieter at Gethsemane.’

‘You let the Temple Guards take this rabble-rouser,’ Prefect Pilatus roared at Sabinus, slurring his words, ‘to be tried by his fellow Jews. Then you let his armed followers wander off to cause whatever mayhem they feel like at a time when this filthy city is





crammed full of the most militant religious bigots that anyone has ever had the misfortune to conquer.'

'The Temple Guards let them go once they'd secured Yeshua; their captain had had half of his right ear cut off and they didn't have the stomach for a fight. I didn't have any other troops with me.'

'Why not?' Pilatus' bloodshot eyes bulged with fury, his bulbous drinker's nose glowed red like a branding iron; droplets of sweat rolled down his saggy cheeks. Sabinus' report on Yeshua's arrest had, to say the least, disappointed him. His three dinner guests sipped their wine in silence as he slumped down on his dining couch and rubbed his temples. He reached for his cup, drained it in one, slammed it back down onto the table, staring at Sabinus malevolently, and then turned to an elegant, middle-aged man reclining on the couch to his left.

'Herod Agrippa, I need your advice. The quaestor has let this rebel outmanoeuvre us.'

Herod Agrippa shook his head, swaying his hair that hung in oiled ringlets to just below his close-clipped beard, framing a thin, firm-jawed face that would have been handsome had it not been for the large, hooked nose that protruded, like a hawk's beak, from between his dark eyes. 'You're right, prefect,' he said holding out his cup unsteadily to be filled by the slave waiting on him, 'the priests walked into Yeshua's trap without...' He stopped as the slave poured wine over his shaking hand. 'Eutyches! You're almost as useless as this quaestor. Get out!'

Sabinus stood, staring straight ahead, scowling and making no attempt to conceal his dislike for Herod.

'In our country a man would lose his eyes for the quaestor's incompetence,' the elder of the two men reclining on Pilatus' right observed, stroking his long, curled beard.

Herod threw his cup at the retreating slave. 'Unfortunately, Sinnaces, they don't have the same freedom here to mete out deserved punishment to idiots as you do in Parthia.'

Sabinus shot Herod a venomous look. 'I would remind you, Jew, that I am a senator, watch your tongue.' He turned back to





Pilatus. 'The priests offered us the opportunity to have this man arrested so I acted on my own initiative as you didn't wish to deal with it, being... otherwise engaged.'

'I was not "otherwise engaged", I was drunk and now I'm even drunker; but even in this condition I would have known to bring that madman back here into Roman custody and not let the Jews have him, no matter how many fucking priests I upset. Fuck 'em all, quaestor; do you hear me? Fuck 'em all.'

'But the priests will try him and find him guilty; it's in their interests to do so,' Sabinus argued.

'They're already trying him and are keen to pass a death sentence on him; in fact, they're so keen to condemn him that they've even broken their Passover Sabbath to try him overnight. Caiaphas sent me a message asking me to come to the palace first thing in the morning to confirm their sentence before they stone him.'

Sabinus looked at his superior uncomprehendingly. 'So what's the problem, then?'

Pilatus sighed, exasperated; he closed his eyes and ran both hands through his hair, pulling his head back. 'You're new to this dump so I'll try and explain it in simple terms,' he said with more than a degree of condescension. 'By your own admission, in your report, Yeshua organised his own arrest; he sent Yehudah to deliver him up to the priests because he wanted *them* to find him guilty, not *us*. Because of his popularity with the ordinary people he's gambling that they will rise up against the priests and all the Temple hierarchy for condemning him to death as well as against Rome for confirming the sentence. In one massively naive blunder you've enabled Yeshua to drive a wedge between the people and the only power they respect: the priests, who owe their position to Rome and therefore have nothing to gain from a revolt.'

Sabinus suddenly saw the depth of his error of judgement. 'Whereas if *we* condemned him the priests would be able to appeal for calm and expect to be listened to; and that, along with a show of force by us, should be enough to stop an uprising.'





‘Exactly,’ Pilatus said mockingly, ‘you’ve finally got there. So, Herod, I’ve got to defuse this quickly before Yeshua’s followers start rousing the people. What should I do?’

‘You must go to the palace first thing tomorrow.’

‘To overturn the sentence?’

‘No, you can’t let this man live now that you’ve finally got him. You’ve got to reunite the priests with the people so that they can control them.’

‘Yes, but how?’

‘By turning a Jewish stoning into a Roman crucifixion.’

‘This man must die,’ the High Priest Caiaphas hissed at Pilatus through his long, full grey beard. Regaled in his sumptuous robes and topped with a curious, bejewelled domed hat made of silk, he looked, to Sabinus, much more like an eastern client king than a priest; but then, to judge by the size and splendour of the Jews’ Temple, Judaism was a very wealthy religion and its priests could afford to be extravagant with the money that the poor, in the hope of being seen by their god as righteous, pumped their way.

‘And he will, priest,’ Pilatus replied; never normally in the best of moods for the first couple of hours after dawn, he was striving to keep his fragile temper. ‘But he will die the Roman way, not the Jewish.’

Sabinus stood with Herod Agrippa watching the struggle between the two most powerful men in the province with interest. It had been an acrimonious meeting, especially after Pilatus had, with great relish, pointed out the trap that Yeshua had set for Caiaphas and how he had been politically maladroit enough to fall into it.

‘To avoid an uprising,’ Pilatus continued, ‘which, judging from the reports I’ve had, Yeshua’s followers are already initiating, you must do as I’ve ordered immediately.’

‘And how can I trust you to do what you’ve promised?’

‘Are you being deliberately obtuse?’ Pilatus snapped, his temper no longer able to take the strain of dealing with this





self-serving priest. 'Because in this instance we are both on the same side. The preparations have been made and the orders given. Now go!'

Caiaphas turned and walked, with as much dignity as he could muster after being summarily dismissed, out of the magnificent, high-ceilinged audience chamber, the centrepiece of the late Herod the Great's palace on the west side of the upper city.

'What do you think, Herod?' Pilatus asked.

'I think that he'll play his part. Are the troops ready?'

'Yes.' Pilatus turned his bloodshot eyes to Sabinus. 'Now's your chance to redeem yourself, quaestor; just do as Herod has told you.'

The noise of a raucous mob grew as Sabinus and Herod approached the main entrance to the palace. Stepping out of the high, polished cedar-wood doors, they were confronted by a huge crowd filling the whole of the agora before the palace and overflowing into the wide avenue at its far end that led up to the Temple and the Antonia Fortress.

The shadows were long and the air chill, it being only the first hour of the day. Glancing up to his left Sabinus could see, on the hill of Golgotha beyond the Old Gate in the city walls, a cross that was always left standing between executions as a reminder to the populace of the fate that awaited them should they seek to oppose the power of Rome.

Caiaphas stood on the top of the palace steps with his arms raised in an attempt to quieten the crowd. He was surrounded by a dozen fellow priests; behind them, guarded by Paulus and a group of Temple Guards, stood Yeshua with his hands bound and with a blood-stained bandage around his head.

Gradually the noise subsided and Caiaphas began his address.

'What's he saying?' Sabinus asked Herod.

'He's appealed for calm and now he's telling them that, because of his popularity with the common people, Yeshua is to be pardoned and released from Jewish custody in a gesture of mercy at this time of Passover.'





A loud cheer went up from the crowd as Caiaphas stopped speaking. After a few moments the High Priest raised his arms, again asking for quiet before continuing.

‘He’s now asking them to return to their homes,’ Herod translated, ‘and he says that Yeshua will be freed immediately.’

Sabinus watched, knowing that his moment to act was imminent; Caiaphas turned and nodded at Paulus who reluctantly began to untie his prisoner’s hands.

‘Now!’ Herod hissed. ‘And try not to say anything stupid.’

‘That man is now a prisoner of the Senate of Rome,’ Sabinus bellowed, walking forward; behind him Longinus led a half-century of auxiliaries out of the palace, quickly surrounding the Temple Guards and their erstwhile prisoner. From the direction of the Antonia Fortress a cohort of auxiliaries marched down the avenue and formed up behind the crowd, blocking the road and any chance of escape.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ Caiaphas shouted at Sabinus, playing his part rather too theatrically.

‘The Senate requires that this man, Yeshua, be tried before Caesar’s representative, Prefect Pilatus,’ Sabinus replied in a high, loud voice that carried over the agora. Angry shouts started to emanate from the crowd as those who could speak Greek translated Sabinus’ words for their fellows. As the noise of the crowd grew, the cohort behind it drew their swords and began to beat them rhythmically on their shields.

Pilatus stepped out of the palace accompanied by a bedraggled and bruised Jew. He walked past Sabinus and, standing next to Caiaphas, signalled for silence; the shouting and the clashing of weapons died down.

‘My hands are tied,’ he declaimed, crossing his wrists above his head. ‘Quaestor Titus Flavius Sabinus has demanded, on behalf of the Senate, that I try Yeshua for claiming to be a king and inciting rebellion against Caesar; as a servant of Rome I cannot refuse such a demand. If he is found guilty it will be Rome that is sentencing him, not me, your prefect. I wash my hands of his blood for this is not of my doing, it is the will of the





Senate.’ He paused and brought the Jew who accompanied him forward. ‘However, in a spirit of goodwill and to show the clemency of Rome I will, in honour of your Passover festival, release to you another Yeshua whom you hold dear: this man, Yeshua bar Abbas.’

To roars of approval Pilatus ushered the freed man down the palace steps to disappear into the joyous crowd.

‘They’ve had their sop, priest, now use your authority over them and get them to disperse before I have to massacre the lot,’ Pilatus hissed at Caiaphas as he turned to go. ‘Herod, come with me.’

‘I think that I will absent myself now, with your permission, prefect. It would not be good for a Jewish prince to be associated with this man’s death, and besides I should be entertaining my Parthian guests.’

‘As you wish. Longinus, bring the prisoner to me once you’ve softened him up a bit.’

‘So you’re the man who calls himself the King of the Jews?’ Pilatus asserted, looking down at the broken man kneeling on the audience chamber floor before his curule chair.

‘They are your words, not mine,’ Yeshua replied, lifting his head painfully to meet his accuser’s eyes; blood, from the wounds inflicted by a thorn crown, rammed mockingly on his head, matted his hair and dripped down his face. Sabinus could see that his back bore the livid marks of a severe whipping.

‘Yet you don’t deny them.’

‘My kingdom is not of the physical world.’ Yeshua raised his bound hands to touch his head. ‘It is, like all men’s, in here.’

‘Is that what you preach, Jew?’ Sabinus asked, earning an angry glance from Pilatus for interrupting his questioning.

Yeshua turned his attention to Sabinus and he felt the intensity of the man’s look pierce him; his pulse quickened.

‘All men keep the Kingdom of God inside them, Roman, even Gentile dogs such as you. I preach that we should purify ourselves by baptism to wash away our sins; then by following





the Torah and by showing compassion for fellow believers, doing unto them as we would be done by, we will be judged righteous and worthy to join our Father at the End of Days, which is fast approaching.'

'Enough of this nonsense,' Pilatus snapped. 'Do you deny that you and your followers have been actively encouraging people to rebel against their Roman masters?'

'No man is master of another,' Yeshua replied simply.

'That's where you're wrong, Jew, I am your master; your fate is in my hands.'

'The fate of my body is, but not *my* fate, Roman.'

Pilatus stood and slapped Yeshua hard around the face; with a vicious leer, Yeshua ostentatiously proffered the other cheek; blood trickled from a split lip down through his beard. Pilatus obliged with another resounding blow.

Yeshua spat a gobbet of blood onto the floor. 'You may cause me physical pain, Roman, but you cannot harm what I have inside.'

Sabinus found himself mesmerised by the strength of will of the man; a will, he sensed, that could never be broken.

'I've had enough of this,' Pilatus fumed. 'Quaestor, have him crucified with the other two prisoners immediately.'

'What's he been found guilty of, sir?'

'I don't know; anything. Sedition, rebellion or perhaps just that I don't like him; whatever you like. Now take him away and make sure that he's dead and in a tomb before the Sabbath begins at nightfall, so as not to offend Jewish law. He caused enough trouble while alive and I don't want him causing more when he's dead.'

The sky had turned grey; droplets of rain had started to fall, diluting the blood that ran from the wounds of the three crucified men. It was now the ninth hour of the day; Sabinus and Longinus walked back down the hill of Golgotha. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Sabinus looked back at Yeshua hanging on his cross; his head slumped forward and blood oozed from a spear wound in his side





that Longinus had administered to hasten the end of his suffering before the commencement of the Sabbath. Six hours earlier he had been whipped up the hill dragging his cross, aided by a man from the crowd. Then he had endured, in silence, the nails being hammered through his wrists; he had seemed barely to notice the nails being pounded home through his feet, fixing them to the wood. The savage jolting as the cross was hauled upright, which had caused the screaming of the other two crucified men to intensify to inhuman proportions, had brought no more than a shallow groan from his lips. He looked now, to Sabinus, to be at peace.

Sabinus passed through the cordon of auxiliaries who were keeping the small, mournful crowd of onlookers away from the executed men and saw Paulus, standing with a couple of Temple Guards, gazing up at Yeshua; a bandage around his head was spotted with blood from the wound to his ear. 'What are you doing here?' Sabinus asked.

Paulus seemed lost in his own thoughts and did not hear him for a moment, then blinked repeatedly as he registered the question. 'I came to check that he was dead and take his body for burial in an unmarked tomb so that it doesn't become a place of pilgrimage for his heretical followers. Caiaphas has ordered it.'

'Why were you all so afraid of him?' Sabinus enquired.

Paulus stared at him as if looking at an idiot. 'Because he would bring change.'

Sabinus shook his head scornfully and pushed past the malchus of the Guard. As he did so a group of two men and two women, the younger one heavily pregnant and carrying an infant, approached him.

The elder man, a wealthy-looking Jew in his early thirties with a dense black beard, bowed. 'Quaestor, we wish to claim Yeshua's body for burial.'

'The Temple Guards are here to claim it. What claim do you have on his body?'

'My name is Yosef, I am Yeshua's kinsman,' the man replied, putting his arm around the shoulder of the older of the two women, 'and this woman is Miriam, his mother.'





Miriam looked pleadingly at Sabinus, tears rolling down her cheeks. 'Please don't let them have him, quaestor, give me my son so that I can take him back to Galilee and bury him there.'

'My orders are that he is to be buried before nightfall.'

'I have a family tomb, just close by,' Yosef said, 'we will put the body there for now, then move it the day after the Sabbath.'

Sabinus looked back at Paulus with a malicious smile. 'Paulus, these people have the claim of kin over the body.'

Paulus looked outraged. 'You can't do that; Caiaphas demands his body.'

'Caiaphas is Rome's subject! Longinus, have that hideous little man escorted away from here.'

As Paulus was manhandled away, protesting, Sabinus turned back to Yosef. 'You can take the body; Rome has finished with it.' He turned to go.

Yosef bowed his head. 'That was a kindness that I won't forget, quaestor.'

'Quaestor,' the younger man called, stopping Sabinus, 'Rome may be our master now, but be warned, the final age is approaching and Yeshua's teachings are part of it; a new kingdom will rise, new men with new ideas will rule and the old order will start to fade.'

Recollecting the Emperor Tiberius' astrologer, Thrasyllus, two years previously predicting the coming of a new age, Sabinus stared at the young man; he recognised him as the man who had helped Yeshua with his cross that morning. 'What makes you so sure of that, Jew?'

'I come from Cyrenaica, Roman, which was once a province of the Kingdom of Egypt; there they await the rebirth of the fire-bird. Its five-hundred-year cycle is coming to an end; next year the Phoenix will be reborn in Egypt for the last time and all things will begin to change in preparation for the End of Days.'

