

ROME'S SACRED FLAME

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ROME'S SACRED FLAME

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FABBRI



First published in hardback in Great Britain in 2018 by Corvus,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

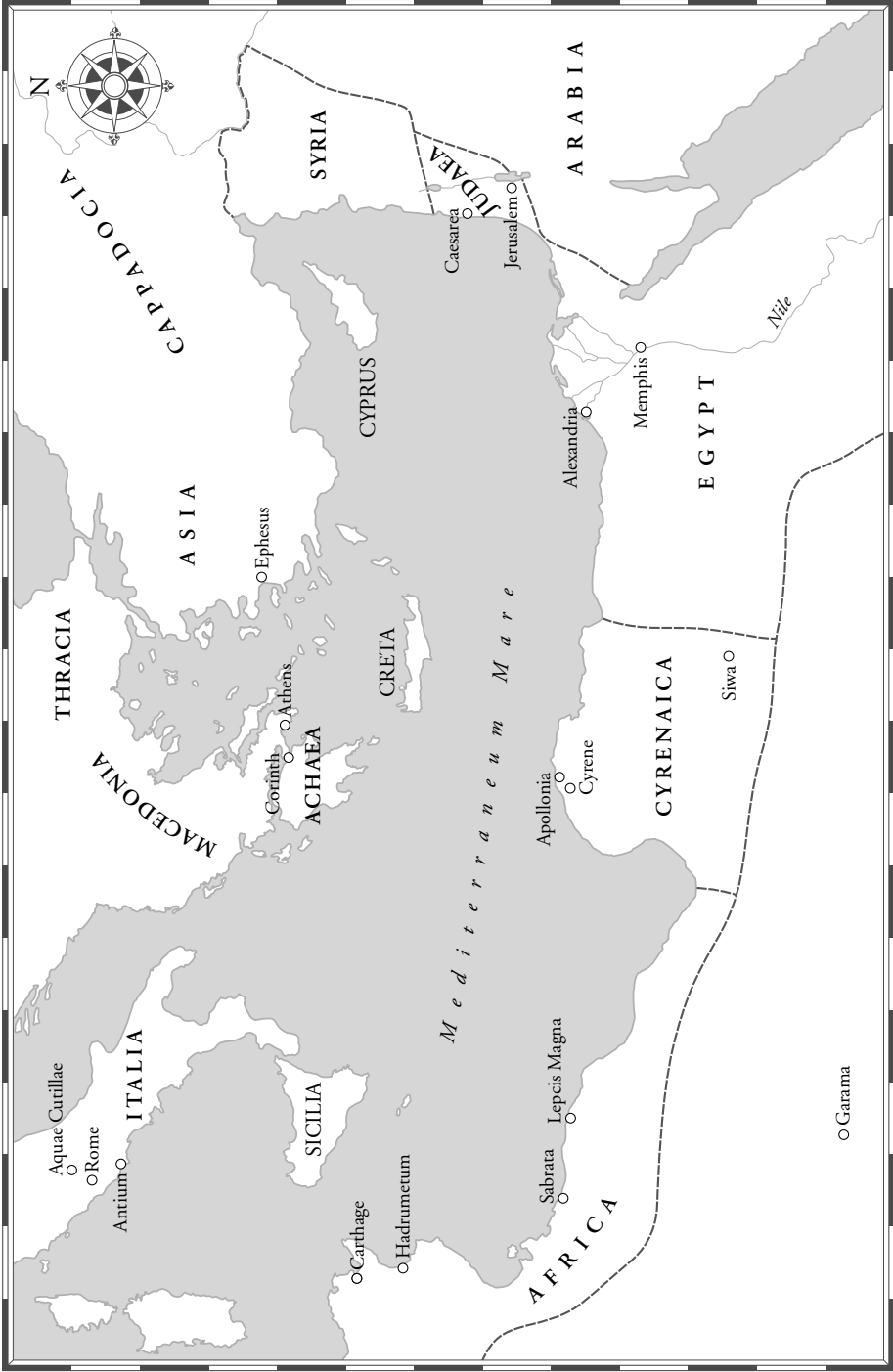
Hardback ISBN: 978 178 239 7045
Trade paperback ISBN: 978 178 239 7052
E-book ISBN: 978 178 239 7076

Printed in Great Britain

Corvus
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk

For Ian Drury, Gaia Banks, Nicolas Cheetham, Sara O’Keeffe,
Toby Mundy and Will Atkinson, with gratitude for the parts
you all played in publishing the Vespasian series.



PROLOGUE



ROME, NOVEMBER AD 63

THE CHILD DID live no more than a hundred days; now she was being immortalised in the heavens. Born in January to great rejoicing throughout the Empire, Claudia Augusta, the daughter of the Emperor Nero and his Empress, Poppaea Sabina, had succumbed to a childhood ailment soon after the spring equinox. Divine honours for the late infant had been voted by the Senate to help ease the pain of the mourning father who was as immoderate in his grief at his daughter's death as he had been in his joy at her birth. And it was with tears streaming down his pale-fleshed cheeks and catching in the golden beard growing beneath his chin that Nero, resplendent in a gold-edged purple toga, took a taper and plunged it into the flame brought from the Temple of Vesta by her six priestesses.

With folds of their togas draped over their heads, in deference to the latest deity to join Rome's Pantheon, the assembled senior senators – all former praetors or consuls – watched, with an air of suitable solemnity, as the Emperor touched the burning taper to the kindling piled upon the altar. The fire caught; wisps of smoke spiralled to the roof of the new temple, next to that of Apollo, on the Palatine Hill. Constructed by slaves working day and night in the seven months since the child's death, and with no expense spared, Nero had personally overseen every lavish detail of the building, devoting most of his time to the project whilst completely neglecting the business of Rome.

In the front row of the congregation Titus Flavius Sabinus struggled to suppress a fast-rising urge to laugh at the ludicrousness of the ceremony unfolding before him. He had witnessed deifications before and had always found it rather unsettling to think that with a form of words and a fire kindled from Rome's Sacred Flame, housed in the Temple of Vesta, a dead human

being could be resurrected as a god. That was not how gods were made, Sabinus knew: they were born of rock in a cave, as was his Lord Mithras. The idea that a babe who had done little more than suck on its wet-nurse's teats could be a divine inspiration and required worship was beyond belief and, as the sacrificial ram, bedecked in ribbons, was led forward to the altar to the sonorous imprecations of the two priests of the new cult, Sabinus almost lost the battle with his mirth. 'The next thing, I suppose, is we'll have a public holiday in the Divine Claudia Augusta's honour,' he whispered under the prayers to his neighbours, Lucius Caesennius Paetus, his son-in-law, and his uncle, Gaius Vespasius Pollo, a magnificently portly man in his seventies with many chins and bellies.

'Hmm? What, dear boy?' Gaius said, his expression a mask of religious awe.

Sabinus repeated his assertion.

'In which case I'll be seated in the most prominent position at the games, having made a more than generous sacrifice to the divine babe, so that the Emperor can witness my piety. Perhaps he'll be less inclined to invite me to open my veins, having, firstly, made a will in his favour, the next time he has urgent need of funds; and, judging by the quality of the marble and the amount of gold in this temple, that time will come very soon.' He flicked a carefully tongued dyed-black ringlet of hair away from a kohled, porcine eye and, with exaggerated reverence, watched one priest stun the ram with a mallet an instant before the second slit its throat in a spray of blood that cascaded down into a bronze basin. Disoriented from the blow, the juddering beast slowly gave its life for the sake of an infant goddess who would have had no concept of what sort of creature it was.

More prayers were intoned as two acolytes rolled the carcass over; with slow precision, the knife was drawn up the belly, skin and ribs pulled back and heart and liver exposed. The Emperor looked on, kneeling, his arms outstretched, tears welling, a picture of grief in the classic mode as depicted by many a famous actor.

Between them, the priests removed both heart and liver; the former was set sizzling on the growing flames whilst the latter

was placed on the altar next to the fire. All watching held their collective breath. Proceeding slowly, so as to build the tension, the priests wiped the blood from their hands and forearms before patting the liver dry and then returning the cloths to the acolytes.

Now was the moment all had been waiting for; now the time had come to examine the liver. Nero shuddered, his body wracked with sobs as he looked to the sky, grey and brooding, through a window high in the back wall of the temple; he lifted his right arm and slowly clenched his fingers as if trying to grab a hidden thing from out of the air.

Veneration grew on the countenances of the two priests as they turned the liver over, examining it minutely.

Nero began to whimper with tension.

Having scrutinised both sides twice, the priests looked to one another, nodded and then turned to the Emperor.

‘Divine Claudia Augusta has been accepted by the gods above and now sits in their midst,’ the elder of the two announced, his voice weighted with reverence.

With a gasp, Nero fainted – his arms carefully ensuring that he did no damage to his face as it hit the marble floor. The assembled senators broke into cheers of rapture and called on the new goddess to hold her hands over them.

‘We should be very grateful to the gods for accepting their latest little colleague,’ Gaius observed without a trace of irony whilst wholeheartedly joining in with the applause. ‘Perhaps now Nero will have his mind free to concentrate on the business of government.’

Sabinus slipped the fold of his toga from his head as the religious part of the ceremony was now concluded. ‘I hope so. He hasn’t heard one appeal or taken a petition since construction of this temple began; I’ve at least a hundred convicted or accused citizens from all over the Empire, awaiting their chance to appeal to the Emperor, scattered around the city. It shouldn’t be the business of the prefect of Rome to be acting as a gaoler to common criminals, even if they are citizens.’

Paetus frowned as he too uncovered his head. ‘Prisoners have always been the prefect’s responsibility.’

'Yes, with the help of one of the praetors, but never so many at once; normally no more than two or three at any one time if the Emperor hears the appeals on a regular basis. I've had that odious little Paulus of Tarsus causing no end of trouble, writing his filth in letters to all sorts of people; my agents intercept and destroy most of them but some slip through. When I challenge him about it he says that until Caesar has passed his judgement upon him he has the right to write to anyone he likes even if it's seditious and attacking the very laws that he's hiding behind – our laws. But with Nero back I'll soon have the runt off my hands, and, well ...' Sabinus glanced with regret at his son-in-law. 'It also means you'll have to face him.'

'I was hoping he hadn't noticed that I was back from Armenia,' Paetus confided, scowling; his boyish face had been weather-beaten from campaigning in the East, making his pronounced front teeth seem even whiter.

More thoughts on the subject were cut off as Nero raised both arms, asking for silence that was soon apparent. The emotion of the occasion was too much for him and for a while he stood there breathing deeply and giving his best expressions of relief. 'My friends,' he said at last, gathering himself. 'What a thing we have witnessed here in this place: I, the son of a god and the great-grandson of a god, have now become the father of a goddess. I, your Emperor, have divine seed.' He turned to his freedman, Epaphroditus, and held out a hand. 'My *cythia*.' From behind the altar the freedman produced the seven-stringed lyre that the Emperor had been studying for five years now. 'In honour of the day and in praise of my divine daughter sprung from my loins I have composed a paean of thanksgiving.' He plucked a chord and attempted to sing a note of similar pitch without noticeable success; his voice, husky and weak, struggled to fill the chamber.

Sabinus grimaced and braced himself. Gaius looked around anxiously for a seat; there were none.

With two more chords that had no business being played in conjunction, Nero launched into a dirge of disharmony, erratic scanning and stretched rhyme.

On he went, verse after verse, as the senators stood, listening with the intense looks of those who consider themselves to be in the presence of genius and are unable to believe the good fortune that had brought them to that place.

But in this they were all experienced: for the past couple of years, Nero had been shamefully performing to small audiences of senators in private, as if he were a slave or a freedman rather than the Emperor of Rome. Since the death of his mother, Agrippina, murdered on his orders, and the sidelining of his tutor, Seneca, who had attempted to keep the young Princes on a dignified and sober path, Nero had come to realise that there was nothing that he could not do. He had murdered his mother because she annoyed him, his brother because he was a threat to him and, most recently, his wife, Claudia Octavia, so that Poppaea Sabina could take her place – Poppaea's wedding present had been her predecessor's head. No one had censured him for these deeds for no one dared. All in the élite of Rome's society knew that Nero could not bear anyone to think badly of him; he wished only to be universally loved and those who made it obvious that they did not share that view had no business in Nero's city.

For Rome now, more than ever, was Nero's city.

Gone was the pretence that the Emperor could not take anything he wanted that had been the sleight of hand with which Augustus had cloaked the actuality of his absolute power. Even the brash young Emperor Gaius – known as Caligula, the nickname of his youth – had paid some attention to law in that if he wanted a man's property he had had the decency to have an ambitious informer trump up a charge of treason against the individual. Now, however, everyone knew the stark reality: everything, ultimately, was the property of the Emperor. For who could argue with a man who had almost ten thousand Praetorian Guardsmen to secure him in power? And who would wish to curb his desires? And if he desired to sing a paean in praise of the goddess sprung from his divine loins then so be it; none of those present gave the slightest sign that what they were listening to was anything other than the greatest composition ever set down, being performed by the most loved man ever to exist.

So, almost half an hour later, as the paean ground to a grisly end, as unheroic as it was uninspiring, the senators vied with one another to be the first and loudest to congratulate and applaud their virtuoso Emperor who, naturally, was overwhelmed and taken totally by surprise by the enthusiasm of the reception and found it impossible to refuse entreaties of a reprise.

'My friends,' Nero croaked as the applause died down after the second rendition; his voice raw from much usage. 'Now I have set my daughter in her rightful place in the heavens and provided her with suitable accommodation here in Rome, my thoughts turn to my own comfort and that of my wife, the Augusta, Poppaea Sabina.' Raising the back of his hand to his forehead and gazing up to the smoke swirling high above, beneath the ceiling of painted panels set between cedar-wood beams, he let go a melodramatic sigh. 'But that shall have to wait, dear friends, as I am well aware that my presence is required in the Senate; I shall come immediately. Corbulo's despatch on the conduct of the renewed war with Parthia in Armenia must be read and our policy and the course of the struggle there be considered, seeing as I was obliged to reinstate him in his eastern command after Lucius Caesennius Paetus' humiliating defeat by the Parthian king, Vologases.' He paused for cries of 'shame' and 'disgrace'.

Paetus stood, stiff-backed, as the insults were hurled at him.

Sabinus shifted uneasily. 'I should never have lobbied for that command for him after he stood down from the consulship,' he muttered to his uncle so that Paetus did not hear. Nero, through jealousy and fear, had removed Corbulo, the greatest general of the age, from overall command of Rome's forces in Armenia after a series of despatches from which it had been evident that he had done far too good and efficient a job in removing Vologases' brother, Tiridates, from the Armenian throne and replacing him with Rome's client, Tigranes. An emperor loves a victory but not necessarily the man who provided it for him and Nero's lack of thanks had been deafening. Hostilities had flared up again when Vologases had, in turn, removed Tigranes and replaced him with Tiridates. Sabinus had used his influence as prefect of Rome to

get Paetus appointed Governor of Cappadocia and to be given two legions in order to bring Armenia back under direct Roman rule; something he had conspicuously failed to do. Corbulo had eventually been authorised to come to his assistance.

Gaius' jowls wobbled with indignation. 'Dear boy, you two brothers are not doing too well with sons-in-law, it has to be said. Vespasian's lost his whole legion in the Britannic revolt and now your son-in-law takes the gloss off his consulship by surrendering his two legions to the Parthians who then force them to pass under the yoke before allowing them to withdraw from Armenia without their weapons or armour.'

Nero signalled for quiet and then looked directly at Sabinus even though Paetus was standing right next to him. 'Now that your son-in-law is recently returned to Rome you can tell him that in honour of my daughter's deification I will pardon him immediately so that he won't die of chronic worry as he awaits my verdict, seeing as he is evidently a man prone to panic.'

The assembly burst into bellows of laughter; Paetus coloured with impotent rage.

Sabinus blanched. 'Indeed, Princeps.'

Nero gave a smile that more than hinted at the cruelty lurking within him. 'And then, of course, after the Senate has risen, I shall hear appeals; have all those wishing the benefit of my judgement waiting in the forum, prefect.'

'I shall make the arrangements, Princeps.'

'Good. I will work my fingers to the bone in the service of Rome to the extent that my own comfort will be secondary.'

This drew mighty cheers from his audience, this time born out of greater sincerity, as, for the first time since the death of his daughter, Nero would be coming to the Senate to tell them how to think.

'It was Corbulo refusing to come to my aid, Father,' Paetus insisted as he, Sabinus and Gaius, along with the rest of the senators, descended the Palatine.

'But that's not the version that the Emperor heard,' Gaius reminded him. 'We all sat there in the Senate listening to

Vologases' crowing letter about how he *magnanimously* let you go when he could have crushed you and destroyed both of your legions. Unfortunately that letter arrived well before yours.'

'As did Corbulo's report,' Sabinus added, 'in which he made it abundantly clear that you got yourself into a mess but were too proud to admit it or ask for help; and now the Emperor accuses you, in public, of panicking, and makes you a laughing stock.'

'For which I'll never forgive him!'

Gaius winced and looked around in alarm at the other senatorial groups as they turned left, onto the Sacred Way, and headed to the forum. 'Not so loud, dear boy; that's the sort of remark that has a habit of coming back on you.'

Paetus scowled. 'Well, don't think I shan't be avenged for the insult in some way.'

Sabinus grabbed his son-in-law's arm and pulled him close. 'Now listen, Paetus; for the sake of my daughter, you will do nothing stupid, nothing that endangers you. Put all thoughts of vengeance from your mind and concentrate on working your way back into Nero's favour because, like it or not, he has complete control over every aspect of our lives and is a terrifying creature of whim. Understand?'

Paetus snatched his arm away. 'It's intolerable; we're not even allowed our honour any more.'

'Our honour faded with the death of the Republic and now that is no more than a distant memory. Nero holds all power in his hands so, of course, we have no honour; but we do have life.'

'And what is life without honour?'

Gaius had no doubts. 'Far more pleasant than death without honour, dear boy.'

'And furthermore, when the Parthian puppet-king, Tiridates, sent emissaries to discuss peace, I did not rebuff them,' Lucius Verginius Rufus, the junior consul, declaimed, reading from a scroll containing Corbulo's despatch, 'as news had come to me of a rebellion in the east of the Parthian kingdom and I realised that Vologases would not wish to prosecute two wars at once; consequently, the Great King agreed to a truce. However, as the

discussions continued, I executed or drove into exile all the Armenian nobles who had sworn allegiance to us and then switched sides after Paetus' debacle, thus ensuring the loyalty of those who remain.' Verginius paused as a growl went through the ranks of senators seated in rows on stools to either side of the Senate House.

Sabinus put his hand on Paetus' wrist, keeping him in his seat.

'And then I razed all their fortifications to the ground so that they could not be used against us again. Tiridates asked for a parley face-to-face and chose the very place where Paetus had been cornered. I did not shy away from this as I thought that coming in strength to the scene of their earlier victory would emphasise the contrast between the two situations.'

Again a rumble went through the meeting and Sabinus felt many pairs of eyes turn to his son-in-law; seated next to Verginius on a curule chair, Nero tutted demonstratively.

'I was not going to let Paetus' disgrace distress me so I sent his son, who is serving on my staff as a military tribune, in advance with some units to wipe away all trace of that unfortunate encounter. He went willingly, anxious to help expunge the memory of his father's folly.'

This was almost too much for Paetus who had to be physically restrained by all those around him. Nero sneered at the sight.

'I arrived with an escort of twenty cavalry at the same time as did Tiridates with his entourage of a similar number. I am pleased to report that he did me the honour of dismounting first; I did not hesitate and went to him and, clasping both his hands, praised the young man for rejecting war and coming to seek terms with Rome. We have come to an honourable compromise: he for his part declared that he shall place his crown at the feet of our Emperor's statue and then come to Rome so that he can take it back only from Nero's hand. I have agreed to this in principle, subject to imperial approval, and the meeting ended with a kiss.'

All eyes turned to Nero, conscious of his reaction the last time one of Corbulo's despatches had proclaimed a swift settlement in Armenia: the Senate had broken out into cheers only to be

silenced by an outburst by Nero declaring that Corbulo had only done what anyone present in the chamber could have achieved. This time they wanted to be told how to think before they reacted and they did not have to wait long.

'What a spectacle that will be!' Nero declared, rising from his seat, raising an arm and gazing into the future. 'Imagine: a king from the Arsacid dynasty, brother of the Great King of Parthia, no less, coming to Rome as a suppliant. Coming to me! Not going to his brother, but to me for I am the most powerful. In acknowledging me as the ultimate giver of the Armenian crown, he acknowledges my dominion over Armenia. I have won!'

Nero opened his arms to encompass the whole House as they rose, almost as one, and hailed their Emperor, the master of Armenia.

'Get up!' Sabinus growled, hauling Paetus to his feet to join in the praise, 'and look pleased.'

Paetus added grudging applause.

'Corbulo seems to have learnt the art of flattering the Emperor,' Gaius observed, sweating profusely from the exertion of lauding Nero. 'That should keep him alive for a little while longer.'

On they went, clapping, shouting, waving folds of their togas and holding their hands out towards the Emperor as he basked in the glory. Eventually even the most hardy of the Senate had begun to tire and Nero, sensing the volume begin to trail off, brought the applause to a close and sat back down.

'Is there any more?' he asked Verginius, once all were again seated.

'Just a couple of lines, Princeps.'

'Well, read them before I go to hear the appeals.'

'Given that it has always been accepted that the Governor of Syria has authority over Judaea and given that I have already taxed Syria hard to pay for this war, I have ordered the procurator, Porcius Festus, to substantially increase the taxation due in that province and will ensure that his replacement, Gessius Florus, continues that policy when he arrives in the new year; it's nothing that they can't afford, the Jews being notoriously wealthy as one look at their temple complex will confirm. The extra

revenue will go a long way to re-equipping the two legions that Paetus so carelessly lost and which I have since brought back to Syria under my command.'

The last word echoed around the chamber and then there was silence.

Nero sat, shaking with fury as he grasped the arms of his chair before composing himself, abruptly standing and then storming from the Senate House in a swirl of purple and gold.

'Oh dear, dear boys,' Gaius muttered as uproar broke out after Nero's departure. 'By being seen to amass legions, I rather think that Corbulo has just undone any good he did himself by making Nero the ultimate dispenser of crowns.'

'And just when I thought that nothing good was going to come from this,' Paetus said, his face fixed in an unpleasant leer.

'Plea dismissed!' Nero screamed; yet another convicted citizen, an eques who had been originally found guilty of murdering his business partner, fell victim to the Emperor's foul temper. 'What was the original sentence?'

Epaphroditus briefly consulted the scroll on the table before him. 'Execution by decapitation, Princeps.'

'Strip him of his citizenship and damn him to the beasts for wasting my time.'

The large crowd of mainly common people, surrounding the outdoor court, cheered appreciatively, always pleased to see one of their betters condemned and caring not unduly about the fairness of the hearing.

The doomed man fell to the ground, pleading for mercy, only to be dragged away by his ankles as his fingers tried to grip the gaps between the paving stones covering the forum.

Sabinus looked back at the twenty or more other supplicants who had witnessed nothing but dismissed appeals in the two hours of Nero sitting in judgement; none looked confident. None? No, one man caught his eye; short, balding and with bandy legs, Paulus of Tarsus wore an expression of serenity that could, almost, be construed as the vacant stare of the bewildered, considering the danger he was in.

‘An interesting reaction, wouldn’t you say? Most, er ... what’s the best word for it? Most composed, yes, that’s it, composed, considering he’s going before an emperor whose worry about a potential rival in the East seems to have removed every last vestige of justice that remained in him.’

Sabinus turned to look into the bloated face of Lucius Annaeus Seneca. ‘Who are you talking about, Seneca?’

‘Paulus of Tarsus, obviously; I couldn’t help noticing that you were studying him so intensely.’

Sabinus’ curiosity was piqued. ‘You know him?’

Seneca beamed in his avuncular fashion and placed a chubby arm around Sabinus’ shoulders. ‘He’s been pestering me, since he came to Rome to appeal to the Emperor, to use my influence with Nero to have the accusation against him of sedition quashed.’

‘You don’t have any influence over Nero any more.’

Seneca patted Sabinus’ shoulder. ‘Now that’s not necessarily true, and you know it. I still have access to him, it’s just that he no longer takes my advice on principle; he likes to humiliate me by doing the exact opposite to what I recommend, and Epaphroditus encourages him in order to emphasise to me that he is now the power behind the Emperor. It’s, er ... what would you say? It’s galling, yes, galling – at least it was.’

Sabinus understood immediately. ‘Until you started to advise him to do the exact opposite of what you wanted?’

‘Ah, my friend, how well you understand our Nero. And having read some of that disgusting atheism that Paulus espouses and the way he urges his followers not to acknowledge the Emperor as the ultimate power on earth and yet, hypocritically, he’s quite happy to appeal to him, I decided that I would grant his wish and have urged Nero to leniency in his case.’

Sabinus nodded in approval. ‘Good. I had to nail up quite a few of his followers whilst I was Governor of Thracia and Macedonia; they deny the gods, refuse to sacrifice to the Emperor – or even on his behalf as the Jews do – and believe in an afterlife that is better than this world and therefore seem to have very little fear of death, which, apparently, is imminent, as

what he calls the End of Days will be upon us very soon. It's dangerous, irrational and bigoted as well as being contrary to everything our ancestors have believed for generations.'

'I agree; although he has got one thing right.'

'What's that?'

'I saw a copy of one of his letters to some Greek follower in which he says that women should be silent; if only Poppaea Sabina would take that advice.' Seneca chuckled at his own observation. 'As, I'm sure, your brother, Vespasian, would now agree,' he added as Paulus was brought forward to stand before the Emperor.

Epaphroditus consulted a scroll. 'Gaius Julius Paulus; accused by Porcius Festus, the outgoing procurator of Judaea, of stirring up anti-Roman and anti-Jewish feeling and causing a riot. He refused trial in Jerusalem and decided instead to appeal to you directly, Princeps.' He handed the scroll to the Emperor. 'Seneca recommended leniency in this case,' he added, giving Seneca a sly look.

Nero eyed Paulus as if he were scrutinising an unpleasant skin disease. 'Well?'

Paulus smiled at the Emperor with exaggerated benignity and opened his arms to him. 'Princeps, may the peace of the Lord soothe you and—'

'Just get on with it!' Nero was in no mood to be soothed.

Paulus stepped back at the vehemence of the order. 'I, er ... I'm sorry, Princeps.' Rubbing his hands together, Paulus hunched his shoulders and smiled with an ingratiating demeanour that made Sabinus feel queasy. 'Princeps, I was misunderstood. I had come to Jerusalem to bring money that had been collected for the poor. The priests in the temple refused to let me distribute it as they thought that it should be their duty, which would have meant that they would have kept it all. When I protested, the High Priest had me arrested by the Temple Guards and handed to the Procurator. That's when the riot broke out.'

Nero had had enough. 'So there was a riot and you did disobey your priests who do make sacrifices on my behalf.

What's more, you were wanting to distribute money to the poor in person as if *you* were the font of all bounty and not *me*, your Emperor?'

Paulus looked unsure. 'Well, yes, and then no. I—'

'Take him away,' Nero ordered, 'and execute him.' He turned towards Seneca. 'Leniency?' He shook his head in disgust.

Even Sabinus was startled at the arbitrary nature of Nero's justice that day. 'I'm very pleased to see the last of Paulus but I'm relieved that he pardoned my son-in-law before he heard Corbulo's report.'

'Very fortunate,' Seneca agreed, smiling, as Paulus was manacled and made no attempt to struggle. 'And a very gratifying verdict.'

'Do you think there's any chance of wiping the stain Paetus has left from my family's record?'

'That entirely depends upon two things: how your brother, Vespasian, acquits himself in Africa; and also upon your decision as to that suggestion I made to you.'

'I told you, Seneca; I won't make a decision until I've spoken to my brother upon his return next spring.'

'By next spring we may all be dead.' Seneca smiled without mirth and walked away as a change seemed to come over Paulus: his ingratiating manner evaporated as the finality of his sentence sank in; he glanced down at the manacles and then stood erect looking Nero in the eye. 'Your sentence means nothing to me. This world is not for long; I will just be leaving it sooner than you, but not by much for judgement is in sight. Until then I shall be with my Lord, Yeshua bar Yosef, the Christus.'

'Wait!' Nero raised a hand. 'What did he say? Christus?'

'I believe so, Princeps,' Epaphroditus confirmed.

Nero peered at Paulus. 'A follower of that new cult with the crucified god, are you?'

'I believe the Christus died for our sins,' Paulus stated with certainty, 'and will come again very soon at the End of Days, which is fast approaching. The rise of the Dog Star will herald it in and it will start here.'

Nero's pleasure was obvious. 'Will it, now? Will it indeed?' He turned to Sabinus. 'Keep him safely locked away in the Tullianum, prefect; I may well have a use for his death.'

PART I



GARAMA, 400 MILES SOUTH OF THE
ROMAN PROVINCE OF AFRICA,
DECEMBER AD 63

CHAPTER I

IT WAS NOT the city of Garama itself that impressed Vespasian most but, rather, the environment in which it was set. Fields of wheat and barley interspersed with orchards of fig trees and grazing pastures were not an uncommon sight in most parts of the Empire; but here, four hundred miles across scrag and desert, beyond Rome's frontier to the south of Leptis Magna in the province of Africa, it was surely a work of the gods.

Just over an hour after dawn the previous day, shortly before the caravan had made camp to sleep away the hours of burning sun, following its night-march, the line of distant hills could be discerned as being verdant. Now, as the sun rose a day later and the caravan was forty miles further south, the full beauty of this unlikely oasis could be enjoyed. For at least ten miles to either side of a high-towered city, not more than a couple of miles away, perched on a hill three hundred feet above the desert floor, was nothing but arable land; and within that sea of green, gangs of tiny figures laboured.

'That's a sight that's about as unlikely as seeing a Vestal doing the splits naked.'

Vespasian looked at the originator of the remark, a battered man in his early seventies with the cauliflower ears and broken nose of an ex-boxer, sitting on a horse next to him and sporting, as did Vespasian, a floppy, wide-brimmed straw hat. 'And what makes you so sure, Magnus, that Vestals don't go in for nude gymnastics?'

Magnus turned to Vespasian, one eye squinting against the rising sun, the other just reflecting its glow, for it was but a glass replica – and not a very good one at that, Vespasian had always found himself thinking. 'Well, I ain't saying that they don't cavort

naked and do all sorts of interesting stretches, leaps, acrobatics and the like; all I'm saying is that I'm unlikely to see them do it, if you take my meaning?'

'I'm sure I do and you're probably right: even if they did allow spectators you look far too unsavoury to be allowed in.' Vespasian grinned, his dry lips cracked, causing a stab of pain; he winced and put his hand to his mouth.

'There; that serves you right for your constant mockery, sir.' Magnus gave a satisfied nod and leant forward to address the man on the other side of Vespasian. 'Does he ever accuse you of unsavouriness, Hormus? Or is he politer to his freedman than he is to his oldest friend?'

Hormus scratched his wispy beard that part concealed an undershot lower jaw and then gave a shy grin. 'Seeing as I have no wish to see females naked, Vestal Virgins or not, it would make no difference to me whether the master thinks me unsavoury or not.'

'That didn't answer my question.'

'I know.'

Magnus grunted and then returned his attention to the wonder before them. 'So, under those hills is a sea?'

Vespasian sucked a drop of blood from his finger. Sweat trickled down from under his hat, catching in the heavy growth on his chin and cheeks, causing it to itch; his eyes squinted against the sun making the strained expression that he constantly wore on his rounded face seem even more tense. 'A sea or a big lake; who knows? But what is certain is that they have hundreds of wells that feed an irrigation system that runs through buried pipes and so that water must come from somewhere.'

'Well, I wish it didn't and then we wouldn't be here.'

'And I thought you liked visiting new places.'

'Bollocks I do.' Magnus rubbed his back and groaned. 'At my age the only new thing I like to see is a new day.'

Vespasian, for the sake of his lips, refrained from smiling at the joke made by his friend of nigh on thirty-eight years; instead he kicked his horse forward towards the road that snaked its way up to the city, wishing, too, that he was not there.

But the sad truth was that he had no choice but to be there; he was, once again, the victim of political manoeuvring in Rome but this time he had no one to blame but himself in that he had been guilty of advancing his position through manipulation. However, that was the only way to get any preferment in Nero's Rome. When a document implicating Epaphroditus in a business that would not have pleased Nero had fallen into the hands of Vespasian's mistress, Caenis, herself a palace insider, it had seemed only natural for her, if Vespasian were to become the Governor of Africa, to inform the powerful freedman of its existence. Epaphroditus had no alternative other than to use his influence over Nero to have Vespasian granted the position in return for the document. He had not been at all content as he could normally have expected to have received a substantial bribe for such a prestigious governorship. But it was not just the enmity of Epaphroditus that had earned Vespasian this trip to the extremity of the known world; it had been a force far more potent: the Empress, Poppaea Sabina. Quite why she had behaved so spitefully towards him, Vespasian did not know but he knew enough about imperial politics to understand that often there was no reason for maliciousness other than the thrill of exerting power over those weaker than you.

So, as vengeance for forcing him to forego a substantial bribe, Epaphroditus had suggested to Nero that whilst Vespasian was serving as Governor of Africa he should be responsible for securing the release of the scores, if not hundreds, of Roman citizens enslaved on the farms in the Kingdom of the Garamantes. Poppaea Sabina had enthusiastically supported the idea, saying that it would be a great coup for Nero achieving something that previous emperors had tried but failed to do before. Nero had therefore charged him to send a mission to Nayram, the king of the Garamantes, with the power to negotiate on the Emperor's behalf. It had been with a cold smile and darkened eyes that Poppaea had suggested to her husband that it would be much better if Vespasian went himself, and that if he did not succeed then it would be much better if he did not return. After due consideration of one heartbeat's duration, Nero had concurred.

Vespasian had inwardly cursed but could not blame Epaphroditus for doing what he knew anyone would do to repay a bad debt; however, Poppaea's sudden malevolence had perplexed him. He had had no choice but to comply and saw the positive side of the deal in that he would be out of Poppaea's reach for over a year whilst his elder brother, Sabinus, back in Rome would, perhaps, be able to find the cause of the Empress's malice. And so, at the age of sixty-three, he had departed for Africa, soon after the marriage of his elder son, Titus, to Arrecina Tertulla, Sabinus' niece, for what should have been a year of luxury and ease but instead had been quite the opposite.

Thus, here he was at the head of a caravan made up of merchants, who plied the desert route, and a half ala of Numidian auxiliary cavalry on their stocky little ponies that seemed to be able to go all day on as much water as their riders, such was their habitude to the desert. Also with him were his eleven lictors, mounted for the purposes of the journey with the fasces strapped over their horses' backs.

Vespasian kicked his own mount again to get it to put some effort into the ascent as he wished to be in the city away from the sun before it reached much higher in the clear, desert sky. The city's towers loomed overhead and horns boomed out from watchmen within, warning of the approaching, much enlarged, caravan.

For fifteen days – or, rather, nights – they had been travelling from Leptis Magna via a series of wells, oases and water dumps along the caravan route that connected the Kingdom of the Garamantes with the Empire. However, the journey had taken far longer in its planning than in its execution as the water supplies en route were sufficient only for a small caravan of twenty to thirty merchants and Vespasian needed to take many more people and then bring hundreds more back.

Immediately upon his arrival in the province, back in April, he had given orders that the water dumps be greatly enlarged, sending thousands of amphorae south to be buried along the way; it had taken six months to achieve once the Suphetes, the two leading magistrates in Leptis Magna, the closest city to

Garama, had been threatened into complying with his will. He had set sail from Carthage, the capital of Africa, in November once the work had been completed. Hugging the coast, he had stopped off at Hadrumetum, the province's second city, to hear appeals, only to find that the backlog was considerable as his predecessor, Servius Salvidienus Orfitus, had neglected to leave Carthage for the entire duration of his tenure. Anxious to be pressing on, Vespasian had left the city after only one day, before even a tenth of the appeals had been heard, and, consequently, despite the presence of his eleven lictors, received a barrage of turnips from disgruntled appellants as he re-boarded his ship. Cursing Orfitus for his negligence and vowing some sort of retribution for the insult to his person, he continued on to the port of Leptis Magna; this city was as close to Carthage as it was to distant Cyrene in the neighbouring province of Cyrenaica where he had served as a quaestor twenty-five years previously.

The port-city's remoteness was the reason for the Suphetes' reluctance to obey him as, up until the beginning of the year, Leptis Magna had been a free city over which the Governor had minimal control. Nero's constant quest for cash had changed that and, in return for Latin Rights, he had made the city a *municipium*, something the locals had resented but, as with the new taxes imposed, could do nothing about. The Suphetes' truculence had been the result; unused to receiving orders, they had automatically reacted against him and one of his early messengers, an *optio* with an eight-man escort, had failed to return, causing Vespasian to demonstrate his resolve with a serious threat. This obstinacy had much amused Vespasian as Leptis Magna had been the birth-city of his wife, Flavia Domitilla, whom he had met when serving in Cyrene.

Vespasian smiled to himself as he finally reached the summit and Garama's gates came into view; his wife's wilfulness, which had dogged him all their marriage, could, perhaps, be explained by the independent-minded ethos of the city she had grown up in.

'What's so amusing?' Magnus asked, taking off his floppy hat and wiping his brow for the hundredth time that day.

'What?' Vespasian pulled himself out of his reverie.

'Were you thinking about your being pelted by turnips? Because I was and I still find it hard not to burst out laughing every time I look at you.'

'Yes, very funny; just about as funny as Orfitus will find it having a turnip rammed up his arse when I see him back in Rome. If you must know, I was just thinking that the Suphetes' attitude to authority goes a long way to explaining Flavia's demeanour, seeing as she spent the first twenty years or so of her life in Leptis Magna.'

Magnus grunted in a non-committal way. 'Perhaps; but you ain't got the same power over her as you have over them.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, it stands to reason, don't it? They soon came into line after you wrote to them saying that if they didn't want to help expand the water dumps, that was fine by you so long as they came along on the expedition to show you where to find the extra water you'll need. The difference is, with them you would have done it, but would you ever try and get Flavia to bend to your will by threatening to take her with you and have her endlessly complaining?'

Vespasian shuddered at the thought.

'Whereas you'd have loved to see those two fat bastards sitting, sweating on a horse two hundred miles from the nearest bath house and boy-brothel, but you'd rather go eye to eye, as it were, with Medusa's arsehole than have Flavia here.'

Vespasian could only agree. 'But at least I'd know that she wasn't spending all my money like she tried to do the last time I was away for any length of time.'

'True; and I'm sure that she'll be calculating that you'll make a fortune out of your position here and has therefore already doubled or tripled her expenditure.'

Vespasian shuddered again at that thought.

'So my advice is start using your power to make a lot of money before the sailing season opens up in March and your replacement arrives, because my bet is that you'll find yourself going home to a wife who now has four slaves each to bathe her and

then do her hair, make-up and then dress her. Of course, that doesn't even include the ones selecting her jewellery or her shoes or just hanging around on the off-chance that she might feel like nibbling on something sweet or getting absolutely Bacchurlic on the very finest Falernian, bought, at no expense spared, from the most fashionable of wine-merchants in the forum, frequented by the Emperor's steward himself because why would the wife of a governor want anything less?

Vespasian frowned at his friend as he caught his breath after his tirade. 'Have you quite finished?'

Magnus grunted again. 'I'm just saying, that's all.'

'Well, thank you; you must be exhausted after that.'

'Well, don't forget that I was right about her when you brought her back from Cyrene: I said she'd want more than two hairdressers and you had a massive argument with her when you sold the third one that she'd bought, behind your back, stupidly thinking that someone as tight with money as you are would never notice.'

'I thought you'd said you'd finished.'

'I have now.'

'Good. Then perhaps I can get on with negotiating the release of all Roman citizens enslaved here?'

'Just make some money on the deal,' Hormus said, almost under his breath.

Vespasian looked at his freedman in shock; he had never been so outspoken before. 'You too, Hormus?'

Hormus nodded. 'Magnus is right: Flavia will spend it before you have it so make sure you get it.'

Vespasian tried to dismiss the remark but in his heart he knew that Magnus had a point; a very good point. He pulled his horse up as the gates of Garama opened and an excessively fat man in a litter was carried out by straining bearers, surrounded by half a dozen slaves all wafting him, energetically, with huge palm-frond fans so that his robe rippled in the breeze and his long beard swayed, rather disconcertingly, from side to side.

A chain of office hung about his neck and fitted snugly into the crevice between his breasts. 'I am Izebboudjen, chamberlain

to His Most Exalted Majesty, Nayram of the Garamantes, The Lord of the Thousand Wells. His Most Exalted Majesty demands to know who approaches his capital.' He spoke in Greek with the accent of a highly educated man.

Vespasian studied the chamberlain for a few moments and found it remarkable how little sign of sweat there was on either his clothes or his exposed brown skin; the slaves fanning him must have been doing an extremely good job and, judging by the streams of fluid dripping from their bodies, as well as those carrying his bulk, they were certainly making up for their master's lack of perspiration. 'My name is Titus Flavius Vespasianus, the Governor of the Roman province of Africa, come to speak with your master, Nayram.'

'You mean, of course, Governor, His Most Exalted Majesty, Nayram of the Garamantes, The Lord of the Thousand Wells.'

Vespasian dipped his head with his best impression of solemnity. 'Indeed I do, Izebboudjen.' Believing in the innate superiority of his race he was not about to kowtow to some petty potentate, no matter how many wells he was lord of.

Recognising that it was probably best not to force the issue of getting the Roman to acknowledge his master's full title, Izebboudjen bowed as deeply as he could for a man of his girth seated in a litter. 'Welcome, Governor. Your troops must make camp outside the walls along with the merchants in the caravan; they shall be given food and drink – whatever they desire, we will not have anyone wish to accuse The Lord of the Thousand Wells of ungenerosity. You, however, may enter with a small escort; rooms will be prepared for you in the palace. How many will you be?'

'I will be bringing my eleven lictors and two companions.'

'Very good. Follow me and I shall arrange an audience for you with The Lord of the Thousand Wells.'

Garama was old, very old; that much was certain from the wide thoroughfare that opened out on passing through the gate. The buildings, mainly two storeyed and constructed of sun-baked mud-bricks with small, shuttered windows, to either side of the

street had many differing layers of repair and paint as succeeding generations had seen to their upkeep; none of them were shabby but, equally, none of them were in pristine condition. But it was the road itself that gave away the extreme age of the place: deeply worn stone from the passing of many wheels, hoofs and feet gave testament to centuries of usage; smooth and undulating, it dimly reflected the burning sun in many different directions. But what was so intriguing was just how clean it was. Nowhere was there any sign of the normal detritus one would expect to find in a public street, whether it be rotting vegetables or fruit, or human and animal waste or just, even, lumps of indeterminate refuse. There was nothing, not even a nutshell, and it was not even as if the street were empty. There were many people, all male and all rather corpulent, either walking with friends or frequenting the open-fronted shops or sitting playing some sort of game with counters on a strangely marked board whilst eating from Roman-import tableware or drinking from cups of the same provenance.

Delivery carts, too, made themselves busy and it was through them that Vespasian saw how the place was kept so tidy when a mule eased itself copiously in the middle of the road. The driver did nothing about the resulting steaming mess and drove off; as he left, two slaves ran out from wherever they had been waiting, one with a shovel and sack and one with an amphora and cloth. The pile of nuggets was soon in the bag and the stain washed down with water and rubbed clean with the cloth. 'Did you see that?' he asked in surprise.

Magnus nodded. 'Never seen the like of it. Does that happen with every bit of rubbish?'

'If so, who pays for the slaves?' Hormus wondered.

As they progressed up the hill, the lictors drawing curious looks, it became apparent that it happened everywhere: two more piles of fresh excrement, a dog that had expired in the heat and a few mouldy cabbages, rejected by a costermonger and thrown to the ground, also ended up in the street-cleaners' sacks. Any time a piece of rubbish fell to the street another scuttling slave appeared from somewhere to retrieve it.

'Do you keep all your streets so clean, Izebboudjen,' Vespasian asked the chamberlain, 'or is it just this main thoroughfare?'

Izebboudjen strained to turn his head; his expression was of amusement. 'Clean? We don't do that to keep the city clean; cleanliness is just a by-product of collecting every scrap of waste that we can to fertilise our fields with.' He gestured to the desert below, stretching as far as could be seen. 'We're surrounded by wasteland so here nothing must be wasted. The only things we burn are our corpses; those of freeborn citizens, that is. Slaves and freedmen are consigned to the fields.'

'Freedmen?'

'Yes. There are very few of them and it is part of the deal that guarantees their manumission. They are always willing to make that small sacrifice in return for their freedom.'

'Master!' a voice called out in Latin from behind Vespasian. 'I'm a Roman citizen!'

Vespasian turned around to see a slave pelting up the road towards him. Pedestrians scampered to either side of the street to get clear of his path as he closed on Vespasian's party, shouting and waving his arms.

Vespasian twisted his horse round.

'Be careful, Governor!' Izebboudjen shouted.

The moment Vespasian kicked his mount forward, back towards the slave, the man gave a sharp cry and flung his hands in the air; he pitched forward, back arched, and crumpled to the ground, sliding a few feet over the smooth stone of the street before coming to a stop, his eyes wide and glazed. Blood trickled down from behind his ear and dripped into a slowly increasing pool. Down the hill, two huge, muscled men, shaven-headed and dressed only in leather kilts, strolled towards the body swinging slings in their right hands.

'You were lucky, Governor,' Izebboudjen said. 'The slave-keepers don't often miss but it's always advisable to move away from a rogue slave as everyone else in the street was doing.'

Vespasian looked around: the street was full again with pedestrians carrying on about their business as if nothing were amiss. One of the slave-keepers hefted up the limp body and slung it

over his shoulder to bear it away to whatever process it went through before it enriched the soil.

Vespasian turned back to the chamberlain, outraged. 'He was a Roman citizen!'

Izebboudjen shrugged. 'What he was before he became a slave is neither here nor there; here he was just a slave bought and owned, as are all the slaves in the kingdom, by The Lord of the Thousand Wells himself. He tolerates no insubordination from them.' He indicated to his bearers and wafters, ordering them to move on. 'There are far more of them than there are of us. That's why we free a few of them, the strongest, to act as the slave-keepers. If for one moment we let our grip slip then imagine what would happen. I believe that it is much the same situation back in your Rome, but perhaps not quite as acute as it is here.'

Vespasian could see Izebboudjen's point – an idea to make slaves in Rome all wear a distinctive mark had been scrapped for the very reason that if they were to realise just by how much they outnumbered free and freed, the consequences could be devastating. 'Yes, but this man was a Roman citizen; he shouldn't have been a slave.'

'Why not?'

'Because ... because he's a citizen of Rome.' Vespasian could think of no logical reason and knew perfectly well that there was no law against citizens being enslaved. He had met Flavia after her then lover, Statilius Capella, had been captured by the Marmarides, a tribe of slavers east of Cyrene. Had Vespasian not rescued the man he would have made the hazardous journey across the desert to this kingdom and would now be still toiling in the fields, or, more likely, be a part of them. 'It's wrong to enslave freeborn Romans.'

'Why? How many Garamantes have you got enslaved in your empire? Or Parthians for that matter; Nubians, Scythians, Germans. Shall I go on?'

'Yes, but they're all ... well, none of them are Roman citizens.'

Izebboudjen chuckled. 'I think that it would be best if we discontinued this argument before one of us embarrasses himself.'

Vespasian bit back a stinging retort that he knew would just sound like empty bluster and was painfully aware of who of the two of them was in danger of embarrassing himself. Besides, he had no wish to aggravate Izebboudjen as he did not know whether he would be of help when negotiating with his master, he of the many wells.

Nayram was, quite possibly, the fattest man in existence; he was certainly the fattest that Vespasian had ever seen. 'Don't say a word,' he hissed out of the corner of his mouth to Magnus as his friend stifled a gasp. Vespasian adjusted his toga so that it fell to his satisfaction, feeling refreshed from the bath and shave that he had enjoyed upon arrival in his quarters at the palace. His eleven lictors, resplendent in their pure white togas, added dignity to his appearance, standing behind him and to either side, their fasces held upright before them.

All in the cavernous audience chamber were on their feet as more than a dozen very burly slaves carried in His Most Exalted Majesty, Nayram of the Garamantes, The Lord of the Thousand Wells, reclining on a bed of immense proportions that Vespasian imagined he rarely strayed far from. His exact girth was impossible to tell as he was festooned in voluminous robes that blended with the bedding and echoed the deep blue, pale green and soft red hues of the glossy ceramic tiles decorating the floor, walls and domed ceiling of the chamber. All that could be ascertained was that there was much blubber beneath, as the contents of the bed seemed to be in constant motion, gently wobbling. His head was covered with an enormous, ill-fitting red wig that tumbled over his shoulders, partly concealing the rolls of fat that constituted his neck.

Izebboudjen led the bowing as Nayram was paraded before the company. The chamberlain seemed positively svelte in comparison to his master; indeed, the assembled courtiers, Vespasian thought, were the plumpest collection of individuals he had ever been in the presence of – which was quite a claim considering the physiques of many of the top echelons of Roman society.

With much care and straining, the slaves managed to lower Nayram's bed so that it settled on the floor without disturbing its occupant who seemed to be mid-nap. From the shadows a swarm of wafters appeared with their fans and set to work keeping the mountain of flesh cool.

Izebboudjen then turned to the assembly and declaimed Nayram's titles, which were far more numerous than Vespasian had been led to believe. When he had finished he turned to his king. 'Most Exalted Majesty, before you stands Titus Flavius Vespasianus, Governor of the Roman province of Africa.' With that he sat down, cross-legged on the floor; the rest of the courtiers followed his lead, leaving Vespasian, Magnus and Hormus, along with the lictors, still standing.

For a while there was absolute silence.

Nayram gave no indication of being awake, or, for that matter, alive. Vespasian stood, not wanting to break protocol and speak before his host had addressed him. Manners, he felt, would be an ally to him and after his conversation with Izebboudjen he knew he needed all the help he could get, especially as Roman honour dictated that he would not be using the king's titles.

Another fifty heartbeats went by before Nayram opened one, bloodshot, eye. It perused Vespasian for a few moments before the other opened. 'Titus Flavius Vespasianus, you are welcome in my kingdom.'

'King Nayram, it is with great pleasure that I come on this embassy from the Emperor, Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, and in token of his friendship he sends you this gift.' He nodded to Hormus who stepped forward and handed a heavy, gem-studded silver casket to Izebboudjen. With some difficulty, the chamberlain heaved himself to his feet and presented the casket to Nayram who smiled with greed and adjusted himself on his bed so that he could open his gift, suffering a resounding, but totally ignored, bout of flatulence as he did so.

Pulling aside some loose tresses of hair, he unfastened the clasp and opened the lid; delight lit up his face as he looked at the contents and ran his fingers over them. 'Hmmm,' he

purred, the sound rumbling in his throat. 'You may tell my brother, the Emperor Nero, that his gift pleases me.' He plucked a black pearl, almost a quarter of the size of Magnus' glass eye, from the casket and examined it, purring again at its lustre as he revolved it around the palm of his hand. Dropping it, he then scooped out a handful of the precious objects, each of similar proportions, and let them clatter back, one by one. 'It pleases me greatly; it is a gift worthy of one equal to another. What would my brother have in return?'

Putting aside the rather fanciful notion that being lord of a thousand wells was the equivalent of ruling all the lands around the inner sea and many beyond, Vespasian graced Nayram with his most solemn countenance. 'The Emperor Nero asks only this of you, King Nayram: your beneficence. In that box are five hundred pearls; each one's value is greatly increased being so far from the sea. Nero would ask that you equate each pearl with the freedom of a Roman held in bondage in your great kingdom; should there be fewer than five hundred then he would have you keep the balance.'

Nayram fingered his gift again, rumbling as he ruminated upon Vespasian's words. 'And what if there are more than five hundred? Hmmm? What then?'

'Then we negotiate.'

'Negotiate? The Lord of the Thousand Wells does not negotiate; he does his pleasure, for who is there to tell him otherwise?' Nayram closed the lid and stared Vespasian in the eye. 'Look around you, Vespasian; see where you are. There is nothing beyond my fields for hundreds of miles in all directions. It is the water from my wells that makes this fertile oasis in the midst of a wasted land. The desert keeps us safe, for what army could cross it and still be in a fit state to assail us? Thus we need no troops of our own, apart from the slave-keepers, so that the citizens of my realm are free to enjoy a life of leisure. That same desert that protects us also acts as a cage for the slaves who till our fields; where can they run to? How long would they survive away from my wells? So, you see, Governor, I have no need to negotiate with anyone. I can just take this gift and give nothing

in return, if it pleases me; and what would my brother Nero do then? Hmmm?

Vespasian bit back his fury at the blubberous petty potentate who dared to consider himself in such an exalted position that he could threaten to dictate terms to Rome. 'The Emperor knows that you would not do that, King Nayram, because he knows that you, like himself, are a man of honour.'

Nayram seemed to consider this, on all levels, blatant untruth to be a fair and just observation. He reopened the lid and gazed once again at the pearls. 'Nero is right: we share the same sense of honour. Very well, Vespasian, you may purchase back your citizens.' He signalled to Izebboudjen. 'Summon the Keeper of the Records.'

Izebboudjen once again struggled to his feet and bowed. 'Most Exalted Majesty, Nayram, The Lord of the Thousand Wells, he awaits your pleasure.' With a nod to the steward of the doors they were swung open to reveal a portly figure with a skewed lower jaw and a flattened, unsymmetrical nose.

Vespasian caught his breath, his throat contracting; he knew that visage well for he had been the cause of its violent restructuring. He checked himself as he looked in shock at the man whose actions had led to the deaths of eighty thousand Roman citizens and as many natives in the province of Britannia; the man who had ordered the flogging of Boudicca and the rape of her daughters as he stole her money and left Vespasian to her mercy. The man who had fled the province, as it erupted in revolt in direct consequence of his actions, and then had disappeared without trace.

Now Vespasian knew what had happened to the former procurator of Britannia as he looked into the hated face of Catus Decianus.