

## EMPEROR OF ROME

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EMPEROR OF ROME

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FABBRI



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To everyone who has taken the time to read the  
Vespasian series; I thank you all.



# PROLOGUE



THE VIA POSTUMIA BETWEEN  
CREMONA AND BEDRIACUM IN THE  
VENETIA AND HISTRIA REGION OF  
ITALIA, 15 APRIL AD 69

CHAOS WAS AN understatement. The shambolic deployment from column to line was in marked contrast to the neat cohorts drawn up, chequerboard, straddling the Via Postumia; with the River Po on their right flank, they blocked the way to Cremona. Tens of thousands of legionaries and auxiliaries stood in silence, burnished helms glowing soft in the dawning rays of sun, watching their enemy struggle to form battle order. But it was not because the deploying army was a mass of ill-disciplined barbarians that there was disarray, nor was it a lack of generalship; quite the contrary. It was a surfeit of generalship that this army suffered from, for, in the absence of the Emperor, Marcus Salvius Otho, no one man was fully in command. There was nothing wrong with the troops' discipline either, for they too, like their opponents, were Roman.

And this was civil war.

Titus Flavius Sabinus grimaced as he watched the centurions of the five Praetorian Guard cohorts, under his command, bawl and beat their parade-ground soldiers into a new position, the orders having changed for the third time since the sighting of the foe. How had it come to this, he wondered, raising his eyes and surveying the army of the Rhene that had marched south, in a two-pronged attack, in support of the man they had hailed as emperor, Aulus Vitellius, the noted gourmand and Governor of Germania Inferior. How, in under a year since Nero's suicide, having been declared an enemy of the state by the Senate, had it reached the point that there were two emperors and Roman blood would be spilt?

Caecina Alienus and Fabius Valens, the two Vitellian generals, had surprised the forces loyal to Otho, the Emperor in Rome, by the speed of their advance and descent into Italia so early



in the season. Otho's response had been to try to negotiate a settlement; however, he had been rebuffed.

Thus, civil war had become the only choice for Otho if he were not to immediately abdicate by committing suicide. And it was here, in the Po Valley, that the issue would be decided.

Sabinus' father and namesake, the elder Sabinus, prefect of the city of Rome under Nero, had been replaced by his successor, Galba, and then reinstated by Otho, who had also promised the younger Sabinus a consulship. And so the family found themselves on the Othonian side of the civil war.

But for how long? Judging by the army's situation, not long was the younger Sabinus' assessment; confusion had reigned all around him since he had started to bring his command across the Po before dawn to join the main body of the Othonian army. 'Otho should have stayed here with us rather than retire to Brixellum,' he observed to his second in command, mounted next to him, 'then, Nerva, we might have a clear command structure rather than this ... this ...' He indicated to the Legio I Adiutrix, recently formed from marines of the Misinium fleet, deploying directly onto the right flank of his own command and having difficulty forming the chequerboard, quincunx formation due to the baggage train being in the wrong position.

Marcus Cocceius Nerva, who at thirty-nine was three years Sabinus' senior, sucked the air through his teeth. 'Otho has been badly advised throughout this campaign; although, with no military experience, having him here wouldn't make much difference. He's great fun at dinner but on the battlefield he'd be worse than a man short. He's like his brother Titianus when it comes to organisation, but perhaps marginally more efficient.'

'And, as Titianus' brother-in-law, you should know.'

'It's because I made the mistake of marrying Titianus' sister that I'm obliged to be here witnessing this.' Nerva looked in disbelief at the shambles unfolding. 'Gods, but we could do with the infantry and cavalry Otho took with him; forty-odd thousand against our thirty; does he need that large a bodyguard so far from the enemy? It's lost us the battle before it's even begun.'

Sabinus shook his head and turned to the thin-stripe military tribune awaiting orders behind his superiors. 'Has our personal baggage been taken to the rear?'

The lad nodded, trying to keep the fear from his expression with a false smile. 'Yes, sir; and the spare horses you asked for.'

Sabinus nodded with grim satisfaction and turned back to his companion. 'We put up a decent show, then get out as fast as possible and surrender to Valens, hopefully.'

'That would seem the wisest course of action. And then we become the ardent supporters of Vitellius until ...' Nerva left the sentence hanging.

'Until what?'

Nerva lowered his voice and leant closer to Sabinus. 'I heard that your father made a trip to Judaea during the time that Galba relieved him as prefect of Rome.'

Sabinus kept his face neutral; Vitellian horns sounded their advance. 'Maybe; but it's no business of yours.'

Nerva was not to be deterred. 'He returned soon after Otho had assassinated Galba and the Senate declared him emperor, just before the news arrived that Vitellius had been hailed as such on the Rheneus.'

Sabinus concentrated his attention on the river where two thousand gladiators, making up the rest of his unlikely command, were in danger of being caught disembarking from the flotilla that had ferried them across.

Nerva pressed his point. 'It wasn't a sightseeing trip, I'm sure. Your uncle, Vespasian, commands the eastern legions putting down the Jewish revolt. That's a powerful force. My guess is that your father and uncle had some in-depth conversations about how this crisis would play out and, if I'm right in thinking, Galba, Otho and Vitellius aren't the only emperors that we'll see this year. The question is: who'll get the prize, your father or your uncle? But, just so you know, I'll support either of them.'

Titus Flavius Sabinus did not respond but, rather, busied himself by sending the tribune with orders to the gladiators to keep themselves positioned hard on the bank of the Po so as to prevent the Batavian auxiliaries, advancing towards them,

from outflanking them. His mind, however, was elsewhere: he wondered how Nerva had come by this information and who else knew of his father's secret errand.

Otho slumped back in his chair and looked up along the line of sullen faces; none of his generals could meet his eye as they apprised him of the calamitous defeat. And calamitous it had been: the Vitellian forces had shown no quarter to their fellow citizens with different loyalties as, through the convention of civil war, they could be neither sold nor ransomed so were therefore worthless to them; thousands had been slaughtered. 'It's over, then,' Otho said, fingering the tip of one of the two daggers on the desk before him.

'The rest of the Moesian legions could still come to your aid,' Otho's older brother, Salvius Titianus, urged as he saw despair in his sibling's eyes and, therefore, probable execution in his own future.

Otho shook his head with regret; his face was handsome and melancholic but running to fat after ten years of luxurious exile as Governor of Lusitania. 'It was my mistake not to wait for them to arrive in the first place. I thought that delay would bring disaster; now I find the very opposite to be the truth.' He paused, reflecting upon his position, running a hand through the thick curls of his hair. 'Am I to expose your courage and valour to further risks? That would, I believe, be too great a price for my life. It was Vitellius who initiated our contest for the throne and began this war, but it is I who shall end it; let this one battle be enough. This is the precedent that I shall set and posterity shall judge me by it.' Otho stood, looking down at his two blades. 'I am not the man to allow the flower of Roman martial strength to be mown down senselessly and thereby weaken our Empire. So, gentlemen, I take consolation in the fact that you were prepared to die for me, but you must live. I will not interfere with your chances of pardon so don't attempt to interfere with my resolve.'

\*

‘And did he do it then and there?’ the elder Sabinus asked his son.

‘No, Father.’ The younger Sabinus took a draught of warmed wine, draining the cup. ‘It was rather embarrassing; he praised our loyalty, even though he knew that we had deserted him in our minds some time ago. Then he sent us on our way, saying that with his death and his mercy for Vitellius’ family he was earning Vitellius’ gratitude, thus buying our lives.’

The elder Sabinus grunted, refilling his son’s cup. ‘Very noble, I’m sure. Then did he do it?’

‘No; he went to quell a disturbance amongst his remaining troops who had tried to stop some of us from leaving the camp.’

‘Not you?’

‘No, Father; I stayed as you had told me to, so as to see it done.’

‘And?’

‘And once he had calmed his men he returned to his tent, drank a cup of iced water, tested the sharpness of his daggers and then, choosing one, retired to bed with it under his pillow. Believe it or not, he slept deeply the whole night through.’

‘That shows remarkable nerve.’

‘It was impressive and made more so by the fact that as soon as he awoke at dawn he reached for his dagger and fell out of bed onto it without a sound.’

The elder Sabinus rubbed his near-bald pate and contemplated this as a light draught made the oil-lamp on the desk between them gutter, causing shadows to drift back and forth across his rounded face, dominated by a bulbous nose. Night had long since fallen; they were sitting in his study in the house on Rome’s Quirinal Hill that he had inherited from his uncle, Gaius Vespasius Pollo, after his suicide at Nero’s command, three years previously. ‘And that was dawn two days ago?’

‘Yes, Father; I rode fast, pausing only to change horses, to bring the news.’

‘Good lad. So, at the moment, we’re the only people in Rome to know?’

‘I would think so; no one could’ve got here faster. Otho was warm when I left.’

The elder Sabinus steepled his fingers and brushed them over his lips. With a slow nod, he came to a decision. 'Very well. I'll assemble the Praetorian Cohorts remaining in the city as well as the Urban Cohorts and the Vigiles at dawn tomorrow and administer the oath to Vitellius; that will force the Senate to recognise him as emperor. Get yourself back north and surrender to the Vitellians; tell them what I have done to secure the city for them. That should keep us safe for the moment.' Sabinus winked at his son. 'Especially if you add that I have taken both the Vitellius brothers' wives and children under my protection. That will concentrate their minds.'

'You play a dangerous game, Father.'

'No one ever won by being nice. Tell the Vitellii, I'll be more than happy to send them their families if they write to me requesting it; they'll understand what that means.'

'Confirmation of your position as prefect of Rome and ...?'

'And you keep the consulship that you're due to take up at the end of this month.'

'What happens then?'

The elder Sabinus tapped his fingers against his lips. 'Then? Then we shall see.'

'Come here, my boy!' Aulus Vitellius' great bulk prevented him from reaching down too far and so a stool had been placed next to him on the dais. His six-year-old son stepped onto it to be enfolded into his father's many layers of blubber. Lifting the boy, Vitellius presented him to the ranks of legionaries, making up his escort, and the crowd of senators and equestrians, newly arrived in Lugdunum, the provincial capital of Narbonese Gaul, to hail their new Emperor as he processed in Triumph from Germania Inferior to Rome. 'I name him Germanicus after the province whence I launched my glorious bid for empire. I confer upon Germanicus the right to wear imperial insignia and confirm him as my sole heir before my victorious legions.'

Rapture greeted this statement as Vitellius' victorious troops hailed their Emperor – the fact that they had not taken part in the

battle but had, rather, escorted Vitellius on his slow, gastronomical progress through Gaul was conveniently overlooked.

The younger Sabinus joined in the adulation; as the consul heading the senatorial delegation that had come to congratulate the new Emperor, it was only right that he should be seen to be most enthusiastic as this hippopotamus of a man wrapped himself in the dignity of the Purple.

‘You might not believe it,’ Sabinus whispered to Nerva, next to him, ‘but my father met Vitellius at Tiberius’ villa on Capreae when he was a teenager. He was lithe and beautiful and much prized by Tiberius for his, shall we say, oral skills, and I don’t mean as an orator.’

Nerva looked at Sabinus, incredulous, as he kept up his applause. ‘No?’

‘It’s true; he even offered my father a demonstration of his art. You wouldn’t have thought it looking at him now; I suppose he must have learnt the joys of hedonism kneeling at the feet of Tiberius, so to speak.’

‘Not only hedonism,’ Nerva said, indicating to more than fifty prisoners, wearing only unbelted tunics, like women, being led out for execution, their heads, which they were soon to lose, held high. ‘There was no need for this: making an example of the centurions who most vigorously supported Otho.’

With a solemn countenance Sabinus masked his satisfaction that Vitellius was acting to character. ‘This will not please the Moesian legions.’

Nerva concurred. ‘I was a part of the delegation of former Othonian officers sent to induce them to return to their bases and swear allegiance to Vitellius. They only did so grudgingly as they saw no alternative.’

*They may see an alternative soon,* Sabinus thought as the first head fell to the ground in a spray of blood, *and when news of this gets out, the Moesian legions will want their revenge.*

The silence of Vitellius’ troops was almost physical as head after severed head rolled across the ground turned to mud by gore; the silence deepened so that it pierced, eventually, the thick skin of the Emperor, his face flushed with the joy of cruelty. As

the last body slumped, Vitellius tore his gaze away from death and looked about him; gradually his eyes registered nervousness as he perceived the heavy atmosphere. He cleared his throat. 'Bring the generals!'

'I hope he decides to spare them after that bloodbath,' Sabinus whispered, wishing the exact opposite. 'We've had enough vengeance for one day.' And, in truth, as he watched the two Othonian generals, Suetonius Paulinus and Licinius Proculus, as well as Salvius Titianus, the brother of the dead Emperor, led forward and forced to kneel before Vitellius, Sabinus felt relief that he was not also in that position. It had been his father's shrewd offer of protection to Vitellius' family that had secured his pardon and consulship. Then he had been given the dubious honour, by Vitellius himself, of returning to Rome to escort his son north and deliver him to his imperial father; a task he had completed with great ceremony as if it had been the pinnacle of his career.

'And what have you to say for yourselves?' Vitellius demanded. Folds of fat wobbled beneath his clothing as he shook with indignation at the sight of the men who had opposed him.

'You should reward us, not accuse us, Princeps,' Paulinus said, his voice steady and loud so it carried over the assembly, 'for it is to us, not Valens and Caecina, that you owe your victory.'

Vitellius stared down at the prisoners, baffled; his mouth opened and closed as he struggled to comprehend just what had been said.

'It was us,' Proculus insisted, 'who created the circumstances whereby a victory for Otho was inconceivable.'

'How so?' Vitellius demanded, regaining his composure and control of his mouth.

'By insisting that Otho attack immediately, before the bulk of the Moesian legions arrived.'

Paulinus nodded in vigorous agreement. 'Yes, and then pushing our troops into a long march so as to arrive as quickly as possible into contact when there was no need to rush.'

'Our men were exhausted by the time we arrived,' Proculus confirmed, backing up the argument. 'And then we made the

deployment from column to line a shambles by issuing counter-orders to each other's commands and then revoking them.' That, having witnessed it, Sabinus could believe. 'Plus, why else would we have placed wagons all through our lines if not to make forming battle order even harder?'

Vitellius studied the two generals and Titianus, who had remained silent throughout. 'Are you telling me that you sabotaged the battle? And what about you, Titianus? Did you betray your own brother?'

Titianus looked up with weary eyes. 'No, Princeps; I didn't need to. My innate inefficiency meant that, whatever I was given to do, I was more of a hindrance than a help.'

Vitellius nodded. 'I can believe that. I'm minded to spare you anyway as you cannot be blamed for supporting your own brother; and your ineptitude is legendary. I pity the man who would ask for your help.'

'I too, Princeps. Thank you.'

Vitellius turned his attention back to the other two defeated generals. 'As for you—'

'If you want real proof, Princeps,' Paulinus cut in, 'ask yourself why I placed our worst troops, a band of gladiators, opposite your Batavians on our extreme left flank and so doom our line.' Sabinus looked astounded at Paulinus as he made this claim that was so obviously untrue, as it had been his doing. 'Ask Titus Flavius Sabinus, who was in command of the left wing, whether I specifically ordered him to make that disposition after he crossed the river to join us.'

Vitellius turned his eyes to Sabinus as Paulinus looked at him, willing him to agree. 'Well, consul? Did he?'

Deciding that it would be better to have a live Paulinus and Proculus in his debt than dead ones owing him nothing, Sabinus nodded. 'Yes, Princeps, he did. I thought it strange at the time but he was insistent upon it; I now understand why. His heart was with you; as was mine, for I didn't argue.'

Vitellius grunted, thinking things over. 'Very well, Paulinus and Proculus. I believe your protestations of treachery and clear you of all suspicion of loyalty. You shall take me on a



tour of the battlefield and show me just how this treason took place.'

It was a field of corruption; stench hung heavy in the air. In the forty days since the battle nothing had been done about the dead; Othonian and Vitellian decomposed together in the mangled heaps. Carrion-feeders had gorged themselves, stripping the corpses of man and beast alike, but now the remaining flesh was fit only for the maggots that writhed in their millions, in and out of cadavers, growing fat before metamorphosing to produce the swarms of flies whose endless buzzing was impossible to ignore.

Sabinus hid his rage at the sight of so many citizens left untended in death, doomed to roam dark paths that did not lead to the Ferryman. Seeing a pile of bodies, little more than skeletal, against the wall of a hut where they had been cornered and butchered, he swore to himself that, should his family one day be in the position to do so, they would take vengeance on Cremona whose citizens had lined the road to cheer Vitellius. No doubt they had stripped the dead of anything of value, indeed there was hardly even a helmet to be seen, but then they had been derelict in their duty to care for the bodies they had robbed.

Vitellius never once took his eyes from the piles of corpses as Valens and Caecina guided him across the field with Paulinus and Proculus in attendance as if it were a tour of a newly laid-out garden.

'It was here, Princeps, that the First Italica retrieved the Eagle that the First Adiutrix had managed to capture in their enthusiasm to prove themselves in their maiden battle,' Valens informed the Emperor as they approached the sector of the field that had been Sabinus'.

Vitellius surveyed the twisted bodies of the former marines who had been formed into a legion by Galba and had fought and died for Otho. With ostentation he sniffed the air. 'One thing smells better than a dead enemy and that is a dead fellow citizen.'

Tense, sycophantic laughter greeted this crass remark but even Valens and Caecina, Vitellius' most ardent supporters, could not completely conceal their unease. Noticing a shared

look between them, Sabinus sensed their horrified realisation that Vitellius had no deference for these brave fellow citizens who had captured an Eagle only to lose it in a counter-attack. Vitellius had just lost all respect.

It was the moment his father had ordered him to watch for. 'Princeps,' he said, stepping from the crowd following the Emperor.

Vitellius turned, still chuckling at his weak and tasteless joke. 'What is it, consul?'

'Now that we have surveyed the scene of your triumph, I feel that it is time for me to return to Rome and prepare the city for your welcome.'

Vitellius' huge frame swelled even more at the thought of his Triumphal entry into Rome. 'Yes, yes, so you should, my dear Sabinus; and I look forward to seeing your father and thanking him for securing the city for me. We are old friends, you know; we go back a long way. But don't you want to show me the section of the field where your command lost the battle for Otho first?'

'I think it would be only right for Paulinus and Proculus to have the honour of showing you the gladiator dead; I take no joy in stealing other men's plaudits.' He glanced across to the losing generals and, by their countenances, understood that they fully acknowledged the debt they owed him. As Vitellius dismissed him back to Rome, Sabinus knew that he had made two important recruits for his family's cause.

It was the same enthusiasm with which they had acclaimed the previous two Emperors that the people of Rome welcomed Vitellius: as if he were the answer to their prayers, the Emperor they had always desired. Ten, twelve deep, and waving their racing faction colours, they lined the streets as Vitellius, mounted upon a straining horse, his unmartial frame incongruously clad in a general's uniform, led his legions onto the Campus Martius two days after the ides of July, two months after the younger Sabinus had taken his leave of him.

'He's not going to lead his troops right into the city, is he, Father?' the younger Sabinus asked as they stood, with the

Senate, outside the Theatre of Pompey waiting to welcome the victorious Emperor with the sacrifice of two white bulls.

‘Why not? Galba did and billeted them here.’

‘But they caused carnage: fights, rapes, murders; they thought they could get away with anything.’

‘They did. But don’t forget: Vitellius wasn’t here to witness that; Galba sent him to govern Germania Inferior before he arrived in Rome so he doesn’t know what a burden billeted troops are on the citizenry. Even if he did, I doubt he would care enough to do anything different.’ The elder Sabinus took on an overly solemn expression. ‘It’s a shame, it really is.’

His son understood. ‘And I’m sure that as the prefect of the city you’re not going to do anything to alert him to the dangers of upsetting the people by allowing their daughters to be gang-raped by ill-disciplined legionaries.’

‘It is not my business to tell the Emperor what he should or shouldn’t do.’

The younger Sabinus suppressed a smile. As he and the rest of the Senate began applauding Vitellius who was drawing close at the head of his martial column that would bring misery to his subjects, he reflected on the dangerous game that he and his father would be forced to play over the next few months: living in the city with an emperor that they were seeking to undermine.

As the thought went through his head a man caught his eye, working his way amongst the senators towards him; he knew the man well for he was his uncle Vespasian’s freedman, Hormus. He signalled Hormus to wait where he was until the end of the ceremony. With a nod, Hormus moved back into a doorway.

‘Well, Hormus,’ the elder Sabinus asked as they greeted the freedman once the prayers and sacrifices were complete.

Hormus grasped both their forearms in turn. ‘It’s happened, masters: Julius Alexander, prefect of Egypt, had his two legions proclaim Vespasian emperor on the calends of this month, seventeen days ago; Vespasian’s legions did the same in Caesarea, two days later, as soon as they heard. My master sent me straight here to bring you the news and ask you to prepare the city for

his army. Mucianus, Governor of Syria, and Cerialis, Vespasian's son-in-law, are marching overland to Italia, hoping to pick up the disaffected Moesian legions on the way.'

'Mucianus and Cerialis!' the elder Sabinus exclaimed. 'Why them? Why not Vespasian at the head of his army?'

'He plans to take Rome without a war by using the threat of one in conjunction with a greater menace. He's gone to Egypt to take control of the grain supply there and, also, if he can, in Africa. He'll threaten to starve Vitellius out; only if he refuses to go will he revert to war.'

Sabinus looked at his son. 'Let's hope that my fair treatment of Vitellius' family will stand us in good stead; it looks as if we may be hostages for some time.'

'Shouldn't we just leave and go to Vespasian?'

'I'm more use to him here.'

'What do you plan to do?'

'When the time comes, I'll take Rome and hold it until Vespasian's army arrives.'

'What do you mean: the people wouldn't let him abdicate?' The elder Sabinus slammed the palms of both hands down onto his study desk.

The younger Sabinus gestured helplessly. 'Just what I say: the senior consul refused to take the knife he offered in token of giving up his power; then the mob blocked him from going to the Temple of Concordia to deposit his Triumphal Regalia and, instead, forced him to return to the Palatine where he remains. He's technically still emperor, although he would rather take that private villa in Campania and the guarantee of a peaceful retirement that you offered him in Vespasian's name.'

Another double-handed palm slam. 'The weak-willed, fat glutton! Medusa's dry dugs, he's been pressured by rabble who know nothing of politics or what's best for them. I know the Saturnalia started yesterday but spare us from the poor playing "king for the day".'

'It's not just the Head Count; it's his friends and the remnants of the Praetorian Guard. They claim that what you offered

Vitellius in the Temple of Apollo was a bluff. They think that you and Vespasian won't keep your word; they don't see how you can let Vitellius and his son live, and, frankly, I don't blame them.'

'Just over a month ago his army was defeated and three days ago the remnants surrendered and Valens was executed! I've more troops with the three Urban Cohorts under my command than he does – not forgetting the Vigiles. What harm can he possibly do?'

'He can be a focus for dissent,' the third person in the room said, stepping away from the scroll-case against which he had been leaning. 'They're right not to trust the offer; I'll have him killed along with the brat as soon as I can.'

'You're not going to be the Emperor, Domitian,' the elder Sabinus snapped.

'Not in name; but I will be the Emperor's son. With my father in Egypt and my brother in Judaea, I would say that gives me a great deal of authority.'

'You're eighteen! You have as much authority as a whore-boy with a cock in either end. Now shut up and listen; perhaps you may learn something,' Sabinus turned back to his son. 'What about the Germans?'

The younger Sabinus grimaced. 'That's a bit of a problem, Father: the Germanic Imperial Bodyguard is also remaining loyal to Vitellius.'

'That's still only five hundred men. I'll send to Vitellius once more, saying that if he doesn't accept the offer he really is a dead man and he'll die having seen his boy's throat cut in front of him. Let him take that chance if he wants but he'd be a fool, whatever Domitian—' A knock on the door interrupted him. 'Yes!'

Hormus stuck his head around the corner. 'There's a delegation to see you; they're waiting in the street.'

'Tell them to come in and wait in the atrium!'

Hormus winced at the unexpected ferocity of the reply. 'I would do, sir, but they wouldn't all fit in.'

'And what do you expect me to do, Nerva?' Sabinus asked the head of the delegation as he took in the magnitude of the crowd

waiting for him outside; over a hundred senators, thrice as many equites and the best part of the Urban Cohorts and the Vigiles, all crying out for Sabinus to lead them. 'Lead you where?'

'The Palatine; we have to force Vitellius out.'

'He's right,' the young Sabinus agreed, 'the longer we wait the more polarised the city will become and the more lives lost. Back in July, you said you would take the city for Vespasian when the time comes. Well, it's now December and that time has come.' He indicated to the armed troops of the Urban Cohorts and the club-wielding Vigiles of Rome's night-watch. 'And there's your army.'

'I don't want to be the one who brings violence to Rome, as it would be said that Vespasian came to power on a tide of blood.'

Domitian stamped his foot. 'It doesn't matter what people say; the important thing is to secure my father as emperor. Vitellius must die along with anyone who hinders that objective.'

'Hold your tongue, whelp!' The older Sabinus did not even look at his nephew. 'Vitellius is not going to die if he goes peacefully.' His eyes hardened into resolution. 'Right! We go, but no one's to offer violence unless provoked; understood?'

It was a single javelin that commenced hostilities; slamming through the head of the Urban Cohort centurion marching in front of the elder Sabinus, it lodged in the shoulder of the standard-bearer next to him. The standard toppled as its bearer staggered with the impact and was then dragged down by the dead weight of the man with whom he was coupled.

And then, as they approached the Fundane Pool towards the lower Quirinal, came the volley; scores upon scores of javelins rained down from the rooftops and upper-storey windows on either side of the street, in a well-set ambush. The younger Sabinus looked up and around him but could see only civilians on the roofs or in the windows, no one in uniform, as tiles and bricks began to pitch down in lieu of javelins. All about him his father's small army scattered for cover, those without shields taking shelter, if possible, with Urban Cohort troops as the improvised missiles continued to cause injury and death.

Bodies paved the road and shrieks echoed off the walls, but these were suddenly drowned by a savage cry that rose like thunder rumbling in from a distance. And then they hit; hundreds of bearded, betrousered and chainmailed warriors with long, hexagonal shields, legionary helmets and the slashing *spathae* swords favoured by tribesmen in Rome's service over the shorter *gladius*. The Germanic Imperial Bodyguard thundered out of a dozen side streets, striking the column at multiple points with the force of forked lightning, irresistible and shocking. Down went those nearest to the strikes whilst others struggled to flee, as the hail of improvised missiles intensified; Germanic war cries filled the senses of all as the killing began in earnest.

'Come, Father!' the younger Sabinus shouted, pulling his father's toga. 'I'd say that we've just been provoked.'

The elder Sabinus raced forward, holding his arms over his head against the deadly rain. 'Keep going!' he shouted as he ran. 'We'll take the Capitoline and hold out there until help comes. Keep going!'

A chill rain had fallen with the night but that did not deter people from making their way to the Capitoline: senators, equites and common people joined Sabinus and his small, much-weakened army holding out on Rome's sacred hill. Even some women came to endure the siege, which, due to the conditions, was not yet impenetrable.

'Arulenus Rusticus, my so-called husband, is hiding under the bed,' Verulana Gratilla informed the elder Sabinus, as she pulled back the lank strands of hair from her face. 'There are many who'd say that my place is with him. But I think: let them say what they will. I'll fight for an emperor whom I can respect; not a sluggard whom I despise.' Her dark eyes fixed Sabinus, daring him to send her back to the husband under the bed.

'You can throw a javelin or a stone as well as anyone, Gratilla,' Sabinus said, trying not to look at the way the wet stola clung to full and inviting breasts. 'I'll treat you no differently.' Admiring the contours of her posterior as she walked away, he knew that was not the truth. He turned to his son to clear his mind of the

possibilities the well-formed buttocks had conjured. ‘Still no sign of Domitian?’

‘No, Father; he was last seen dragging a shield from a wounded Urban Cohort man and then running away.’

‘The little shit never did show any spunk; he’ll turn up, once it’s safe, with tales of personal glory.’

‘Two of them,’ Domitian asserted, ‘both with slashed throats.’ He grinned at his cousin, showing the blood on his hand as proof.

The younger Sabinus knew better than to believe anything his cousin claimed but never to show his incredulity. ‘You did well to get back; where were you since the ambush?’

Domitian frowned as if the question was beyond stupid. ‘Getting supporters to join us, of course. Whilst you’ve been hiding safely up here, I’ve been around the city in disguise, urging people to support our cause.’

*Hiding until night fell and it was safe to make a dash for the Capitoline*, Sabinus thought as he clapped his cousin on the shoulder. ‘Did you get a look at how many are down in the Forum?’

‘Hundreds; all the Germanic Bodyguard and a good deal of the Praetorian Guard.’

Unless they had arrived undercover of night, Sabinus knew this to be a gross exaggeration. ‘And what about behind us, on the Campus Martius?’

Domitian shrugged. ‘I didn’t come in that way.’

‘Well, let’s hope that there are fewer than in the Forum and that our messenger got through. With luck, Vespasian’s army could be here in two days; his cavalry could even be here tomorrow evening. We can hold out until then.’

Domitian sensed Sabinus’ unease. ‘Will they attack?’

‘Who knows? My father’s sending Centurion Martialis to Vitellius at first light to complain about him breaking his agreement to abdicate. If he still refuses then I think ... well, I think if they do attack, it won’t be just a matter of a few lives being lost.’

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‘He says that he’s too unassuming to cope with the overpowering impatience of his supporters,’ Cornelius Martialis, the *primus pilus* centurion of the Second Urban Cohort, reported in a clipped tone.

The elder Sabinus widened his eyes in astonishment. ‘Unassuming? The fat slob is one of the least unassuming men I know. If he thinks he has a chance of remaining as emperor with just the support of his bodyguard, a couple of Praetorian Cohorts and the rabble then he’s seriously mistaken. Vespasian’s army will be here within a couple of days.’

‘If the messenger got through,’ the younger Sabinus pointed out.

‘Of course one got through; I sent a dozen.’ The elder Sabinus turned back to Martialis. ‘Did you point out that we agreed he should abdicate, and that if he goes back on that then he’ll most certainly die along with his son and brother?’

‘I did, prefect; and he seemed to be more interested in his breakfast than the danger he was putting himself in. He said it’s out of his hands and then bade me leave by a secret passage in case his supporters decided to kill me because I’m an ambassador for peace.’

‘It sounds as if he’s emperor solely in name and has completely lost control,’ the younger Sabinus said, looking out over the Forum Romanum to the far end where a body of troops was congregating near the Temple of Vesta. ‘And here come the worst sort of soldiers: leaderless ones.’

‘Now!’ the younger Sabinus roared as the Germanic Bodyguard approached the gates to the Capitoline at full sprint.

Hundreds of broken tiles and bricks hailed down upon the attackers, forcing them to raise their shields and crouch under the onslaught.

With the relentless energy of those whose lives depended on it, the younger Sabinus, his father, Nerva and all those defending the Capitoline hurled missiles down into the Imperial Guards who had brought nothing but their swords and shields. Back they were forced as more of their number fell unconscious or clutching broken limbs.

‘They’ll be unable to threaten us even if they come back with a thousand javelins,’ the elder Sabinus asserted as the last Germanic troops disappeared towards the Temple of Saturn and the safety of the Forum. ‘They need siege equipment to get into here and there’s none in the city.’ He looked down at the iron-reinforced, wooden gates secured with two metallic bars across them and stout wooden logs wedged against them. ‘They’re not going to force those without a ram or some serious artillery.’

‘Or fire, Father,’ the younger Sabinus said, his voice low with dread.

The elder Sabinus looked up. ‘Jupiter’s great sack, even the Gauls, four hundred and fifty years ago, had respect enough for our gods not to destroy their temples.’

‘The Gauls may have; but these are Germans.’ His son glanced once more at the approaching enemy, each man bearing a flaming torch, before turning to his comrades. ‘Get water! Get it from the cistern; as much as you can or we’re lost.’

Water, however, was in short supply on the summit of the Capitoline but, even in December, dry wood was not. The younger Sabinus and his father urged their followers to greater efforts in emptying the cistern with the few pails that could be mustered along with brass bowls used for collecting the blood of sacrifices. But torches streaked over the walls continuously, firing everything combustible.

It was a sharp flash that made the younger Sabinus turn and stare in horror. ‘The gates! Get water onto the gates; damp them down!’ But even as he shouted he knew that it was too late, for the gates had been ignited from without and his nostrils detected a smell stronger and rarer than wood: Naphtha had been used, hence the flash, and Naphtha paid little heed to water.

His father had seen it too. ‘Block the gates, tear down all the statues and pile them up, and then find some way to escape,’ he ordered. ‘The Capitoline is lost!’

‘But that’s sacrilege; many are statues of the gods.’

The elder Sabinus pointed up to the roof of Jupiter’s temple; flames had begun to crack the tiles and lick through holes that

multiplied rapidly. 'And that's not sacrilege? Germanic tribesmen in the Emperor's service setting fire to Rome's guardian god's temple! The statues will hold them back for long enough to get a lot of people away; if that adds a bit more sacrilege to what's already happened then it's worth it. Now get going and take that little shit Domitian with you, if he hasn't already scarpered. You should be able to climb down from the Arx into the Campus Martius.'

'What about you, Father?'

Sabinus looked at his son and namesake and, with a grim smile, shook his head as a thunderous crash and a burning jet of air issued from the Temple of Jupiter, heralding the collapse of the roof. 'I'm staying here. The prefect of Rome does not flee the city; if Vitellius wants to live then he needs to negotiate with me.'

'And if he thinks that he can live without negotiating with you?'

'Then we are both dead men. Now go!'

Smoke wafted across the Forum Romanum and over the Palatine from the blackened ruins of the Capitoline now a husk of its former glory. The younger Sabinus looked down from his hiding place, on the roof of the Temple of Apollo, to the palace built by Caligula and newly restored after the Great Fire five years previously. Below him, Vitellius hauled his bulk out of the main doors and stood at the top of the steps, surrounded by his loyal Germanic Guards. Waiting to greet him were senators and equites, many of whom had been up on the Capitoline that morning, but had escaped as Sabinus and the Urban Cohorts delayed the storming of the hill; now they had sneaked from their hiding places to support the Emperor they hated as he passed judgement on those who had opposed him and failed.

Sabinus' fingers squeezed the parapet, his knuckles white, as he looked upon a figure, weighed down with chains, being frog-marched up the steps: his father.

The elder Sabinus was thrown to the ground in a rattle of fetters, causing the crowd, which had hitherto remained silent, to jeer.

Vitellius indulged his audience for a while before raising his arms; he looked down at Sabinus, hawked and spat the contents

of his throat over his head. 'How dare you bargain with the Emperor? How dare you tell me whether to come or to go; to offer me my life, as if it were yours to give, and deigning to grant me a patch of land in Campania when I have all this?' He indicated to the vast expanse of Rome before him, over the charred Capitoline to the Campus Martius with the Tiber and the Via Flaminia disappearing north, calm in the evening light. 'This is mine, all mine, and I see now that there is no need to give it up as the people love me.' Vitellius paused to allow the crowd to cheer and affirm their misplaced support. 'So what shall I do with you?' he asked, addressing the question to the crowd.

The answer was unequivocal. 'Death!'

'Death?' Vitellius mused, pulling at his many chins. 'What say you, Sabinus; do you not deserve death for your arrogance?'

The elder Sabinus looked up at Vitellius, squinting through swollen eyes. 'Kill me and you'll be dead by sunset tomorrow. Spare me and I'll see what I can do to save your miserable and copious skin.'

Vitellius tutted. 'More arrogance. I'll tell you what I'll do, Sabinus, seeing as we're old friends. Do you remember, all those years ago, on Capreae when I made you an offer, a generous offer and you called me a disgusting whore-boy? You said that you wouldn't suck another man's cock to save your life; I hoped one day you would be in the position to prove that. Well, here you are.' He lifted up his tunic and pulled his penis out of his loincloth. 'Here's my cock; suck it and live.'

The older Sabinus started shaking; for a moment the younger Sabinus feared that he was sobbing until thick laughter burst from him. 'Look at you, standing there proudly showing off a cock the size of my little finger. Is that the dignity of an emperor? Is this what it's come to? I remember that conversation; I was disgusted with you then, whore-boy, and I'm disgusted by you now so get it over with. I'll not suck your cock, even if I could find it.'

Vitellius' mouth opened and closed; he gazed around, seeing the ludicrousness of his position. Quickly adjusting his dress, he turned and waddled away. 'Despatch him and expose the body,' he called as he disappeared into the palace.

It was the silence that the younger Sabinus remembered most as his father voluntarily offered his neck to the executioner's sword: the silence of the crowd watching as the blade flashed in the evening light, taking his head from his shoulders in a fountain of blood that slopped over the swordsman's feet. Sabinus' head rolled down the steps, his body collapsed, disgorging its contents, and the crowd watched in silence. The younger Sabinus would always recall that silence, choking back his grief as his father's corpse was dragged off to the Gemonian Stairs, for it was because of that silence that he heard a faint call of a horn drift on the breeze. He turned, looking north whence the sound came, and there, in the distance on the Via Flaminia, were tiny mounted figures glinting in the setting sun.

Too late to save Sabinus but not too late to avenge him, Vespasian's army had come.