

## PROLOGUE



ROME, 24TH JANUARY AD 41

THE RIGID, WIDE-EYED grin of a gaudily painted, comic actor's mask leered out at the audience; its wearer skipped a short jig, the back of his left hand pressed to his chin and his right arm outstretched. 'The wicked deed that causes you *all this* distress was my doing; I confess it.'

The audience roared with laughter at this well-delivered, purposely ambiguous line, slapping their knees and clapping their hands. The actor, playing the young lover, inclined his mask-obscured head in acknowledgement of the appreciation before turning to his partner on the stage, who wore the more grotesque, gurning mask of the villain of the piece.

Before the players could continue the scene, Caligula jumped to his feet. 'Wait!'

The ten thousand-strong audience in the temporary theatre clinging to the northern slope of the Palatine Hill turned towards the imperial box, jutting out on supporting wooden columns at the exact centre of the new construction.

Caligula copied the actor's pose. 'Plautus would have wanted the line delivered like this.' He skipped the jig perfectly whilst imitating the mask's broad grin, opening his sunken eyes wide so that the whites contrasted markedly with the dark, insomniac's bags beneath them. 'The wicked deed that causes *you all* this distress was *my* doing; I confess it.' As he finished the last syllable he brought his left hand up from his chin to rest on his forehead and melodramatically threw back his head.

The audience's mirth was even more vigorous than at the first rendition, loud and raucous – but forced. The two actors held their bellies and doubled up in unrestrained hilarity. Caligula came out of the pose, a sneer on his face, and, throwing his arms wide, turned slowly to the left, then to the right to encompass the whole audience in the semi-circular construction, basking in their adulation.

Standing at the very rear of the theatre, within the shade of one of the many awnings rigged over the precipitous seating, Titus Flavius Sabinus looked down at his Emperor with disgust from beneath a deep hood.

Caligula swept up an arm, palm towards the audience; they quietened almost instantaneously. He sat down. 'Continue!'

As the actors obeyed his command a middle-aged man wearing a senatorial toga, seated at Caligula's feet, began to shower kisses on the young Emperor's red slippers, caressing them as if they were the most beautiful objects that he had ever seen.

Sabinus turned to his companion, a pale, thin-faced, auburn-haired man in his

thirties. ‘Who’s the unashamed sycophant, Clemens?’

‘That, my dear brother-in-law, is Quintus Pomponius Secundus, this year’s Senior Consul, and that’s as close as he’ll come to expressing an independent opinion whilst he’s in office.’

Sabinus spat and gripped the hilt of his sword, concealed beneath his cloak. The palm of his hand felt clammy. ‘This hasn’t come a moment too soon.’

‘On the contrary, this is long overdue. My sister has been living with the shame of being raped by Caligula for over two years now; far longer than honour dictates.’

Down on the stage a hearty kick by the young lover up the backside of his newly arrived slave sent him tumbling to the ground and the audience into a fresh fit of laughter that grew as the players then proceeded to chase each other around, with many trips, turns and near misses. In the imperial box Caligula gave his own demonstration of comedy running, chasing his lame uncle, Claudius, up and down, this time to the genuine amusement of the crowd, who never failed to appreciate a cripple being mocked. Even the Emperor’s sixteen full-bearded German Bodyguards, lined up across the rear of the box, shared in the enjoyment of the hapless man’s degradation. The two Praetorian tribunes standing to either side of the enclosure made no effort to reprimand their subordinates.

‘Are you really going to make that buffoon emperor?’ Sabinus asked, raising his voice against the escalating mirth as Claudius’ weak legs gave out and he sprawled onto the floor.

‘What choice do we have? He’s the last of the adult Julio-Claudians. My men in the Praetorian Guard won’t accept the restoration of the Republic; they know that’ll lead to their disbandment. They’ll mutiny, kill me and any other of my officers who stand in their way; then they’ll make Claudius emperor anyway.’

‘Not if we assassinate him as well.’

Clemens shook his head. ‘I can’t in honour order his death, I’m his client.’ He indicated the two Praetorian tribunes in the box and lowered his voice as Caligula, tired of humiliating his uncle, retook his seat and the audience settled back down to watching the scheduled entertainment. ‘Cassius Chaerea, Cornelius Sabinus and I have agreed that Claudius must become emperor: it’s our best hope of surviving this. We’ve had discreet negotiations with his freedmen Narcissus and Pallas – as well as Caligula’s freedman, Callistus. He’s seen the way things are going and has thrown his lot in with the Claudius faction; they’ve promised to try and protect us from any vengeance that Claudius would be honour bound to exact for killing a member of his family, even though he’ll be the beneficiary – a very surprised one.’

‘Claudius doesn’t know yet?’

Clemens raised an eyebrow. ‘Would you trust that garrulous idiot with such a secret?’

‘And yet you would trust him with the Empire?’

Clemens shrugged.

‘I say he should die.’

‘No, Sabinus, and I demand your oath to Mithras on that. We could have done this a couple of months ago but we delayed so that you could get back to Rome to strike the blow and satisfy your honour. Jupiter’s tight sack, I’ve already exposed another conspiracy to the Emperor in order to ensure that it will be us who will have the pleasure

of killing him.’

Sabinus grunted his assent, well aware that he was in no position to argue. For the two years since the rape of his wife, Clementina, and his appointment as legate of the VIII Hispana by the perpetrator of that outrage, he had been stationed with his legion on the northern frontier in the province of Pannonia, cut off from Rome. He had been forced to wait until Clementina’s brother, Clemens, one of the two prefects of the Praetorian Guard, had identified a group of his officers disaffected enough with Caligula’s deranged behaviour to risk their lives in an assassination attempt. This had proved to be a lengthy process – as Clemens’ coded letters had informed him – owing to his men’s understandable reluctance to share treasonable thoughts; if they misjudged their confidant they would have been immediately executed.

The tipping point had come the previous year after Caligula had returned from a half-hearted punitive expedition to Germania and an aborted invasion of Britannia where the legions had refused to embark on the ships. He had humiliated them for their insubordination by making them collect seashells, which he paraded through the streets of Rome in a mock triumph. Having alienated the army he had then proceeded to do the same to the Senate and the Praetorian Guard, making himself absolutely friendless, by announcing his intention to move the Empire’s capital from Rome to Alexandria. This had caused consternation amongst both the officers and the nine thousand rank and file of the Guard: they feared that they would either be forced to relocate to the unpleasantly hot province of Egypt or, worse, be left behind to rot into irrelevancy so far from the Emperor who gave purpose to their existence.

United in their fears for their future, the officers had hesitantly begun to share their unease with one another. Clemens had soon been able to recruit the tribune Cassius Chaerea, whom he had long suspected of harbouring murderous intent towards the Emperor who constantly mocked his high voice. Chaerea had brought his close friend and fellow tribune Cornelius Sabinus into the plot as well as two disaffected centurions. With the conspirators finally in place, Clemens had kept his promise to Sabinus that he would be the one to strike the first blow and had written informing him that all was ready and he should return to Rome in secret; Sabinus had arrived two days earlier. Since then he had remained hidden in Clemens’ house; not even his brother, Vespasian, nor his uncle, Senator Gaius Pollo, whom he could see seated next to each other near the imperial box, knew of his presence in the city. Once the deed was accomplished he would return to his posting. He was confident that he could leave unnoticed and that the alibi he had given the junior officers he had left in command of his legion in winter quarters was secure: that he had been visiting his wife and two children, who were staying, out of Caligula’s reach, with his parents in Aventicum in the south of Germania Superior. This way, Clemens had reasoned, if there were to be any vengeance meted out to the conspirators by the incoming regime, Clementina would just lose her brother and not her husband as well.

On the stage below the plot had resolved to a happy conclusion and the characters were exiting to a wedding feast through a door in the *scaenae frons*, the two-storey scenery fronted with columns, windows, doors and arches. Sabinus pulled his hood further over his face as the final player turned to address the audience.

‘To all our friends here, we would gladly extend an invitation to join us; but though enough is as good as a feast, what is enough for six would be poor fare for so

many thousands. So let us wish you good feasting at home and ask, in return, your thanks.'

As the audience burst into applause the German Bodyguards parted to allow a tall man, shrouded in a purple robe and sporting a gold diadem around his head, into the imperial box. He bowed to Caligula in an eastern fashion, putting both hands to his chest.

'What's he doing here?' Sabinus asked Clemens in surprise.

'Herod Agrippa? He's been here for the last three months, petitioning the Emperor to extend his kingdom. Caligula's been toying with him, making him suffer for his greed. He treats him almost as badly as he does Claudius.'

Sabinus watched the Judean King take a seat next to Claudius and exchange a few words with him.

'Caligula will leave to take his bath soon,' Clemens said as the applause started to die down. 'On the way there he wants to hear a rehearsal of a group of Aitolian youths who are due to perform tomorrow. Callistus has had them wait above us in front of Augustus' House just by the entrance to the passage that leads directly to those steps by the imperial box. You can get to there through that exit.' He pointed to the extreme left of the gates that ran along the rear of the theatre; it was shut. 'Knock on it three times, then wait a beat and repeat the signal. It's guarded by two of my men, both centurions; they're expecting you and will let you through. The password is "liberty". Put your neckerchief over your face; the fewer people who can identify you the better if the worst comes to the worst. Chaerea, Cornelius and I will escort Caligula out of the box and then up the steps. As soon as you see us leave, make for the passage and walk down it; we should meet about halfway. I'll delay his German Bodyguards by ordering them to prevent anyone following us up, so we'll have a little time but not much; strike him as soon as you can.' Clemens held out his right arm.

'I will, my friend,' Sabinus replied grasping it. 'It'll be a blow straight to the neck.'

They held each other's gaze for a moment – the grips on one another's forearms firmer than they had ever been – then nodded and parted without another word, both aware that this day may be their last.

Sabinus watched Clemens enter the imperial box and felt calm spread through him. He cared not whether he lived or had died by the close of the day; his one concern was to avenge the brutal and repeated rape of Clementina by the man who had set himself up as an immortal god over all men. Today that false god would taste the limits of his immortality. Clementina's face, as she pleaded with him to save her from her fate, burned in his mind. He had failed her then; he would not do so now. He gripped his sword hilt again; this time his hand was dry. He breathed deeply and felt his heart beating slowly and steadily.

A troupe of acrobats took to the stage and began hurling themselves around, spinning, tumbling and cartwheeling, only to be met by a disinterested rumble of conversation from the audience, no matter how high or far they leapt. All eyes were on the Emperor as he prepared to leave.

Sabinus saw the Germans salute Clemens as he barked an order at them. Cassius Chaerea and Cornelius Sabinus moved from their positions and came to stand behind the Emperor's chair. The Senior Consul showered one last passionate fall of kisses on the beautiful red slippers, only to be kicked aside by the objects of his adoration as Caligula

stood up.

The crowd cheered, hailing Caligula as their god and Emperor; but their god and Emperor did not acknowledge them. Instead, he looked down at Claudius and lifted his chin to examine his throat, passing his finger across it like a knife; terrified, Claudius twitched and drooled over his nephew's hand. With a look of disgust, Caligula wiped off the saliva on Claudius' grey hair and shouted something, unheard over the din, into his uncle's face. Claudius immediately got to his feet and lurched out of the box; the Germans parted for him, and he disappeared as fast as his weak legs could take him. Sabinus stayed focused on Caligula, who then turned his attention to Herod Agrippa and with a couple of bellows sent him, bowing obsequiously, from the box. Caligula threw back his head, laughing, and then mimicked Herod Agrippa's fawning exit, much to the amusement of the crowd. Having milked the comedy value from the situation he swept from the box, slapping Chaerea's arse on the way. Sabinus watched the tribune tense and his hand begin to go for his sword; it stopped mid-movement when Clemens caught his eye, and fell back to his side with fingers flexing as he and Cornelius followed Caligula to the steps. Just before Clemens left the box his eyes flicked up to Sabinus and widened slightly; he strode past the German Bodyguards, half of whom followed him to block the steps to the public whilst the imperial party climbed them, leaving the Consul, nursing his bruised face, watched over by the eight remaining Germans left guarding the imperial box.

All was set.

Sabinus turned and made his way along the rear of the last row of seating to the gate that Clemens had indicated. Pulling up his neckerchief, he put his knuckles to the wood and gave the signal; within an instant a bolt slid back, the gate opened a fraction and he was staring into the dark, hard eyes of a Praetorian centurion.

'Liberty,' Sabinus whispered.

With a slight inclination of the head the centurion stepped back, opening the gate; Sabinus walked through.

'This way, sir,' a second centurion, his back already turned, said as the first closed and bolted the gate.

Sabinus followed the man along a paved path climbing gently up the last few feet of the Palatine; from above a close-harmony dirge drifted down. Behind him he heard the rhythmic clacking of the first centurion's hobnailed sandals as he followed.

After thirty paces they came to the summit. To his left Sabinus could see two Praetorian centuries, clad in tunics and togas, standing at ease next to the Aitolian youths rehearsing their melancholy hymn in front of what remained of the imposing facade of Augustus' House. Once an architectural study in elegance combined with power, it was now disfigured by the series of extensions that Caligula had added. They snaked their way forward, each more vulgar and ill-conceived than the one before, and cascaded down the hill to the Temple of Castor and Pollux at the foot of the Palatine, which now – sacrilegiously in the secret part of many people's minds – served as a vestibule to the whole palace complex. It was to the closest of these extensions, just ahead of him, that the centurion led Sabinus.

Taking a key from his belt, the centurion unlocked a heavy, oaken door and pulled it open, noiselessly on goose-fatted hinges, to reveal a wide passageway. 'To the right, sir,' he said, stepping aside to allow Sabinus past. 'We'll stay here to prevent anyone

following you down.'

Sabinus nodded and passed through; sunlight washed in from regularly spaced windows on either side. He swept his sword from its scabbard beneath his cloak, pulled a dagger from his belt and strode forward; the hard slapping of his footsteps reverberated around him off the whitewashed plaster walls.

After a few dozen paces he heard voices from around a bend to the left; he quickened his pace. From the theatre below came another burst of laughter followed by applause. Sabinus approached the corner; the voices were close. He raised his sword and readied himself to strike as soon as he made the turn. Swinging sharply left he pounced forward. He felt his heart leap in his chest as a shrill shriek greeted him and he stared into two terrified eyes set in a long, down-turned face; mucus oozed from a pronounced nose. Claudius' cry died in his throat as he gaped at the sword pointing directly at him and then back at Sabinus. Herod Agrippa stood stock still, his face frozen in fear, next to him.

Sabinus pulled himself back; he had given Clemens his word not to kill Claudius. 'Get out of here, both of you!' he shouted.

After a moment's dumbfounded delay Claudius lumbered off, twitching and muttering, leaving a pool of urine behind him. Herod Agrippa, breathing deeply, stooped and stared up, under the hood, at Sabinus' concealed face. For a moment their eyes met; Herod's widened slightly. Sabinus made a threatening gesture with his sword and the Judaeans pelted off after Claudius.

Sabinus cursed and prayed to Mithras that it was not recognition that he had seen in the King's eyes. Voices from further down the corridor drove the worry from his mind; one of them was most definitely that of Caligula. He retreated around the corner and waited as the voices grew closer.

'If those Aitolian boys are sweet-looking I might take a couple to the baths with me,' Caligula was saying. 'Would you like a couple, Clemens?'

'If they're sweet-looking, Divine Gaius.'

'But if they're not then we can always have Chaerea; I'd love to hear that sweet voice moan with ecstasy.' Caligula giggled; his companions did not join in.

Sabinus surged around the corner, sword raised.

Caligula's mirth faltered; his sunken eyes went wide with fright. He leapt backwards; Chaerea's strong hands clamped onto his upper arms, pinioning him.

Sabinus swept his sword through the air; it sliced into Caligula's flesh at the base of his neck. Caligula shrieked; a goblet of blood slopped onto Chaerea's face. Sabinus' sword arm jarred and he lost his grip as the blade wedged, abruptly, into the collarbone.

There was a moment of shocked silence.

Caligula stared down, eyes gaping, at the sword embedded in him and then suddenly burst into manic laughter. 'You can't kill me! I'm still alive; I am a g ...' He juddered violently; his mouth froze open, mid-laugh, and his eyes bulged.

'This is the last time you'll ever hear my *sweet* voice,' Chaerea whispered into his ear. His left hand was still grasping Caligula but the other was now hidden. Chaerea jerked his body, forcing his right side forward, and the tip of a *gladius* burst through Caligula's chest; his head jolted back and he exhaled violently, spraying a fine crimson mist into the air. Sabinus tugged his weapon free and pulled down his neckerchief; the false god would know who ended his life and why.

'Sabinus!' Caligula croaked, blood trickling down his chin. 'You're my friend!'

‘No, Caligula, I’m your sheep, remember?’ He thrust his weapon, sharply, low into Caligula’s groin as Clemens and Cornelius both drew their swords and plunged them into the stricken Emperor from either side.

With the bitter joy of vengeance, Sabinus smiled as he rolled his wrist, twisting the blade left and right, shredding the lower intestines, and then forcing the point forward until he felt it break through the flesh between the base of the buttocks.

All four assassins wrenched back their swords simultaneously; Caligula stood unsupported for a moment before crumpling, without a sound, to the floor into Claudius’ pool of urine.

Sabinus stared down at his erstwhile friend, hawked and spat a globule of phlegm at his face and then pulled his neckerchief back up. Chaerea aimed a shuddering kick at Caligula’s bloodseeping groin.

‘We must finish it,’ Clemens said quietly, turning to leave. ‘Hurry; the Germans will find the body soon, I told them to wait for a count of five hundred to stop anyone following us up the steps.’

The four assassins walked briskly back up the corridor. The two centurions were waiting by the door.

‘Lupus, bring your century into the palace,’ Clemens ordered as he passed them. ‘Aetius, keep yours outside and don’t let anyone in. And get rid of those caterwauling Aitolians.’

‘Did Claudius and Herod Agrippa see you?’ Sabinus asked.

‘No, sir,’ Lupus answered, ‘we saw them coming and stepped back outside until they’d passed.’

‘Good; get going.’

The two centurions snapped salutes and doubled off through the door towards their men. From back down the corridor came guttural shouting.

‘Shit!’ Clemens hissed. ‘Those bastard Germans can’t count. Run!’

Sabinus burst into a sprint and flicked a look over his shoulder; eight silhouetted figures appeared from around the corner; their swords were drawn. One turned and ran back in the direction of the theatre. The remaining seven began to chase them.

Clemens crashed through a door and led them on up a set of marble steps, through a high-ceilinged room full of lifelike painted statues of Caligula and his sisters and on into the palace. Turning left they reached the atrium as the first of Lupus’ men were coming through the door.

‘Form your lads up, centurion,’ Clemens shouted, ‘they may have to kill some Germans.’

At a sharp order from Lupus a line was formed as the Germans raced into the atrium. ‘Swords!’ Lupus yelled.

With the precision expected of Rome’s élite soldiery the eighty swords of the century were drawn in ringing unison.

Hopelessly outnumbered but maddened by the murder of the Emperor to whom they owed absolute loyalty, the Germans screamed the war cries of their dark-forested homeland and charged. Sabinus, Clemens and the two tribunes slipped behind the Praetorian line as, with a resounding clash of metal on metal that echoed through the columns of the room, the Germans crashed into the Praetorians with their weight fully behind their shields. They slashed with long swords at the heads and torsos of the

unshielded defenders. Four went down immediately under the ferocity of the attack but their comrades held the line, punching with their left arms in lieu of shields and stabbing with their shorter swords at the groins and thighs of their assailants, whose numbers quickly dwindled. Soon five of their companions were lying dead or dying on the floor, and the last two Germans disengaged and ran headlong back the way that they had come.

A shrill female voice cut through the clamour. 'Just what is going on here?'

Sabinus turned to see a tall woman with a long, horse-like face and pronounced aristocratic nose; she held a child of about two years old in her arms. The girl's young eyes stared greedily at the blood wetting the floor.

'My husband will hear of this.'

'Your husband will hear nothing, Milonia Caesonia,' Clemens informed her coldly, 'ever again.'

For a moment she hesitated; then she drew herself up and looked Clemens in the eyes; defiance burned in hers. 'If you mean to kill me too then my brother will avenge me.'

'No he won't. Your *half*-brother, Corbulo, thinks that you've brought shame and dishonour to his family. If he's sensible he'll get his legion, the Second Augusta, to swear loyalty to the new Emperor; then, when he's served his term as legate, he'll come back to Rome and hope that the stain on his character that you have left will be forgotten in time.'

Milonia Caesonia closed her eyes, as if acknowledging to herself the truth of the statement.

Clemens walked towards her with his sword drawn.

She held up the child. 'Will you spare Julia Drusilla?'

'No.'

Milonia Caesonia clutched her daughter tightly to her breast.

'But as a favour to you I will kill you first so you don't see her die.'

'Thank you, Clemens.' Milonia Caesonia kissed her child on the forehead and set her down; she immediately started to wail, holding her arms up to her mother and jumping up and down to be picked up again. After a few moments of being ignored she flew at her mother in a frenzy, tearing at her *stola* with sharp nails and teeth.

Milonia Caesonia looked down with tired eyes at the screaming brat at her feet. 'Do it now, Clemens.'

Clemens grasped her shoulder with his left hand and punched his sword up under her ribs; her eyes bulged open and she exhaled softly. The child looked at the blood seeping from the wound and, after a moment's incomprehension, started to laugh. Clemens gave one more thrust and Milonia Caesonia's eyes closed. He wrenched his sword out and the child's laughter died. With a squeal of fear she turned and scampered off.

'Lupus! Get that monster,' Clemens shouted, laying Milonia Caesonia's body down.

The centurion sprinted after the small figure and caught her within a few paces. She lashed out with her nails, drawing blood on his arm, as he lifted her, before sinking her teeth into his wrist. With a cry of pain, Lupus grabbed her ankle and held her, struggling and screeching, dangling upside-down at arm's length.

'For the sake of the gods, finish her!' Clemens ordered.

A shriek curtailed by a sickening crunch made Sabinus wince.

After a quick look at his handiwork Lupus tossed the lifeless body aside to land in a crumpled, broken heap at the base of the bloodied column.

‘Good,’ Clemens said, sharing the relief that everyone in the room felt at the sudden quiet. ‘Now take half of your men and search the eastern side of the palace for Claudius.’ He pointed at a Praetorian optio. ‘Gratus, you take the other half into the western side.’

With smart salutes Lupus and Gratus led their men off.

Clemens turned to Sabinus. ‘I’m going to find where my drooling idiot of a patron has hidden himself. You should go now, my friend, it’s done; get out of the city before this becomes public.’

‘I think it already has,’ Sabinus replied. The good-humoured noise that had emanated from the theatre below had now turned into uproar.

Sabinus squeezed his brother-in-law’s shoulder, turned and ran out of the palace. Screams and panicked cries filled the air as he raced down the Palatine.

People had started to die.

**PART I**



ROME, THE SAME DAY

## CHAPTER I

VESPASIAN HAD ENJOYED the play despite the Emperor's constant interruptions; *The Pot of Gold* was not his favourite by Plautus but the dual-meaning dialogue, misunderstandings and slapstick chases as the miserly protagonist Euclio tries to hang onto his new-found wealth always made him laugh. The problem he had with the play was that he actually rather sympathised with Euclio's desire to part with as little money as possible.

The troupe of young male acrobats currently leaping about the stage did not enthral Vespasian in the way they did his uncle, Gaius Vespasius Pollo, seated next to him, so, as he waited for the next comedy to commence, he closed his eyes and dozed peacefully, thinking of his young son, Titus, now just over a year old.

Vespasian woke with a start as a harsh, throaty cry cut through the half-hearted applause for the acrobats as their act reached a tumbling finale. He scanned his eyes over the heads of the audience for the source and cause of the yelling. Twenty paces to his left, a German Imperial Bodyguard came racing out of a covered staircase; his right hand was raised and covered in blood. He sprinted, shouting unintelligibly in his native tongue, towards eight of his colleagues guarding the entrance of the imperial box, recently vacated by the Emperor. The audience close by stared at the man in alarm as he brandished his blood-soaked hand in the bearded faces of his comrades.

Vespasian turned to his uncle, still applauding the scantily clad youths leaving the stage, and stood, tugging at the sleeve of Gaius' tunic. 'I've a feeling that something bad is about to happen. We should leave immediately.'

'What, dear boy?' Gaius asked distractedly.

'We need to go; right now!'

The urgency in his nephew's voice made Gaius heave his corpulent body to his feet, pulling a carefully tonged curl away from his eyes and casting one last look at the disappearing acrobats.

Vespasian glanced nervously back over his shoulder as the German Bodyguards drew their long swords simultaneously. Their combined bellows of rage silenced the crowd nearest to them; a hush spread in a wave until it encompassed the entire audience.

The Germans held their swords aloft, their faces contorted with rage, the roar dying in their throats. For an instant the hush, deep and tense, enveloped the whole theatre; all eyes fixed questioningly onto the nine barbarians. Then a sword flashed and a head spun through the air, spiralling blood that fell in heavy drops onto the people gawping up in open-mouthed bewilderment at the macabre missile spinning over them. The body of the decapitated spectator – a senator – spewed forth gore for two or three heart-pumps, sitting upright and motionless, drenching the horrified people surrounding it. It slumped forward onto a wideeyed, uncomprehending old man – also a senator – twisting round in the seat in front; a sword slammed into his gaping mouth, the point exploding through the back of his skull without his eyes changing expression.

For another half-heartbeat there was complete stillness; then a single scream of a

woman, as the head landed in her lap, shattered the moment and unleashed a cacophony of terror. The Germans swept forward in a blur of flickering iron, carving their way indiscriminately through the crowd, leaving in their wake the limbs and corpses of anyone too slow to join the immediate stampede away from them. In the imperial box the Senior Consul gazed stupefied at a snarling barbarian bearing down on him before leaping over the balustrade at the front and falling, arms and legs flailing, onto the backs of the panicking mob below.

Vespasian thrust his uncle forward, pushing aside a screeching matron, and headed for the nearest gangway leading down between the aisles of seating, towards the stage. 'Now's not the time for good manners, Uncle.' As he shoved his way down through the crush, using his uncle's bulk as a battering ram, he caught glimpses of the mayhem all around. To his left, two senators went down under a hail of slashes. Behind him, three maddened Germans hacked their way through the surging mass, in a welter of blood, closing in on them. Vespasian caught the eye of the leading swordsman and felt his concentration fixed upon him. 'Senators seem to be their main target, Uncle,' he yelled pulling his toga from his right shoulder so that the broad, purple senatorial stripe would be less visible.

'Why?' Gaius shouted, treading over an unfortunate who had gone down in the crush.

'I don't know, just keep pushing.'

With their combined body weight and downhill momentum they managed to heave their way away from the trailing Germans who had become entangled in the dead and dying. Bursting out into the relatively uncongested *orchestra*, between the seating and the stage, Vespasian risked another backwards glance and was shocked by the havoc just nine armed men could wreak amongst so many defenceless people. Bodies littered the seating and more than a few wore bloodied senatorial togas. He grabbed his uncle's arm and broke into a run; he pushed his way up a short flight of steps, onto the stage and moved, as fast as Gaius could waddle, towards a bottlenecked arch in the scaenae frons on its far side, crammed with desperate people. Joining the scrum they jostled and sweated their way through, struggling to stay upright, feeling the soft flesh of those not so fortunate beneath their feet, and eventually surged out of the theatre onto a street running along the base of the Palatine.

The crowd streamed out to the right as, from the left, came the pounding, even steps of three centuries of an Urban Cohort advancing at the double. Vespasian and Gaius had no choice but to be swept along by the torrent whilst all the time easing themselves across to the edge. As he felt his left shoulder brush the wall, Vespasian looked out for a turning.

'Ready, Uncle?' he shouted as they approached the opening to an alley.

Gaius huffed and wheezed; he nodded his head, beads of sweat flowing down his wobbling jowls. Vespasian yanked him left and they escaped the panic-driven flood.

Vespasian almost tripped over the corpse of a German Imperial Bodyguard lying across the alley's mud-splattered floor as they tore up its length. Just before the end they hurdled another German, bald but with a long blond beard, sitting leaning against the wall, grasping the stump of his right arm trying to stem the flow of blood; he stared down in horror at the severed hand, still clutching a sword, next to him. At the mouth of the alley Gaius caught his breath whilst Vespasian quickly looked around. To his right a man

hobbled away, head down. Blood ran down his right leg from under his cloak; he held a sword slick with gore.

Vespasian ran to the left towards the Via Sacra. Gaius lumbered after him, slowing with every rasping breath.

‘Hurry, Uncle,’ Vespasian called over his shoulder, ‘we must get back to the house in case this spreads throughout the city.’

Gaius came to a halt, hands on his knees, gasping. ‘You go ahead, dear boy; I can’t keep up. I’ll head to the Senate House; you go and see to Flavia and young Titus. I’ll join you once I have any news of what’s happened.’

Vespasian waved a hand in acknowledgement and raced off to be with his wife and young son. He turned onto the Via Sacra, heading to the Forum Romanum, as two centuries of the Praetorian Guard came clattering down from the Palatine, away from the screams and anguished cries that still emanated from its north slope. Vespasian was forced to wait as they crossed the Via Sacra. In their midst, carried in a chair, sat Claudius, twitching and drooling, with tears streaming down his face, pleading for his life.

‘Lock and bolt the door,’ Vespasian ordered the young and very attractive door boy who had just let him into his uncle’s house, ‘and then go around the house and make sure that all the outside windows are closed.’

The lad bowed and raced off to do as he had been bidden.

‘Tata!’

Vespasian turned, breathing deeply, and smiled at his thirteen-month-old son, Titus, as he hurtled across the mosaic floor of the atrium on all fours.

‘What’s the matter?’ Flavia Domitilla, Vespasian’s wife of two years, asked, looking up from her spinning by the atrium hearth.

‘I’m not sure, but thank the gods that you’re safe.’ Vespasian picked up his son and kissed him on both cheeks in relief as he walked over to join her.

‘Why shouldn’t we be?’

Vespasian sat down opposite his wife and bounced Titus up and down on his knee. ‘I don’t exactly know but I think that someone has finally—’

‘Don’t excite the child so much; his nurse has just fed him,’ Flavia cut in, looking disapprovingly at her husband.

Vespasian ignored his wife’s plea and carried on the rough ride. ‘He’s fine; he’s a sturdy little fellow.’ He beamed at his giggling son and pinched a chubby cheek. ‘Aren’t you, Titus?’ The child gurgled with delight as he pretended to be riding a horse and then squealed as Vespasian jerked his knee suddenly to the left, almost unseating the miniature cavalryman. ‘I think that someone has finally assassinated Caligula, and for Sabinus’ sake I pray that it’s not Clemens.’

Flavia’s eyes widened, excitedly. ‘If Caligula’s dead then you’ll be able to release some of your money without fear of him killing you for it.’

‘Flavia, that’s the least of my concerns at the moment; if the Emperor has been assassinated I need to work out how to keep us all safe during the change of regime. If we’re going to persist in this folly of choosing an emperor from the heirs of Julius Caesar then the obvious successor is Claudius, which might work out well for the family.’

Flavia waved a hand dismissively, ignoring her husband’s words. ‘You can’t expect me to always live in your uncle’s house.’ She indicated the homo-erotic art work

littering the atrium and the lithe, flaxen-haired German youth who waited on them discreetly by the *triclinium* door. 'How much longer am I going to have to endure looking at all this, this ...' She trailed off unable to find the right word for Senator Gaius Vespasius Pollo's taste in decor and slaves.

'If you want a change join me on my trips to the estate at Cosa.'

'And do what? Count mules and fraternise with freedmen?'

'Then, my dear, if you insist in staying in Rome, this is where you live. My uncle has been very hospitable to us and I've got no intention of throwing his generosity back in his face by moving out when there's plenty of room here for all of us.'

'You mean you've got no intention of taking on the expense of having your own house,' Flavia retorted, giving her spindle a fractious twist.

'That as well,' Vespasian agreed, giving Titus another fullblown gallop. 'I can't afford it; I didn't manage to make enough extra money when I was a praetor.'

'That was two years ago. What have you done since?'

'Managed to stay alive by seeming to be poor!' Vespasian looked sternly at his wife, immaculately presented with the latest coiffure and far more jewellery than he thought necessary; he regretted that they could never see eye to eye about finances. However, the fierce independence in her large brown eyes, the allure of her full breasts and the pregnant swell of her belly – under what seemed to be yet another new stola – reminded him of the three main reasons why he had married her. He tried the reasonable approach. 'Flavia, my dear, Caligula has executed a lot of senators just as wealthy as me so that he could get his hands on their money; that's why I keep my money invested in the estate and therefore out of Rome whilst living in my uncle's house. Sometimes being perceived as poor can save your life.'

'I wasn't talking about the estate; I'm thinking about that money you brought back from Alexandria.'

'That is still hidden and will remain so, until I'm certain that we have an emperor who is a little less free with his subjects' property; and their wives for that matter.'

'What about their mistresses?'

A series of hiccups from Titus followed by a stream of partly digested lentils splattering onto Vespasian's lap came as a welcome distraction. Conversations with his wife about money were never enjoyable, especially as they always led on to the subject of his keeping a mistress. He knew it was not that Flavia was sexually jealous of Caenis but rather that she resented what she imagined he was spending on his mistress while she, his legitimate wife, felt that she was deprived of some of life's comforts; the chief amongst which was her own house in Rome.

'There, what did I tell you?' Flavia exclaimed. 'Elpis! Where are you?'

A comely, middle-aged slave woman bustled into the room. 'Yes, mistress?'

'The child has been sick on the master; clean it up.'

Vespasian stood and handed Titus over to his nurse; the lentils slopped to the floor.

'Come here, you young rascal,' Elpis cooed, taking Titus under the arms. 'Oh, you're the image of your father.'

Vespasian smiled. 'Yes, the poor little fellow will have a round face and just as large a nose.'

'Let's hope he'll have a larger purse,' Flavia muttered.

A loud rapping on the front door saved Vespasian from having to respond. The attractive doorkeeper looked through the viewing slot and then immediately pulled the bolt back. Gaius dashed through the vestibule and into the atrium, his body wobbling furiously under his toga; his curls were now lank with sweat, sticking to his forehead and cheeks.

‘Clemens has assassinated the monster. Reckless idiot,’ Gaius boomed before pausing to catch his breath.

Vespasian shook his head regretfully. ‘No, *brave* idiot; but I suppose that it was inevitable after what Caligula did to his sister. I just thought that after two years his sense of self-preservation would have re-established itself. Thank the gods that Sabinus isn’t in Rome, he would have joined him; I heard them make a pact to do it together and I would have been honour bound to help. Clemens is a dead man.’

‘I’m afraid so, not even Claudius would be stupid enough to let him live. He’s been taken to the Praetorian camp.’

‘Yes, I saw. After the madman we get the fool; how long can this go on for, Uncle?’

‘As long as the blood of the Caesars lasts and, I’m afraid, Claudius has it pumping around his malformed body.’

‘The fool was begging for his life, he didn’t realise that they were just keeping him safe until the Senate proclaimed him emperor.’

‘Which should be very soon. Get that sick off your tunic, dear boy; the Consuls have summoned a meeting of the Senate in one hour at the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline.’

Progress up the Gemonian Stairs to the summit of the Capitoline Hill had been slow, clogged as they were not only with members of the Senate answering their Consuls’ call but also teams of slaves heaving many heavy strongboxes, the entire contents of the treasury, for safekeeping up to the Temple of Jupiter, the most sacred building in Rome. At the foot of the stairs, in front of the Temple of Concordia in the Forum, the entire three Urban Cohorts stood to, with orders from Cossus Cornelius Lentulus, the Urban prefect, to guard against any attempt by the Praetorian Guard to retrieve Rome’s wealth. Across from the Forum, on the Palatine, the temporary theatre stood silent, dead bodies still strewn about its empty seats.

Eventually over four hundred senators were assembled in the dim, cavernous chamber. The business of transferring the strongboxes went on around them as the Consuls sacrificed a ram to their host deity.

‘This could turn nasty,’ Gaius whispered to Vespasian as Quintus Pomponius Secundus, the Senior Consul, inspected the auspices, assisted by his junior colleague, Gnaeus Sentius Saturninus. ‘If they’ve brought the treasury up here they must be thinking of defying the Guard.’

‘Then we should get out of here, Uncle; Claudius becoming emperor is inevitable.’

‘Not necessarily, dear boy; let’s listen to what people have got to say before jumping to any rash and maybe dangerous conclusions.’

Satisfied with what he saw, Pomponius Secundus declared the day auspicious for the business of the Senate and took the floor; the bruise on his face that he had received from Caligula earlier was now swollen and discoloured. ‘Conscript Fathers and fellow

lovers of liberty, today is the day when our world changed. Today is the day when the man whom we hated and feared in equal measure has finally been brought down.'

To emphasise the point he nodded towards the statue of Caligula standing next to the sedentary statue of Rome's most sacred god; a group of slaves pushed it from behind and the image of the late Emperor crashed to the marble floor, shattering into many fragments. A mighty cheer from the senators echoed around the chamber. For a moment Vespasian remembered the good-natured, vibrant youth he had known and regretted the loss of a friend, before the memories of the monster he had become returned and he began to cheer along with the rest.

'Today is the day,' Pomponius Secundus continued, raising his voice above the celebrations, 'when all of us who so fearlessly opposed the tyrannical regime of Caligula can, once again, call ourselves free men.'

'I wouldn't call kissing Caligula's slippers in the theatre this afternoon fearless opposition,' Gaius muttered as this statement was greeted with more cheering. Judging by the looks on many faces Vespasian guessed that his uncle was not the only person to hold that opinion.

The Senior Consul pressed on, unaware that some of the cheers were, now, ironic. 'The Praetorian Guard has taken it upon itself to try and impose a new emperor on us: Caligula's uncle, Claudius. Conscript Fathers, I say no! Not only does Claudius stutter and drool and stumble in a way that would bring dishonour to the dignity of government but also he is not known to, and therefore not loved by, the legions. We cannot allow the Praetorian Guard to force an emperor like this onto us; if the legions of the Rhenu or Danubius decide to nominate their own more martial candidates we could face another civil war. As free men we should choose one from our number as the new Emperor to rule in conjunction with a loyal senate. He should be a man acceptable to us, the legions and the Guard. He should be ...'

'You, is what you're trying to imply,' Gnaeus Sentius Saturninus, the Junior Consul, shouted as he got to his feet, jowls and belly quivering. He raised an accusatory finger at his colleague and then cast his piercing blue eyes around the temple. 'This man would have us replace the known tyranny of one family with the unknown tyranny of another; is that what free men do? No!' A rumble of agreement met this assertion and Saturninus took as statesmanlike a pose as his flabby figure would allow, with his left arm folded across his body, supporting his toga, and his right down at his side. 'Conscript Fathers, today we have a historic opportunity to take back our ancient powers and become once again the legitimate government of Rome. Let us rid ourselves of these Emperors and return to the true freedom of our forefathers, a freedom so long denied us that very few here present have savoured its taste; a freedom that belonged to a time when the eldest men here were mere boys: the freedom of a Republic.'

'Keep your face neutral, dear boy,' Gaius hissed in Vespasian's ear. 'Now is not the moment to be seen to have an opinion.'

Almost half of the assembled company broke into enthusiastic applause and cheering but a goodly minority scowled and muttered to one another; the rest stood and watched impassively, preferring, like Gaius, to wait and see which faction was more likely to prevail.

Gaius tugged at Vespasian's elbow, pulling him back through the crowd. 'We would do well to remain as inconspicuous observers until this matter has been decided,

one way or the other.'

'At which point we'll profess our loyalty to the winning side, eh, Uncle?'

'It's a sensible course of action that has a far higher survival rate than rashly cheering for what one believes in.'

'I quite agree.'

The cheering began to subside and the ex-Consul, Aulus Plautius, took to the floor.

'This should be telling,' Gaius muttered, 'Plautius has a knack of staying in favour.'

Vespasian gave a wry grin. 'He has a knack of changing sides, you mean.' Almost ten years previously, Aulus Plautius had managed so survive being a supporter of the doomed Sejanus by leading the demand for his erstwhile benefactor's death.

'Conscript Fathers,' Plautius declaimed, pulling his broad shoulders back and puffing out his muscular chest; the veins on his thick neck bulged. 'Whilst I can quite understand our two esteemed Consuls' differing opinions and can see that each in its own way has merit and is worthy of discussion, I would remind the House that one thing has been overlooked: the power of the Praetorian Guard. Who can stand against them?' He picked out the Urban prefect, Cossus Cornelius Lentulus. 'Your Urban Cohorts, Lentulus? Three cohorts of almost five hundred men against the nine cohorts of the Guard, each nearly a thousand strong? Even if you added the Vigiles to them you would be outnumbered three to one.'

'The People would join us,' Lentulus retorted.

Plautius' lip curled disdainfully. 'The People! And what would they use to fight against the élite force of Rome? Eating knives and meat cleavers with baking trays for shields and stale bread for sling shots? Pah! Forget the People. Conscript Fathers, however much it offends your *dignitas* to hear this, I put it to you that, pragmatically, the matter is out of your hands.'

Vespasian looked around from his position at the rear of the gathering to see that the unpalatable truth in Plautius' words was sinking in.

Plautius' eyes hardened as he too saw that his argument had traction. 'This is what I suggest, Conscript Fathers: that we send a delegation to the Praetorian camp to meet with Claudius. We need to ascertain whether he really wants to be our Emperor and, if he does, how he intends to rule? If he doesn't, and he can be persuaded to refuse the Guard's offer, whom would they accept in his stead? Because I can tell you this for sure: the Guard will not accept a return to the Republic.'

The senators were silent as the last word echoed around the chamber until it was finally lost, like the vague memory of a pleasant dream that disappears upon waking to the reality of daily existence.

'We should leave immediately,' Vespasian whispered in Gaius' ear, 'and present ourselves to Claudius.'

'And what if the Senate persuade Claudius to step down? Where would we be then? It's too soon to make a decision; we stay with the flock.'

Vespasian frowned, doubt clouding his thoughts. 'At this point whatever we do is dangerous; we should take a gamble on the most likely course of events.'

'Would you gamble with the lives of your wife and child?'

Vespasian did not need to think about the answer. 'No.'

‘Then stay anonymous; don’t make a decision until you have all the information.’

The Senior Consul stepped forward, his demeanour now subdued. ‘I am forced to agree with the ex-Consul and suggest that we nominate a deputation representing the full dignity of this House; all Consuls and praetors, past and present, should go.’

There was a murmur of assent.

‘Very good, Consul,’ Plautius jeered, ‘and who should head this delegation?’

‘Naturally as Senior—’

‘No, not naturally at all; you’ll just be seen as a prospective candidate for the job and not impartial. This has to be led by someone who, although he has senatorial rank, is not eligible to be emperor or even consul. It must be someone whom Claudius considers to be a friend so that he won’t feel that he’s being bullied or manoeuvred. In short it cannot be anyone here present.’

Secundus looked puzzled. ‘Who then?’

‘King Herod Agrippa.’

Night had fallen by the time the Judaean King had been found and summoned before the Senate. Torches and sconces had been lit in the temple making its polished marble interior a place of dancing light, far brighter than during the day. The sedentary statue of Rome’s guardian god watched over the deliberations. If Jupiter’s stern face had been able to register emotions it might have taken on a look of contempt as it looked down on the depleted gathering. Over the last couple of hours, now that it was apparent that the Guard had the upper hand, many of the senators who had openly supported a restoration of the Republic had suddenly remembered urgent reasons to hurry to their country estates outside Rome. Vespasian and Gaius had stayed, safe in the knowledge that they had, as yet, expressed no opinion.

Herod Agrippa’s dark eyes glinted with amusement as they looked around the remaining senators from either side of a beaklike nose. ‘I’m very happy to head your delegation, Conscript Fathers; you honour me by your invitation. However, I fail to see what it can achieve.’

‘We wish to know Claudius’ mind,’ Pomponius Secundus replied testily. ‘Perhaps he would be willing to refuse the Guard’s offer of making him emperor.’

‘He tried to do that but has been persuaded otherwise.’

‘By the Guard at the points of their swords?’

‘No, Secundus, by me.’

‘You!’ Pomponius Secundus almost choked and had to slap his chest as he stared with disbelief at Herod Agrippa sitting serenely before him in his gold-embroidered, purple robe and kingly golden diadem.

‘Well, someone had to.’

‘Someone did *not* have to,’ the Senior Consul exploded, ‘especially you; a greasy little, eastern client king who can’t even bring himself to eat pork like any self-respecting Roman should.’

‘I think that was the final bit of information that I needed to make a decision, Uncle,’ Vespasian said out of the corner of his mouth.

Gaius nodded his head sagely. ‘I’ve just become an ardent supporter of Claudius. I always thought that he was the best man for the job, a natural leader.’

Herod Agrippa remained unruffled by this outburst. ‘This greasy little, eastern client king – who, by the way, enjoys pork very much – took it into his own hands today

to save your idiotic necks because I could see that the outcome was inevitable; unlike some people. I followed Claudius to the Praetorian camp and I was there when the Guard proclaimed Claudius emperor. However, Claudius thought it unconstitutional for the Guard to elevate him to the Purple—'

Gnaeus Sentius Saturninus jumped to his feet, bursting with latent Republican indignation. 'It's absolutely unconstitutional, only the Senate can do that!'

Herod Agrippa smiled placidly. 'Yes, that was Claudius' view, even though the Guard proved otherwise by killing one emperor and replacing him with another. Claudius was very keen – insistent even – that the Senate should proclaim him emperor immediately he was taken to the camp; he wanted his elevation to have at least the appearance of it being requested by this House. He waited for hours but heard nothing from you. Instead you sat up here on treasury strongboxes, scheming and plotting – what about, he could only guess. However, he knew that one thing was for sure: the fact that you hesitated to make him emperor meant that you didn't want him.'

'We never said that,' Pomponius Secundus stated flatly.

'Don't demean yourself by lying to me. Every word of what has been discussed up here has recently been reported to Claudius by a few senators, including one of the praetors, anxious to stress that it was nothing to do with them but, strangely, begging for his forgiveness anyway.

'From my understanding of it the only one of you who has come out of this reasonably well is Aulus Plautius.' Herod smiled thinly at the gathering as each man tried to remember exactly what positions he had held in the debates that afternoon. 'Once your silence had deafened him for a few hours, Claudius decided that it might be best, for his own safety, to step down before things started to escalate into an armed confrontation. I persuaded him not to, arguing that that would be akin to signing his and all your death warrants; his freedmen agreed. So he accepted the Guard's acclamation and showed his thanks by promising a donative of one hundred and fifty gold aurei per man.' There were soft whistles of incredulity. 'He now feels very safe and intends to stay as emperor. Face it, gentlemen, by your failure to take the initiative and quickly accept the inevitable you have allowed the Guard and Claudius to create a very nasty precedent: from now on the Guard can make emperors and the emperors will pay handsomely for them to do so. You've just lost what little power remained to you.'

Cossus Cornelius Lentulus, the Urban prefect, got to his feet. 'I've heard enough, I'm taking the cohorts to swear loyalty to Claudius.'

'You can't do that,' the Junior Consul called, 'they're meant to be protecting the Senate.'

'From what? The Senate has just become irrelevant,' Lentulus barked. 'And even if the Guard were to come to attack the Senate with an emperor at their head do you think my men will fight? Bollocks they will.' He turned and walked out.

Gaius looked at Vespasian; they came to a swift mutual agreement. 'We'll come with you, Lentulus,' Vespasian called as he and Gaius stood up.

There was a chorus of similar calls as the senators rose to their feet.

Following the Urban prefect to the door, Vespasian glanced at Herod Agrippa who frowned as their eyes met; then a half-smile of understanding seeped over his face.

As Vespasian passed, the Judaeen King turned back to Secundus. 'Would you still like me to lead that delegation, Senior Consul?' he asked innocently, above the noise.

Pomponius Secundus scowled at him and stormed from the temple.

The streets of Rome were almost deserted as the Senate led the Urban Cohorts up the Vicus Patricius towards the Viminal Gate, beyond which was situated the Praetorian camp. As one of the main brothel streets in Rome, its pavements would normally be crowded at any time of the day or night; but this evening business was very slow. There was not even a single cart or wagon, forbidden to enter the city during the day, rumbling along the road taking advantage of night-time delivery hours. The common people of Rome had mostly locked their doors and closed their shutters as they waited for the power struggle to be played out so that life could get back to normal and they could be safe in the knowledge that somebody – and they cared not who – was in charge of distributing the grain dole and financing the games.

Passing under the Viminal Gate, Vespasian took a deep intake of breath; before them, a hundred paces away, lined across the front of the Praetorian camp, stood three cohorts of the Guard in full arms. The burnished iron of their helmets and scale armour and the bronze of the rims and bosses of their oval shields reflected the guttering torchlight. At their centre, on a raised dais, sat the new Emperor; the few senators who had already offered their allegiance to him stood to either side.

On the dais, behind Claudius, Vespasian recognised Claudius' freedmen, Narcissus and Pallas, as well as Caligula's erstwhile freedman Callistus; all three wore citizens' plain white togas.

'I'll go first,' Herod Agrippa told the two Consuls who were showing a reluctance to go forward although each was escorted by twelve lictors bearing fasces, the bundle of rods tied around an axe symbolising the magistrates' power.

The Consuls both nodded and, despite the loss of dignitas, allowed themselves to be preceded by a client king.

Upon drawing closer, Vespasian could see an amused look play on Narcissus' pudgy face as he stroked his oiled, pointed black beard with a stubby hand, heavy with bejewelled rings. He had always served Claudius, and Vespasian knew that he had been responsible for keeping his master safe during the reigns of Tiberius and Caligula by encouraging him, although little encouragement was needed, to play the fool; for him, today was the vindication of that policy. Pallas, tall, slim and full-bearded, betrayed, as ever, no emotion; he had served Vespasian's late patron, the Lady Antonia, but upon her death had transferred his allegiance to her son Claudius, as the eldest surviving male in her family. Vespasian tried but failed to catch his eye, hoping that their past acquaintance, friendship even, would still count for something. The shaven-headed, wiry Callistus was not so well known to Vespasian although he had met him on a few occasions, firstly as Caligula's slave and then as his freedman. How he had transferred his loyalty to Claudius before Caligula's assassination, just in time to save himself, Vespasian did not know. It did not, however, surprise him, as the one thing he did appreciate about the three men who now stood behind the Emperor was that they were all consummate politicians; not public demagogues but private intriguers with a subtle and accomplished understanding of imperial politics.

When Herod Agrippa was ten paces from the dais a sharp command followed by the deep rumble of a *cornu*, the horn usually used for signalling on the battlefield, led to three thousand blades being simultaneously unsheathed. The Consuls stopped abruptly.

'The Senate and the Urban Cohorts have come to swear allegiance to the

Emperor,' Herod Agrippa shouted and then swiftly stepped aside.

'And ab-b-bout time,' Claudius yelled at the senators; saliva sprayed from his mouth and his left arm shook uncontrollably as it gripped the arm of his curule chair. 'I wanted you to make me e-e-e-emperor in a constitutional manner; instead we have a situation whereby my first issue of coinage is going to have my head on the front and "emperor, thanks to the P-P-P-Praetorian Guard" on the back and not "thanks to the Senate and People of Rome". Why did you delay? Didn't you want a cripple for your emperor?'

'That never crossed our minds, Princeps,' Pomponius Secundus lied.

Claudius held up his right hand and Narcissus unravelled a scroll and, after a small pause for effect, started reading: "'Not only does Claudius stutter and drool and stumble in a way that would bring dishonour to the dignity of government but also he is not known to, and therefore not loved by, the legions.'" Narcissus lowered the scroll and his eyebrows raised a fraction as he met Pomponius Secundus' bewildered gaze.

Claudius turned to a senator, in his early thirties, standing close to the dais. 'That is what he said, isn't it, Geta?'

'It was, Princeps, word for word,' Gnaeus Hosidius Geta replied, looking smug. 'I was ashamed that a consul of Rome could state such untruths about ...'

'Yes, yes, that's e-e-enough. No need to overdo it, praetor.' Claudius jerked his attention back to the mortified Consul. 'Can you think of one reason why I should not have you executed? In fact, can anyone think of one reason why I shouldn't have the whole S-S-Senate executed?'

'Because you wouldn't have anyone worthwhile left to dominate, Princeps?' Herod Agrippa suggested.

There was a moment's stunned silence before Claudius exploded with laughter. 'Ah Herod, you do cheer me up, my friend.'

Herod smirked and bowed extravagantly, his hands upon his chest.

Claudius acknowledged the gesture and then turned back, his face set rigid again with displeasure, to the Senior Consul. 'As to the army n-n-not knowing or loving m-m-me, you are mistaken. I am the brother of the great G-G-G-Germanicus; they will love me as they loved him because I will love them as he did. I will ...' Behind him Narcissus subtly pressed a hand on his shoulder and Claudius immediately fell silent. Pallas bent down to whisper in his ear.

'I think we're getting a foretaste of what is to come,' Vespasian mused. 'But at least we can still consider Pallas to be a friend.'

Gaius frowned. 'Let's hope so, although past friendships can't always be counted upon when the political landscape changes. How are you with Narcissus? Has he forgiven you for cashing that bankers' draft of Claudius' whilst you were in Alexandria?'

'He owes me a couple of large favours but I assume that cancels one of them out.'

Claudius nodded at his freedman as Pallas stood back up, having given his advice, and then struggled to his feet to indicate that the impromptu audience was at an end. 'I shall retire to bed now; you will attend me tomorrow at the second hour and lead me to the Forum where you will announce your unanimous decision to endorse the will of the Guard; then you will swear allegiance to me in the Senate House. I expect all of you to be there. Now go!'

Claudius was helped down from the dais by Narcissus; Callistus and Pallas tried

to outdo one another in courtesy by offering the other the honour of being next down the steps before descending together. The senators and the Urban Cohorts broke out into a series of 'hail Caesars', whilst the Guard, in two swift motions, sheathed their drawn swords and then snapped to a resounding attention.

Claudius disappeared into the ranks of his now very wealthy Praetorians and the senators turned to go.

'Well, that went as well as we could have expected,' Gaius observed.

Vespasian grimaced. 'I don't think that we can expect too much favour from the new regime. We should have gambled, like Geta and those others, and got here to offer our loyalty before we were forced to. Once the Guard supported him it was inevitable, as Herod Agrippa said.'

'I'm so glad that you appreciate my wisdom,' a voice oozed from just behind Vespasian's ear.

Vespasian turned and looked into the cold smile on Herod Agrippa's face.

'Claudius' freedmen appreciated it too; so much so in fact that they're going to recommend to Claudius that he confirms me in my kingdom and makes a couple of very lucrative additions to it. Would you like to know why?'

Vespasian shrugged. 'Do we need to?'

'You don't need to, but it just might interest you all the same. You see, not only have I helped Claudius secure his position for the present, thereby making his freedmen very influential; but I've also advised Narcissus and Pallas on how to hang onto their power by instituting a new precedent to discourage the Guard from making a habit of changing emperors. Did you see your friend Clemens in his rightful place as Praetorian prefect next to the Emperor? Or for that matter his tribunes, Cassius Chaerea and Cornelius Sabinus? No, of course you didn't.'

Vespasian was unimpressed. 'They signed their own death warrants by killing Caligula.'

'Of course, although Claudius unwisely wanted to spare them, reward them even; especially after they claimed to have done some deal with Narcissus and Pallas, brokered by that weasel Callistus. Naturally Narcissus, Pallas and Callistus have denied all knowledge of this because, as you have just intimated, it wouldn't do to have people assassinating emperors and surviving. However, my refinement was to take it a step further.' Herod Agrippa paused for a moment of self-appreciatory reflection. 'The second Praetorian prefect, Lucius Arruntius Stella, who wasn't part of the plot, has also been arrested. I suggested to Narcissus and Pallas that perhaps it would be a good thing if, in future, the prefects realised that an important element of their duties is to keep an eye on their colleagues. Narcissus and Pallas thought that was an excellent idea and so Stella is going to be executed along with all the conspirators.' Herod Agrippa thrust his face closer to Vespasian's and looked at him with mock innocence. 'And by the way, I intend to make sure that it will be *all* of them.'