

PROLOGUE



BRITANNIA, MARCH AD 45

THE FOG THICKENED, forcing the *turma* of thirty-two legionary cavalry to slow their mounts to a walk. The snorts of the horses and jangle of harnesses were deadened, swallowed up by the thick atmosphere enshrouding the small detachment.

Titus Flavius Sabinus pulled his damp cloak tighter around his shoulders, inwardly cursing the foul northern climate and his direct superior, General Aulus Plautius, commander of the Roman invasion force in Britannia, for summoning him to a briefing in such conditions.

Sabinus had been surprised by the summons. When the messenger, a tribune on Plautius' staff, arrived with a native guide the previous evening at the XIII Gemina's winter camp on the middle reaches of the Tamesis River, Sabinus had expected him to be bringing his final orders for the coming season's campaign. Why Plautius should order him to travel almost eighty miles south to meet him at the winter quarters of the II Augusta, his brother Vespasian's legion, seemed strange just a month after the legates of all four legions in the new province had met with their general at his headquarters at Camulodunum.

Unsurprisingly, the tribune, a young man in his late teens whom Sabinus had known by sight for the last two years since the invasion, had been unable to enlighten him as to the reason for this unexpected extra meeting. Sabinus remembered that during his four years serving in the same rank, in Pannonia and Africa, he was very rarely favoured with any detail by his commanding officers; a thin-stripe military tribune from the equestrian class was the lowest of the officer ranks, there to learn and obey without question. However, the scroll the young man bore was sealed with Plautius' personal seal, giving Sabinus no choice but to curse and comply; Plautius was not a man to tolerate insubordination or tardiness.

Reluctantly leaving his newly arrived senior tribune, Gaius Petronius Arbiter, in command of the XIII Gemina, Sabinus had ridden south that morning with an escort, the tribune and his guide, into a clear dawn that promised a chill but bright day. It had not been until they had started to climb, in the early afternoon, up onto the plain that they were now traversing that the fog had started to descend.

Sabinus glanced at the native guide, a middle-aged, ruddy-faced man riding to his right on a stocky pony; he seemed unperturbed by the conditions. 'Can you still find your way in this?'

The guide nodded; his long, drooping moustache swayed beneath his chin. 'This is Dobunni land, my tribe; I've hunted up here since I could first ride. The plain is reasonably flat and featureless; we only have to keep our course just west of south and we will come down into the Durotriges' territory, behind the Roman line of advance. Then tomorrow we have a half-day's ride to the legion's camp on the coast.'

Ignoring the fact that the man had not addressed him as 'sir' or indeed shown any

respect for his rank whatsoever, Sabinus turned to the young tribune riding on his left. 'Do you trust his ability, Alienus?'

Alienus' youthful face creased into a frown of respect. 'Absolutely, sir; he got me to your camp without once changing direction. I don't know how he does it.'

Sabinus stared at the young man for a few moments and decided that his opinion was worthless. 'We'll camp here for the night.'

The guide turned towards Sabinus in alarm. 'We mustn't sleep out on the plain at night.'

'Why not? One damp hollow is as good as another.'

'Not here; there're spirits of the Lost Dead roaming the plain throughout the night, searching for a body to bring them back to this world.'

'Bollocks!' Sabinus' bravado was tinged slightly by his realisation that he had neglected to make the appropriate sacrifice to his guardian god, Mithras, upon departure that morning, owing to the lack of a suitable bull in the XIII Gemina's camp; he had substituted a ram but had ridden through the gates feeling less than happy with his offering.

The guide pressed his point. 'We can be off the plain in an hour or two and then we'll cross a river. The dead won't follow us after that – they can't cross water.'

'Besides, General Plautius was adamant that we should be with him soon after midday tomorrow,' Alienus reminded him. 'We need to carry on for as long as we can, sir.'

'You don't like the sound of the Lost Dead, tribune?'

Alienus hung his head. 'Not overmuch, sir.'

'Perhaps an encounter with them would toughen you up.'

Alienus made no reply.

Sabinus glanced over his shoulder; he could, again, just see the end of their short column, as the fog seemed to be thinning somewhat. 'Very well, we'll press on, but not because of any fear of the dead but rather so as not to be late for the general.' The truth was that the superstitious part of Sabinus' mind feared the supernatural as much as the practical part feared the wrath of Plautius should he be kept waiting too long, so he was relieved that he had been able to retract his order in a face-saving manner. It would not do to have people think that he gave any credence to the many stories of the spirits and ghosts that were said to inhabit this strange island; but he did not like the sound of the Lost Dead and, even less, the thought of spending the night in their dominion. During his time on this northern isle he had heard many such stories, enough to believe there to be a grain of truth in at least some of them.

Since the fall of Camulodunum and the surrender of the tribes in the southeast of Britannia, eighteen months previously, Sabinus had led the XIII Gemina and its auxiliary cohorts steadily east and north. Plautius had ordered him to secure the central lowlands of the island whilst the VIII Hispana headed up the east coast and Vespasian's II Augusta fought its way west between the Tamesis and the sea. The XX Legion had been kept in reserve to consolidate the ground already won and ready to support any legion that found itself in trouble.

It had been slow work as the tribes had learnt from the mistakes of Caratacus and his brother, Togodumnus, who had tried to take the legions head-on, soon after the initial invasion, and throw them back using their superior numbers; this tactic had failed

disastrously. In two days, as they tried to halt the Roman advance at a river, the Afon Cantiacii, they had lost over forty thousand warriors including Togodumnus. This had crushed the Britons' resolve in the southeastern corner of the island and most had capitulated soon after. Caratacus, however, had not. He had fled west with over twenty thousand warriors and had become a rallying point for all those who refused to accept Roman domination.

A light breeze picked up, gusting east to west across their line of travel, swirling the mist and clearing a swathe off to Sabinus' right. He pulled himself up in his saddle, feeling a relief that visibility had cleared, if only by a few score paces in one direction. He began to mutter a prayer to Mithras to shine his light through the gloom of this fog-bound island and help him to ... he caught a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of his eye, he turned to look but it was gone, the wind sucked the mist back in and doubt clouded his mind as to whether it was a movement he had seen or it was just his imagination feeding off the tales of horror that were hard to banish from his head. The stories could never be unheard.

During the two months that Plautius had been forced, for political reasons, to pause north of the Tamesis, waiting for the Emperor Claudius to arrive and take the credit and glory for the fall of Camulodunum, the XIII Gemina had probed west along the river. It was at this time that Sabinus first began to hear reports from his officers of strange apparitions and unnatural occurrences: a legionary had been found, barely alive, flayed and yet still in uniform; his dying words had been of daemons that sucked the flesh from his limbs. Another had been found dead, drained of blood, and yet with no wound on his body or trace of the life-giving fluid seeping into the ground close by. Spectral figures in long, luminous robes that glowed with an unnatural fluorescence were sighted regularly, especially near to the mounds covering the tombs of the ancients and the many henges of both stone and wood that seemed to be, along with the sacred groves, centres for the Britons' barbarous religion.

At first Sabinus had put this down to the overactive imaginations of superstitious soldiers but, after Claudius' departure, he led his legion further inland for the final month of the campaigning season and had felt something that he had never been aware of anywhere else. He could only describe it as an ancient presence. That – and the disembodied howls and cries that plagued their nights – had convinced him that there was a power here that he did not understand; a power that was linked to the land where, no matter how strongly he was protected by the light of his lord Mithras, he was an interloper.

The following year they had carried on moving slowly inland, investing hill-forts one by one and fighting off raids on their supply lines and ambushes on their columns by Caratacus' warriors. The further they went the greater grew his feeling of unease and it was almost with relief that he withdrew his legion back south to their winter quarters on the Tamesis at the end of that season. He had brought up the subject with Vespasian last month, when the legates had met with Plautius at Camulodunum to discuss the next season's campaign, but his brother had dismissed his fears as soldiers' yarns; and yet there had been a look in his eyes that had led Sabinus to believe that he too felt a similar unease.

Sabinus tried to put his worries to one side as the column rode on slowly across the plain studded with tufts of rough grass. The breeze strengthened, shifting the fog,

tugging it this way and that in wispy tendrils so that occasionally visibility improved enough to see the way ahead until, a few moments later, another gust would cause their view to be clouded again.

To force his mind away from the superstitious depths that the eerie conditions had taken it to, Sabinus glanced sidelong at Alienus and studied him. He noticed a ruddiness to his cheeks and a certain stubbiness to his nose and, although his face was quite slender, he thought that his family must have some Celtic blood. That would explain his cognomen, Alienus: foreigner. But then, he reflected, what family from northern or, for that matter, central Italia did not? His own roundish face and bulbous nose could hardly be described as classically Latin. 'Are your people from the north of Italia, Alienus?'

'Hmm?' The young tribune blinked his eyes as if emerging from a private reverie. 'I'm sorry, sir, what did you say?'

Sabinus repeated the question.

'No, sir; I'm from the south coast of Britannia. I'm the grandson of Verica, King of the confederated tribes of the Atrebates and the Regni. My Britannic name is also Verica after my grandfather.'

Sabinus was surprised. 'Your Latin is excellent.'

'Thank you, sir. My grandfather fled to Rome five years ago, after Caratacus had dispossessed him of his kingdom, and he took me with him. Like all Britannic princes in the south, I'd already had a good education in Latin and so I soon became fluent.'

'And Claudius granted you citizenship?'

'Yes, and equestrian rank. I took the name Tiberius Claudius and then added the cognomen Alienus because it amused me and so I became Roman as my grandfather wanted. General Plautius took me onto his staff as a favour to him so that I could begin to make my way up the various offices and perhaps even become a senator. I'd be the first Briton to do so.'

Sabinus nodded his approval at this thoroughly Roman ambition. 'I was sorry to hear of Verica's death. Just last month, wasn't it?'

'He was old and expected to die; he had no regrets. He'd reclaimed his kingdom, been made a formal client-king of Rome and had ensured a strong heir in his nephew, Cogidubnus.'

'Why not his grandson?'

Alienus smiled. 'He said I was too young, the people wouldn't accept me and I understand that: how could a nineteen-year-old who hasn't been seen by his people in five years rule? Cogidubnus is also seen as a man who stood up to Rome before he was subdued by her; I on the other hand am seen as a man who voluntarily joined Rome's legions.'

'So you'll go to Rome after you've ...' A freshening gust cleared the fog around them, momentarily unveiling a burial mound not ten paces away to the left; the words died in Sabinus' throat as the breeze blew the vapour back, shrouding the tomb once again but leaving its image burnt in his mind.

Dark murmurs and muttering came from the column behind – clearly he had not been the only one to witness the ill-omened sight. When he glanced back he saw more than a few of the troopers had their thumbs clutched in their right hands and were spitting on the ground to avert the evil-eye. A barked order from decurion Atilius brought his men back to order but the damage to their already fragile morale was done and they cast

nervous looks to either side as the thinning fog billowed around them, fearful as to what it might reveal next. Amongst the Romans only Alienus seemed unruffled by travelling so close to the mound, which struck Sabinus as odd seeing as he had shown a natural disinclination to remain too long in the vicinity of the Lost Dead.

Another swirl in the fog, up ahead, drove that thought from Sabinus' mind; his heart skipped a beat. A giant's leg, solid and broad, appeared in their path as if the monster had taken a great step towards them and planted it there that instant – yet there had been no trembling of the earth and no booming report of the footstep. Then the second leg materialised through the miasma, equally silent. Shocked troopers hauled on their mounts' reins, causing many to rear and whinny, shattering the silence. Sabinus looked up in alarm; the lower torso was becoming visible but above the waist was still lost in the fog. Another leg on either side emerged; there were at least three of the monstrosities lined against them.

Sabinus drew his sword and glanced over his shoulder. 'Atilius, form two lines. Stay together!' he bellowed at his escort as panic mounted. Turning back to face the threat, he gasped; the breeze stiffened; more legs appeared to either side and they were all connected by one long lower abdomen that was not flesh and bone but stone – cut and shaped stone slabs of great magnitude. Sabinus realised that he was gazing at a henge, a stone henge; the biggest that he had seen.

Calming his horse he turned to the guide to find him missing. 'Shit! Alienus?' He could see no sign of the young tribune either. Behind him the decurion was managing to restore some order amongst the troopers. Then, to his left, Sabinus glimpsed two horses galloping away through the mist; as they disappeared, spectral figures materialised, moving towards them, now visible, now not. He felt cold dread rise in his belly; that glimpse of movement had not been a figment of a wild imagination. He looked the other way; scores more of the ethereal shapes, indistinct in the eddying mist, seeming to glide over the veiled ground, were heading their way.

They were surrounded.

When the first slingshots cracked into the turma from both sides, Sabinus felt an illogical relief: it was not the Lost Dead that faced them but men, live men who could be fought and killed.

The screaming started; but it was bestial, not human. The slingers were aiming low, at the horses' legs; they had not come to deal out death, Sabinus realised, but to take captives.

'Atilius!' Sabinus roared, pointing his sword north, back the way they came. 'Our only chance is to ride through them together.'

Atilius yelled at his men to turn; the turma struggled to form line in the hail of shot thwacking in from both sides. Five horses were already down, writhing in shattered-bone agony, their dismounted riders, screaming, struggling to clamber up behind one of their comrades. Two more horses fell thrashing to the ground, hurling one trooper clear but crushing the other; he lay still, his head at an unnatural angle. The unseated man rose shakily to his feet to be punched back, with a sharp howl, arms flailing, body arched over buckled knees, crashing to the ground with a pulped hole where his nose had been.

Sabinus urged his mount forward. 'With me!' Risking the uneven ground he drove his horse into a canter; the surviving troopers followed, unsheathing their cavalry *spathae* ready to cleave their way through their tormentors, who were now less than fifty

paces away.

Another hail of slingshot scythed through their ranks, bringing down six horses, head first, their muzzles ploughing into the grass as their splintered forelegs collapsed beneath them; the riders cried to their comrades not to leave them behind. But their pleas were in vain.

A shot fizzed past Sabinus' knee; the slingers were still aiming low. He kicked his heels and slapped the flat of his blade hard on his mount's rump; the beast burst into a gallop. The slingers turned and fled. Sabinus' heart raced, stimulated by hope. But in the instant that he thought they would run their attackers down a new terror sprang from the ground: a double line of spearmen, concealed until now, raised themselves up to kneel on one leg; each supported a long, ash-shafted boar-hunting spear, their butts wedged in the turf and the leaf-shaped, iron heads aimed at the horses' chests.

With no time to react, the turma ploughed into the bristling hedge of honed iron. The blades sliced into taut equine muscle, crunched through bone to burst into the cavity housing vital organs beyond. Blood, pressurised by huge hearts working to the limit, exploded from the ghastly rents in the beasts' chests as they impaled themselves, their momentum forcing in the spearheads until they came to a juddering, haft-bending halt on the iron crosspieces at their base.

Sabinus was flung forward onto his mount's neck, his red-plumed helmet spinning away over the enemy line. An instant later he was hurled back as the stricken animal reared, shrieking in agony, yanking the embedded spear from the grip of its blood-spattered wielder and cracking the skull of the man next to him as the beast twisted in its torment.

Landing with a lung-emptying crunch on his back, Sabinus just had the presence of mind to roll to one side as the dying horse crumpled onto its rump and then tumbled backwards, its legs scrabbling weakly in the air as if it were trying to canter its last.

Sabinus pulled himself to his knees, gasping for breath, and felt his head crack; a white light streaked across his vision. As he faded into unconsciousness he realised the bitter irony of being led into a trap by a spy passing himself off as a Roman called 'Alienus'.

It was a scream that brought Sabinus back to consciousness: a scream of fear, not of pain. He opened his eyes but could see only thick stems of rough grass; he was on his belly, his hands fastened behind his back. His head throbbed. The scream stopped and he could hear a low chanting.

Trying to ease himself over, he felt his stomach churn and then convulse. A gush of thin vomit sprayed onto the grass; its sour taste lingered on his tongue and its reek, as it dribbled out of his nostrils, turned his insides again, forcing him to heave once more.

Breathing fast and shallow he forced himself onto his back, spitting out the residue of the noisome fluid. The fog had lifted and the sun was setting. He raised his head; he was within the henge. Blurred figures were moving around. The scream resumed, drowning the chant. One of the figures raised an arm, paused, and then brought it crashing down; the scream was abruptly curtailed, replaced by a long croaking gurgle and then silence.

He felt the temperature suddenly drop. Now his eyes had begun to focus he could make out the figures. They were filthy. Their hair, dishevelled and matted into clumps, fell halfway down their backs; their beards, twisted into strands, were equally long. They

each wore a single, long-sleeved garment, belted at the waist and reaching their ankles, that may have at one time been white but now looked as if patches of mould and mildew had been allowed to fester on them for years.

Sabinus shivered and let his head slump back onto the grass with a groan; if there was one thing that he feared more than the spirits of this land, it was their servants: the druids.

‘You’re awake then, legate,’ a voice said with remarkable cheerfulness.

Sabinus turned to see Alienus walking towards him. ‘You treacherous little cunt!’

‘Hardly; to be treacherous you have to betray your own people. You can’t accuse me of that; I’m a prince of the Atrebates.’ Alienus squatted down next to him. ‘Not all of us have bowed the knee to Rome like my cowardly grandfather or my vainglorious cousin who has stolen my birthright and now rules in my place; they’ve brought shame to my people. Caradoc, or Caratacus as you call him, may have been my people’s enemy but he at least stands up to the invaders. He’s of our blood and would preserve our ways and our gods, and for that he deserves our support to throw you back into the sea.’

‘So that you can carry on your petty squabbles living on the fringes of the world?’

‘It may be the fringes of *your* world, but this island is our whole world and before you came we were free to organise our lives according to our own laws and customs. Can you blame us for wanting to keep it that way?’

‘No, but you’re being impractical.’ Sabinus shivered again, his toes were frozen.

‘Rome has come to stay and you’ll cause the death of many of your people realising that.’

‘Not now that we have you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Today is the spring equinox; the few survivors from your escort have wetted the altars of our gods with their blood in honour of the day – but not you. You’re the one we came for. We knew that to get you, it had to be before you went out on campaign. You wouldn’t have believed a summons from Plautius after.’

Sabinus’ teeth started to chatter as a deep chill crept up his legs. ‘How did you forge his seal?’

‘If you have access to documents with his seal intact on it then it’s not that difficult; you’ve got three months to work it out.’

‘What for? Why not just kill me now?’

‘Oh, you’re too precious for that. It would be a waste. The druids have decided that the most potent sacrifice to offer the gods on behalf of Caratacus – to strengthen him in his struggle – is a Roman legate.’ Alienus raised his eyebrows and pointed at Sabinus with a half-smile. ‘That would be you.’ He indicated with his head towards the druids who were standing in the golden rays of the setting sun that flooded through two of the arches in the henge to exactly illuminate the altar stone. ‘And Myrddin, the head of their order, who knows about these things, has decided that the most auspicious day and location for that sacrifice will be the summer solstice in the grove of the sacred springs.’

Sabinus looked over to the druids as they continued their chant and realised that no heat was coming off the sun’s rays but, rather, a cold power, filled with malice, emanated from the group, chilling its way up him like a series of freezing breaths; and yet Alienus seemed unaffected. Sabinus’ mind started to slow, rendering it incapable of questioning. His eyes began to frost over; with a final effort he spat a weak globule of vomit-tainted saliva into the spy’s face. ‘I’ll be gone by then. My brother will come for

me.'

Alienus wiped his cheek with the back of his hand, smiling without humour. 'Don't worry, Myrddin wants me to ensure that he does come and that he brings his doomed legion with him. I think you'll agree that two legates would be much more powerful than one; and a brace of brothers would be the most potent sacrifice to win the gods' favour for the army that Caratacus is now assembling. And Myrddin always gets what he wants.'

Sabinus' vision went white as the coldness settled on his heart; he felt a malevolent presence draw him away from consciousness and he screamed until he was deafened. But no sound emerged from his frozen lips.

PART I



BRITANNIA, SPRING AD 45

CHAPTER I

VESPASIAN SECURED THE leather thongs of his chinstrap with a tight knot, pulling the articulated cheek-guards close about his face. He shook his head; the helmet stayed firm. Satisfied, he nodded at the slave waiting upon him; the man – in his early twenties – stepped forward and draped a deep red, heavy woollen cloak about his shoulders, fastening it with a bronze brooch in the shape of a Capricorn, the emblem of the II Augusta. Despite the two mobile braziers in the tent, there was a morning chill and Vespasian was pleased with the garment's extra warmth. He grasped the hilt of his sword, tugged it, checking the weapon was loose in its scabbard, and then glanced at the slave as he stepped back, his task complete. 'You may go, Hormus.'

With a short bow, Hormus turned and disappeared through dividing curtains into the sleeping area at the rear of the *praetorium* tent – the headquarters of the legion and living area of its legate at the heart of the II Augusta's camp.

Picking up a cup of warmed wine from a low table, Vespasian strode over to his desk, covered in neat piles of waxed wooden tablets and bundles of scrolls; he sat down and opened the despatch that had caused him a sleepless night. Sipping his morning drink, he reread it a couple of times, his full face drawn into a strained expression, and then clacked the tablet down. 'Hormus!'

'Yes, master?' the slave answered, scurrying back through the curtains.

'Take this down and then have a messenger set out with it immediately.'

Hormus sat at his smaller, secretary's desk, took up a stylus, poised it over a clean sheet of wax and nodded his readiness to his owner.

'To Gaius Petronius Arbitrator, senior tribune of the Fourteenth Gemina, from Titus Flavius Vespasianus, legate of the Second Augusta, greetings.

'My brother, Titus Flavius Sabinus, did not arrive at the Second Augusta's camp around the time of the spring equinox; nor was there any meeting scheduled here between General Plautius, myself and my brother. I know of Tribune Alienus; he is the grandson of the late Verica of the Atrebates. I vaguely recall coming into contact with him a few times whilst he has been serving on Plautius' staff during the last two years and I have no reason to doubt his integrity; but neither do I have any reason to believe that his loyalties may not still lie with the rebels. What was he doing leading my brother to a meeting that did not exist? If you are positive that it was to here that they set out fifteen days ago then I can only assume that Alienus was, after all, never truly one of us but, rather, a Britannic spy. Therefore, my brother is either a prisoner or, the gods forbid ...' Vespasian paused, not wanting to say the word that had tormented him all night as he contemplated Sabinus' possible fate.

Although Sabinus – almost five years Vespasian's senior – had terrorised him as a child and treated him with scorn as a young man, their relationship had gradually changed over the last dozen years or so and matured into one of mutual respect. It had been Vespasian's part in helping his brother recover the lost Eagle of the XVII Legion that had brought the two siblings close enough to communicate without constant bickering. Sabinus had been under threat of death from the Emperor Claudius' powerful freedman, Narcissus, for his part in the assassination of Caligula; his fellow conspirators had all been executed. However, owing to the intervention of the brothers' old

acquaintance, Pallas, fellow freedman to Narcissus, Sabinus' role had been covered up and his life spared on condition that the siblings retrieved the final Eagle still missing after the German rebel, Arminius, destroyed three legions in the Teutoburg Forest in the year of Vespasian's birth, thirty-six years previously.

Although the Eagle's return to Rome did not go exactly as planned, it was recovered and the brothers found themselves back in favour with the real power in Rome: not the Emperor but his freedmen. Their success had forced Sabinus to admit that he owed his brother his life and it was with a heavy heart that Vespasian completed his sentence: '... dead.'

Vespasian waved a hand, dismissing his slave, and downed the rest of his wine, praying to Mars, his guardian god, that somehow Sabinus was still alive; although why the Britons would spare any captives he did not know as they were well aware that Plautius refused to bargain with their lives. To be sold into slavery to the tribes in the north or the west was the best that any man could hope for and that was a living death. But, if that was the case, at least there would be a chance of finding him.

The two guards outside the tent crashing to attention and the sound of someone entering brought him out of his reverie. The prefect of the camp, Maximus, the third most senior officer in the legion, marched briskly in and snapped an immaculate salute honed by almost thirty years of service.

Vespasian stood out of respect for his junior in rank but senior in experience. 'Yes, Maximus?'

'The legion is deployed, sir! We're awaiting your orders should the parley prove to be unsuccessful.'

'Is Cogidubnus talking with them?'

'They wouldn't allow him and his two bodyguards to enter the fort so he had to negotiate from outside the gate; he's still up there.'

'Very well; I'm on my way.'

Vespasian walked out through the gates of the II Augusta's camp, built on a low flat-topped hill that ran gently down to a stream at its base. The guards on the gate, staring rigidly ahead, presented arms with overemphasised stamps as he passed.

His primus pilus, Tattius, the most senior centurion of the legion, and his thick-stripe tribune, Valens, were waiting outside along with the thin-stripe tribunes: five of them, teenagers or in their early twenties, and here to learn. A quarter of a mile ahead of them stood another hill, round like a giant molehill, three hundred feet high and half a mile across at its base, which stood apart from the surrounding undulations for no apparent reason other than to provide a formidable fortified refuge; and fortified and formidable it was. Three-quarters of the way up its summit, two great ditches, each ten feet deep, had been carved out of its circumference and filled with fire-hardened, pointed stakes. The slope before them was steep and had been cleared of all trees and bushes, except, as Vespasian had noted on his circuit of the fort upon arrival, the western slope on the far side; that was too steep for an assault and bushes had been allowed to flourish on it. Behind the inner ditch, the excavated earth had been piled up and packed down to make a steep mound on top of which a palisade of thick logs, twice the height of a man, had been constructed. Hundreds of warriors lined its length and behind them, amongst the scores of round huts that covered the summit, waited many more along with their women and children, plenty of whom, Vespasian had learnt from bitter experience, were capable

of using a sling or hurling a javelin to deadly effect.

On the downwards slope between Vespasian and the hill-fort stood the II Augusta in two lines of five cohorts each; rank upon rank of iron-clad heavy infantry, their burnished helmets glowing golden in the newly risen sun as they stood, motionless, beneath their standards fluttering in a chill breeze. Vespasian had ordered this display not because he intended to send the full might of his legion against the enemy; the ditches would make that impracticable and a waste of legionary life. No, the noncitizens of the more expendable Gallic auxiliary cohorts would make the first assault. The parade was purely to intimidate the defenders and aid Cogidubnus, the new King of Rome's allies, the confederation of the Atrebatas and the Regni, in his negotiations with the chieftain of this sub-tribe of the Durotriges who had been trapped in their hilltop redoubt by Vespasian's lightning move inland, to the northwest, in the first days of the new campaigning season.

The thrust had been initiated by the report from a Britannic spy, in Cogidubnus' pay, of the muster of a large war band at the fort, perhaps under the command of Caratacus himself, in preparation to strike eastwards, behind the line of the II Augusta's advance, to harry their supply lines in order to force the legion to turn and deal with them, thus delaying considerably their spring campaign.

The legion's arrival and surrounding of the fort the previous evening had been so swift that none of the Britons had managed to escape; those who had made it over the palisade had been quickly cut down or picked up by the legion's Batavian auxiliary cavalry, which had skirted around the fort specifically to prevent anyone escaping and calling for aid. The spy's estimate that there were upwards of four thousand men of fighting age within had been confirmed by prisoners less willing to endure the knives of their inquisitors. However, they had all denied Caratacus' presence to the point of death.

Caratacus' plan will not work now, Vespasian thought with a self-congratulatory half-smile, putting his anxiety for his brother to one side and concentrating on the matter in hand. The scene before him would have impressed him four years ago when he had first taken command of the II Augusta, but now, after two seasons' campaigning in Britannia, it was a common sight for him; he counted them in his head and reckoned that this was his ninth siege.

Although the defences were almost a mile in circumference, there was but one entrance and that was facing Vespasian; but it was not a straight route up the hill to get there. The crossing points in each ditch were at different points, forcing an attacker to zigzag during the ascent, exposing their flanks to constant missile fire from the men on the walls. Many auxiliaries would die in a frontal assault just to reach the gates and then many more would perish as they tried to batter them down with the ram that stood ready, encased in a wooden housing covered with dampened leather to protect it from the fire-pots that would surely be hurled down from above.

But Vespasian was hoping that it would not come to that as he watched three mounted men, Britons, turn their horses and ride away from the gates. As they did there was a commotion on the palisade next to them; a figure jumped down, rolling as he landed, before fluidly regaining his feet and pelting towards the three riders. One slowed, braving the few javelins hurled down at the fugitive, and leant back, his arm outstretched towards the fleeing man who leapt, grabbing the proffered hand, and using his momentum swung himself up behind the rider. The horse reared in fright, almost

unseating the men, before its rider brought it back down with a brutal tug of the reins and kicked it forward to thunder down the hill in the wake of his two comrades, now passing through the gap in the outermost ditch.

Vespasian waited with his officers in silence as they galloped down the hill, each man knowing that the news they brought would decide the fate of them all that day, one way or another.

There was a stirring amongst the legionaries as the horsemen passed through their formation; centurions and optiones bellowed at their men for silence.

‘I think the lads can tell by the expression on Cogidubnus’ face that the news is not good,’ Maximus muttered as order returned to the legion.

Vespasian grunted. ‘Of course it’s not good; who would try to escape from a fort that was going to surrender?’ The strained expression returned to his face as the riders drew near and their demeanour confirmed Maximus’ conjecture; but he also knew that their unwillingness to surrender may mean that there was an even greater prize at stake.

‘Their chieftain, Drustan, has sworn that they will fight to the death of the last child,’ Cogidubnus confirmed as he brought his horse to a halt. The fugitive, a young man with long matted hair, wispy stubble and a slim face smeared with dirt, slipped from behind one of the accompanying horsemen to the ground. ‘I offered them their lives and the status of allies of Rome with the right to bear arms.’

Vespasian tensed. ‘He’s in there, isn’t he?’

Cogidubnus spoke to the rescued man in his own tongue; he nodded his head as he replied. ‘Yes, legate, he’s in there; my agent here says he arrived two days ago.’

Vespasian glanced at the spy, astounded that such excellent information could have emanated from so unlikely a source. The man kept his head bowed; with his ragged clothes he looked more like a slave than a warrior. ‘And now he hopes to slip away whilst a whole sub-tribe sacrifices themselves for him.’

‘It would seem that way.’

Vespasian turned to his officers. ‘Gentlemen, I want this place completely surrounded before the assault starts; nobody must be allowed to pass through our lines. I’ve a feeling that by our swift action we may have cornered Caratacus.’

It had taken less than half an hour for the II Augusta to redeploy; each cohort had formed up in four ranks of one hundred and twenty men, standing in silence, encircling the hill, sealing it so that none might escape. Vespasian looked up the slope ahead of him, over the heads of the first cohort, to where three Gallic auxiliary cohorts, of eight hundred men each, were formed up, shields raised against the long-range slingshot raining down from the warriors on the wall, just over a hundred paces away. At the head of the central cohort stood the dark form of the ram’s housing surrounded by the century that had received the much-prized honour of leading the assault. In front of them to the left stood the eight hundred eastern archers of the Hamian auxiliary cohort and to their right were the legion’s sixty *ballistae*, bolt-shooters.

Vespasian steadied his horse and brought his right arm sweeping down; the *cornicen* next to him blew one low, rumbling note on his G-shaped horn. Simultaneously a crewman from each bolt-shooter thrust a flaming torch at the oil-drenched wadding wound around the tips of their three-foot-long wooden missiles and the Hamians ignited their arrows in small fires set along their line. With the massed thrumming of bows and the staccato thwacking of high-torsion engines releasing, hundreds of burning projectiles

soared through the air leaving trails of black smoke in their wake, like plough-furrows in the sky.

The assault had begun.

The first volley tore over the palisade to punch into the wattle and daub walls and thatched roofs of the many round huts behind it; shrieks of the wounded indicated that it was not just the buildings that suffered. As the Hamians released a second volley from their powerful re-curved composite bows of wood and horn, Vespasian saw, with satisfaction, the first few thin tendrils of white smoke rise from within the fort. The Hamians managed six more volleys before the bolt-shooters released again; above, the smoke trails had smudged together into a thin grey pall that arced over the field to merge with the thickening fumes emitting from the fires feeding on thatch. Flames now licked up, under-lighting the denser clouds of smoke with a deep orange hue as the conflagration grew; here and there billows of steam added to the thickening atmosphere attesting to the fire-fighting efforts of those trapped within the fort. Their disembodied shouts floated down over the II Augusta as the hail of slingshot from the warriors on the wall, as yet untroubled by the arrows passing over their heads, continued to beat into the shields of the Gallic cohorts – with little effect.

A young tribune galloped down the slope towards him.

‘Are the Gauls ready, Vibius?’ Vespasian asked as the lad pulled up his mount and saluted.

‘Yes, sir. The two support cohorts have been issued with scaling ladders as you ordered.’

‘And Valens’ diversionary attacks?’

‘Yes, sir; he has enough planking to span the first ditch.’

‘Ride back down to him and tell him not to wait for the Gallic auxiliaries to make it to the gate. I want him to go immediately to keep as many Britons as possible occupied away from fighting the fires. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, sir!’ With a perfunctory salute Vibius turned his horse and galloped away under another flaming volley.

Vespasian glanced at Maximus, seated on a horse next to him, and allowed himself a grin of enjoyment. ‘Time to clear the walls for our gallant Gauls.’ He nodded at the cornicen. ‘Second target.’

This time the man blew two shorter notes; the effect was immediate: the Hamians lowered their trajectory, sending shaft after shaft at the warriors manning the palisade whilst the ballista crews adjusted their sights to the same effect. By the time the first bolts pounded into the smoke-wreathed palisade it was clear of the enemy, who had hunkered down, unwilling to risk their lives until the situation made it necessary; they were all well aware that that moment would come soon.

The clearing of the wall was the signal that had been prearranged with the prefects of the Gallic auxiliary cohorts and for the first time that day a shout erupted from the Roman lines. The lead cohort moved forward up the steep hill towards the gap in the foremost ditch, its first century pushing and pulling the ram in its midst; the lucky few toiling safely within the structure and the rest hauling on the two ropes to the front or the bars ranged down the side or pushing from behind. The second century led the way to provide some cover to the front whilst other auxiliaries crowded around their comrades heaving at the great engine of war, sheltering them with their shields to the sides; but no

shots came from above as the Hamians continued their strafing of the wall. The two support cohorts raced ahead from either side, quickly passing over the crossing points in the nearer ditch and then fanning out along the rim between it and the last ditch, left and right to either side of the gate. Crouching down under their shields, scaling ladders laid on the ground before them, they waited for their comrades with the ram to arrive. On up the hill the ram ground, gradually gaining momentum, the solid wooden wheels, turning on goose-fatted axles, rumbled over the earth, closing in on the first obstacle.

It was for this moment that the Britons were waiting; the gap in the ditch, only forty paces from the palisade, was angled to the left and narrow, no more than six feet wide so that a wagon could just pass safely through. The ram's housing had been especially adapted overnight so that its wheels just fitted, leaving no room for the men heaving on the side-bars and, more crucially, no room for the protective shield-bearers to either side. The leading second century passed through first and formed up in two ranks, one kneeling, one standing, making a wall of shields facing the enemy. As the engine followed, the men to either side were forced to fall back and wait; the ram lost momentum and the auxiliaries manhandling it lost their shelter. As one, hundreds of heads appeared over the palisade, arms twirling leather slings above them; many fell back, pierced by feathered shafts, into the fires beyond, but the majority managed three swift revolutions before releasing and then ducking back down to reload. A hail of shot sped unseen down onto the auxiliaries; much clattered off the protective wall of the second century's shields but enough pounded in on the first century, felling men with shattered limbs and pulped faces as their comrades strove on, knowing that to flee with the whole legion watching would bring a shame upon them too heavy to bear. A few men from the second century ran back to haul the dead and wounded out of the way of the heavy wheels and to take over the empty places on the ropes; auxiliaries behind added their weight to the effort and the ram again picked up speed.

Another volley of ballista bolts hissed over the toiling centuries' heads, punching warriors bodily back, skewered and arcing blood, as they reappeared on the wall, slings reloaded. Yet, braving the Hamians' constant rain of arrows and indistinct in the thickening smoke, those still standing again whirled their slings about their heads, quickly achieving the velocity for another deadly salvo that pummelled into the target, dropping men with shrill shrieks or in deathly silence. Once again the ram's progress was slowed, but not before the back wheels cleared the gap and the protective shield-bearers could again stream through.

A huge cheer rose from every man witnessing the feat and Vespasian found himself gulping in air; he had not taken a breath for some time. Glancing left to the south side of the hill he saw that Vibius had delivered his message. Valens was on the move with the legion's second, third and fourth cohorts, now formed into columns, eight men abreast. In front of each formation, long planks had been thrown across the first ditch and pioneers had climbed carefully down their sheer sides and were now working between the stakes, raising upright supports for the temporary bridges.

Satisfied that his second in command was progressing with all due haste, Vespasian turned his attention back to the hill, now swathed in roiling smoke. The ram was just visible being manoeuvred right to negotiate the gap in the second ditch, twenty paces from the gate. The second century had already crossed and had formed up as before to shield their comrades from as much missile hail, both slingshot and now javelin, as

possible – although the more acute angle so close to the palisade made their efforts of little account and, as he watched, two men on the ropes fell. But the ram kept on moving, its front wheels now halfway across the gap. The Hamians and bolt-shooters continued their volleys, although it was largely by guesswork as the figures on the palisade were only visible intermittently. The two supporting Gallic cohorts remained shielded and ready on either side of the gate, ladders now projecting skywards from their midst.

Vespasian looked down at the cornicen. ‘The first cohort to advance!’

An ascending series of three notes rumbled from the bronze instrument.

Vespasian saw the standards of the five double-strength centuries of the legion’s élite cohort dip and then, to the bellows of their centurions and optiones, one by one they marched forward towards the gap in the first ditch. Now it was all about breaking down the gate to let those seasoned killers in.

But disaster had struck.

Through the eddying smoke the ram was just discernible; it was listing to the right. Vespasian tensed, straining his eyes; a gust cleared his view for a few moments, enough time to watch the earth crumble beneath the rear, right-hand wheel and see it slip over the edge. The housing crashed down onto its back axle, the angle causing the suspended ram to swing to the right, stunning many of the auxiliaries labouring within the structure and skewing it even more with its momentum. For two or three quickening heartbeats the engine teetered on the brink as men rushed to its left side to cling to it, hoping that their weight would somehow avert the inevitable.

But the inevitable, as ever, happened.

Beginning with a slow lean that quickly accelerated, the housing crashed, with a splintering and cracking of wood that could be just heard even over the din of the assault, to its ruin onto the stakes in the ditch below, taking the men inside down with it onto the fire-hardened points. For a moment its front end stood perpendicular before it toppled back, lengthways along the ditch, disappearing from view.

Vespasian kicked his horse forward. ‘Maximus! Stay here and give the orders; keep the momentum up and tell the Hamians and the artillery to aim for the wall above the ram.’

Confident that he had left the overall command of the assault in the hands of the most experienced man in the Roman ranks, Vespasian urged his horse into a gallop up the hill; the turma of legionary cavalry, acting as his bodyguard, followed in his wake. He sped past the legion’s first cohort, overtaking them halfway up, and then dismounted and ran on, with his escort following, through wispy smoke. Keeping his shield high, he passed the eight remaining centuries of the Gallic cohort who had stopped, unsure of how to proceed now that the means to open the gate had been taken out of commission, and arrived at the second ditch in the shadow of the gate. ‘Where’s your prefect?’ Vespasian demanded of the auxiliary centurion of the third century as he too crouched with his men, shielded against the hail of shot.

The man indicated with his head towards the ditch. ‘Down there, sir, trying to sort out the mess.’

‘Bring your century and follow me; I want you to form up in testudo on the gap facing the ditch and be prepared to haul the ram up.’

‘Sir!’ The centurion’s battle-hardened face set firm with resolve, evidently pleased to have a direct order in the chaos.

Vespasian ran forward at the crouch, his shield taking hit after hit; his red cloak and tall horsehair plume making him highly conspicuous. Behind him he heard the bellowed orders of the centurion getting his men on the move. Reaching the ditch he looked down; the housing lay on its back, mangled. Stakes jutted out along its twenty-foot length; a few were slimed with gore, protruding from impaled bodies and, in one case, the back of a broken skull. In amongst the wreckage the surviving men of the first century worked furiously trying to clear a way to the ram and tending to the wounded whilst the second century did their best to shield their comrades, although the archery and artillery concentrated on the wall above them meant that very few Britons risked exposing themselves to try a shot. Nevertheless, three men from his escort stood over Vespasian, protecting him with their shields.

‘Prefect!’ Vespasian shouted, spotting the cohort commander amid the carnage. ‘Cut the ram free and pass it up to those men in the gap.’ He pointed to the third century now forming a testudo, holding their oval auxiliary shields over their heads and to their front and sides creating a reasonably safe leather and wood box around themselves. ‘Forget about the wounded for the moment; we need to open that gate before the assault falters.’

The prefect acknowledged the order and bellowed at his men to start cutting the ropes that suspended the ram from its housing.

Vespasian turned to two of his escort crouched behind him. ‘Run to the support cohorts on either side of the wall and tell them to start scaling the palisade as soon as they see the ram lifted out of the ditch.’

With a salute to their commander and a nervous glance between them the two men scampered off. Down in the ditch much of the protective leather had been stripped away from the wooden frame and the ram was clearly visible; the last few ropes were being cut and the prefect had gathered all his able-bodied men along its length ready to lift the great trunk – almost two feet in diameter – either by the hooks to which the ropes had been fastened or by cradling it underneath. The final rope was left attached to the ram but unknotted from the housing; an auxiliary hurled the loose end of it up to the centurion of the third century, who fed it into his men’s formation.

‘Lift, you whoresons!’ the prefect roared at his men.

Vespasian made a mental note to mention the prefect in his report to Plautius.

The ram rose from the ground. Javelins hurtled down from above in increasing numbers as the defenders realised what was being attempted; the second century’s shields vibrated with their impacts.

The ram was brought up to shoulder level and the slack was taken out of the rope as the men within the midst of the testudo lowered their shields and made ready to take the strain. Vespasian glanced around his shield, up at the top of the palisade; men were still braving the Hamian and artillery volleys in order to disrupt the operation that, if it was successful, would spell their deaths as surely as an arrow in the eye. As he looked, two Britons were punched back by feathered shafts; two more immediately took their places, such was the defenders’ desperation to halt the progress of the ram.

The auxiliaries raised the ram above their heads and began to feed it, foot by foot, up into the heart of the testudo as the javelin storm increased, felling three of the work-party; the prefect rushed to add his support to the weight, bellowing at his men to go faster. Vespasian held his breath, knowing that he was powerless to speed things up; the

men were working as fast as possible and his shouting at them as well would make no difference. He steeled himself for what he knew he must do as soon as the ram was back up, knowing that the chances of success would be greatly increased if he fought in the front rank, sharing the danger with his men. How he wished that his old friend, Magnus, always so useful in a fight, was with him to guard his right shoulder and not a thousand miles away in Rome.

The ram juddered and a shriek pierced through the tumult.

‘Get that fucking thing out of his hand!’ the prefect roared.

Without any ceremony the javelin skewering an auxiliary’s hand to the ram was yanked out; the man fell to his knees nursing the bloody wound as his comrades toiled on, heaving the ram the last few feet up out of the ditch and into the testudo. The Britons now concentrated their efforts on the partially shielded formation as the ram was passed through its middle.

Vespasian ran to the front of the century and took up position next to the centurion at the head of the ram, grasping a hook whilst keeping his shield above his head. ‘Get them turned to face the gate!’

The centurion screamed the order; the century rotated ninety degrees as javelins pounded its wooden roof. Glancing left and then right, Vespasian could see the two supporting cohorts making their way down into the second ditch with their tall scaling ladders, drawing a little of the defenders’ attentions away from the ram. He shared a grim but determined look with the centurion and gave a brief nod.

‘Forward at the double!’ the centurion cried.

Hefting the ram in their midst, the auxiliaries broke into a jog, behind them the remainder of the cohort followed up. Within a few pounding heartbeats they covered the last twenty uphill paces to the gates; without stopping, they crashed the ram into them with a heavy report, shaking the structure but doing no discernible damage.

‘Swing it back on my mark!’ Vespasian cried. ‘And now!’

As one the men carrying the ram withdrew it and then swung it forward with all possible momentum, cracking it into the gates whilst their comrades did their best to shield them from the constant rain of missiles. Again the gates shook and again the auxiliaries swung.

But then came what Vespasian had been dreading but somehow had to be endured. Clay pots filled with red-hot charcoal crashed down onto the upturned shields, fragmenting into sharp shards and releasing their scorching contents onto the men underneath. Vespasian stifled an agonised scream as a glowing coal fell onto the back of his hand; it was all he could do not to relinquish his grip on the ram’s hook as the burning lump rolled off leaving seared skin and the stench of scorched flesh. Cries from all around attested to the effectiveness of the stratagem but somehow the ram was swung again and then again.

Now there was a crack of light between the gates and Vespasian’s hopes soared. ‘Keep at it, lads!’

With another resonating blow the gates shifted back a bit more, widening the gap; figures could be seen through it rushing to lend their weight to the defences. Javelins now flicked overhead as the remainder of the cohort’s centuries loosed their primary weapons at the defenders, punching many of them back, arms flailing, eyes rolling, shrieking into the fires beyond. Yet still the fire-pots fell onto their upturned shields; as Vespasian

turned to encourage the men one screamed in agony as his woollen tunic suddenly ignited and Vespasian felt a sticky liquid slop through a gap in the shield-roof.

‘That’s oil, sir!’ the centurion yelled, his voice taut with dread as flames burgeoned on their makeshift cover.

The ram again thundered forward; the auxiliaries, faces racked with fear, heaved at it with the extra strength afforded by desperation as oil, ignited by the glowing charcoal scorching their upturned shields, dripped down into their formation. The gates shuddered as the bar across them cracked; the ram returned with brutal force, splintering the bar and driving the gates ever back. A spear punched through the gap, cleaving the centurion’s mouth, shattering teeth, and slicing through soft tissue and bone to burst out of the back of his neck in an explosive spray. Vespasian lowered his burning shield to face the threat as all around him the men of the century dropped the ram and slammed their shoulders into the two gates, edging them back. More spears thrust through the gap, cracking into Vespasian’s shield and those of the auxiliaries who now stood to either side of him. They stood firm as the men on the gates strained with the defenders in a contest of strength and will; gradually but inexorably the gates ground backwards as men from the next century rushed to aid their comrades. The gap widened even more and the shield-wall extended; javelins now hissed towards them, thumping into their shields that dripped flaming oil. To his rear, Vespasian could hear the other centuries’ officers bellowing orders at their men to storm the breached defence; he sensed bodies forming up behind him and felt relief at the arrival of support – even if it was not Magnus.

The gates shifted another couple of feet and in the swirling smoke beyond, backlit by flaming huts, stood a mass of warriors. With a volley of sleek-pointed javelins announcing their intent, they charged.

Holding his smoking shield tight before him, Vespasian led the auxiliaries’ response, breaking into a jog for the few closing paces before the two sides collided just inside the gates. The moment before contact, in an action instilled by years of repetitive training, the auxiliaries punched their shields forward and up as they stamped their left legs down, planting them squarely on the ground whilst thrusting their swords, underarm, between the gaps at their adversaries’ groins. The shock of impact crunched through Vespasian’s frame as he strained his left arm to hold back the weight of the charge, hunkering down behind his shield to avoid the wild slashes of long swords and the overarm thrusting of spears. The auxiliary next to him, blood already splattered on his chain mail, screamed in an unintelligible tongue; Gallic, Vespasian assumed as he furiously worked his sword arm forward to feel it jar against wood. The weight of the file behind him pushed into his back and a shield was thrust over his head, protecting him from projectiles hurled from the wall to either side. Javelins from the rear ranks hurtled overhead, slamming into the packed mass of defenders compacted by warriors at the rear surging forward against a Roman line that held solid. Another punch with the tip of his weapon brought a lingering scream from ahead as he felt it tear through yielding tissue; warm fluid slopped onto his sandalled feet as he twisted his blade, rolling his wrist left then right, before abruptly yanking it out. He felt a body slither down his shield and jabbed his sword down at it as he stepped over his fallen foe, praying that the man behind him knew his business and would ensure that the warrior was despatched.

Another warrior stood in his path, snarling under a drooping moustache, his naked torso smeared with blue-green vitrum swirls, brandishing a slashing-sword above his

head. With lightning speed, the weapon flashed towards him, left to right; Vespasian ducked under the swipe at the same moment as the Gallic auxiliary to his left raised himself to stab overarm at the throat of his own opponent. With a wet crunch the blade seared through the Gaul's neck, cutting off his stream of obscenities, severing his head and sending it spinning, spiralling blood, away into the fray. Vespasian sliced his weapon down, taking the Briton's arm off at the elbow while the headless corpse sank to the ground disgorging its contents in a crimson fountain as the heart pumped on for a few beats; the freshly carved stump added to the gore spraying about and the warrior screamed, looking incredulously at his shortened arm. It was the last thing he saw; Vespasian's sword punched back up into his throat as an auxiliary from the second rank stepped into his decapitated comrade's place.

Vespasian took another step forward; gradually the auxiliaries were pushing their way into the hill-fort. How the support cohorts were doing in their attempts to scale the palisade to either side of the gate, Vespasian had no idea; he did not even know if they had made it across the final obstacle with their twenty-five-foot ladders that would just reach the top of the palisade from the bottom of the ditch. He pushed on, punching with his shield boss, stabbing with his sword and stamping with his feet, working his body to its limits as the cacophony of battle swirled around him along with the smoke from burning thatch, cocooning him in a world of brutal images and ever-present danger.

How long he struggled for he could not tell but profound weariness was beginning to envelop him. He forced his aching muscles on, waiting for an opportunity to relieve the front rank with fresh troops; but the press of battle prevented this. His breathing had become ragged and he could feel his reactions slowing; he knew that he would not survive long if he stayed to the fore of the fight. Yet how could he, the legate, retire from the combat by himself? Straddling another body as the man behind him stabbed the tip of his weapon into the stricken man's throat, Vespasian felt a ripple flow through the tightly bunched defenders, from south to north; suddenly the timbre of the Britons' yells changed from defiance to surprise. As he worked his blade he saw from the corner of his eye a couple of Britons further back look nervously over their shoulders. They had been hit in the flank; somewhere along its length the Romans had succeeded in scaling the palisade. Now he knew that they were in and all he had to do was survive for a few racing heartbeats more.

Sensing that victory was imminent, the auxiliaries pushed forward into the wavering Britons, stabbing and hacking with blood-slick blades, each step forward easier than the last as the enemy lost cohesion and resolve in equal measure. Through a break in the smoke, Vespasian glimpsed Roman helmets away to the left: legionary helmets, not auxiliary. Valens had made it over the palisade with his three cohorts, fifteen hundred men. Now they just had to clear the way for Tattius' first cohort to enter the hill-fort. They, along with the three auxiliary cohorts already joined in the assault, would be enough to prevail, whilst the rest of the legion and Gallic cohorts and Cogidubnus' recently raised Britannic cohort would prevent any escape. Caratacus would be at least killed, if not captured alive.

Caught between the two-pronged attack and the fires to their rear and suffering casualties at a steadily increasing rate, the Britons broke, fleeing into the smoke.

Glancing up, left then right, Vespasian saw the defenders leaping from the palisade anxious not to be caught between the auxiliaries coming through the gates and

those of the two cohorts now streaming over the walls, the Hamians and artillery having ceased their volleys. However, he was under no illusion that it was over. 'Halt!' he shouted to the century that had led the charge. 'Move aside.'

The century's survivors – Vespasian estimated that they were down to half their number – gladly complied and stepped out of the way in an unmilitary fashion, too exhausted to care about drill, as the rest of the cohort streamed into the fort, their prefect at their head.

'They'll regroup beyond the flames, prefect,' Vespasian called. 'Keep your lads tight together.'

With a half-made salute the prefect led his men on into the smoke as the legion's first cohort doubled through the gate. Vespasian did not bother to give Primus Pilus Tatus any orders; four years working closely with the veteran centurion had taught him that the man knew his business.

It was with relief that he saw his cavalry escort, now remounted, following the first cohort into the fort. He took his horse from the decurion and hauled himself wearily into the saddle. 'Thank you, decurion, I don't think I could walk another pace.'

'Then you ain't exercising enough,' a voice from behind him commented.

Vespasian spun round, his eyes murderous.

'Perhaps you should do more riding of a different sort, if you take my meaning?'

Vespasian's face broke into a broad grin. 'Magnus! What in the name of all the gods are you doing here?'

Magnus rode up to Vespasian and proffered his arm. 'Let's just say that Rome's a bit unwelcoming for me at the moment, but I think that can probably wait until later, sir, seeing as you seem to be in the middle of storming a hill-fort.'

Vespasian grasped his friend's muscular forearm. 'I'm intrigued, but you're right, it can wait until I've caught Caratacus.'

Vespasian rode past the last of the smouldering huts. All around lay the bodies of the dead – women and children as well as warriors – sprawled, bloodied and broken. Ahead of him, lined across the hill-fort, from the southern wall to the northern, stood the II Augusta's first and second cohorts, supported by the third and fourth. Beyond them was a mass of warriors and their families.

'Looks like they're going to surrender,' Magnus observed, scratching his grey hair. 'They must have decided that a life of slavery is preferable to an honourable death. I'll never understand these savages.'

'That suits me; it'll save a lot of Roman lives and I'll get a healthy cut of the profit from their sale. But if they are surrendering it must mean that Caratacus is dead.'

'Or he's escaped.'

'Impossible, the fort is surrounded.'

Magnus grunted, his scarred ex-boxer's face betraying his scepticism at that assertion, as they dismounted.

Cogidubnus was waiting for Vespasian next to Tatus. 'They are willing to surrender; Drustan and Caratacus are dead.'

'Where are their bodies?'

'Drustan's is with them but they claim that Caratacus' corpse was completely burnt in the fire.'

'Bollocks!'

‘That’s what I thought; but if they’re willing to surrender they must be confident that Caratacus is safely away.’

Vespasian scowled. ‘Take their surrender; he can’t have got out of here.’ He turned to Tattius. ‘Have every hut searched for trapdoors and other hiding places and whilst the lads do that have the prisoners pass through the gates one by one so that Cogidubnus can examine each of them.’ He turned back to the Briton. ‘Even the women; you never know what he could be disguised as.’

Cogidubnus nodded and walked away with Tattius to organise the surrender and search of the hill-fort.

Vespasian turned to Magnus. ‘Something is not quite right here. Come on.’

He kicked his horse towards the south wall and, dismounting, climbed one of the many ladders leading up to the walkway that ran around the palisade’s entire length. Magnus followed him up.

Looking out around the hill’s circumference Vespasian saw what he expected: it was surrounded by cohort after cohort with never more than a fifty-pace gap between each one. ‘Surely no one could get through that.’ They walked around to the western and then northern sections; every angle was covered.

‘Perhaps he was burnt after all,’ Magnus suggested.

‘No, if he died they would have saved the body to prove it.’

‘Then he must be hiding.’

‘Sir!’ Tattius called from under the west-facing wall. ‘We’ve got something.’

Vespasian and Magnus ran back and climbed down to the primus pilus; in his hands he held some wooden boards.

Vespasian looked at the ground at his feet; it was a tunnel entrance, just wide enough to admit a man. ‘Shit!’ He pulled up the remaining boards and saw a ladder within; he climbed in.

He headed down into darkness with Magnus following. After descending ten feet or so he came to a level tunnel; light could be seen at its far end. He speeded up, anxious to get out of the close confinement. A few moments later his head popped out into the open; in front of him were stakes: he was in the ditch below the palisade. Opposite was another tunnel leading to the second ditch; he made his way through the stakes and climbed in. Pulling himself along with his arms for a dozen or so paces of gradual descent he emerged at the other end into the second ditch. He dusted himself off and looked around. On the far side was the only growth of bush that had been allowed to cultivate around the defences on the steep west slope; foot-holes led up the ditch’s side beneath it.

Magnus joined him. ‘So this is how he got out.’

Vespasian pointed to the foot-holes. ‘Yes, and that’s how he got away.’ He climbed up the vertical bank and peered into the bush; there was a narrow path cut through it that went on for thirty paces down the hill. He crawled down its length and came out into a dell in the hillside, deep enough to obscure him from both the walls above and the auxiliary cohort on station at the base of the hill.

‘He could have got to here unseen,’ Magnus said, peering over the edge and down to the troops at the bottom, ‘but the rest of the way down is open ground; our lads are bound to have seen anyone coming out of here.’

‘Let’s go and ask them.’

Vespasian and Magnus jogged over to the auxiliaries; their prefect strode forward to meet them. 'The fort is ours, legate?'

'It is, but we're missing one vital component, Galeo. Did anyone come out?'

The prefect looked confused. 'Just the man you sent an optio to bring out: the spy.'

'What spy? What optio?'

'The young lad seemed too young to be an optio but it was hard to tell under all the grime on his face.' He pulled a scroll from his belt and proffered it to Vespasian. 'But he had written orders with Plautius' seal on, giving him permission to get our agent out of the place before it fell, so he wouldn't get killed in the chaos of the assault.'

Vespasian glanced at the scroll, knowing immediately that it was a forgery.

'When was this?'

'Just after the attack started.'

'Where did they go?'

'They rode off, around the fort heading for our camp.'

'Are you sure that they didn't turn away and ride off?'

'I don't know; I didn't pay them any attention once they'd gone.'

Vespasian's fists clenched. He felt like pummeling the man although he knew that it was not his fault; he had been duped. 'This optio, did he give his name?'

'Yes, sir; Alienus.'

Vespasian raised his eyes to the sky. 'I might have guessed.'

'So he was from you?'

'No, prefect, he was not.'