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# **Rome's Fallen Eagle**

Written by Robert Fabbri

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ROME'S FALLEN EAGLE

ROBERT  
FABBRI



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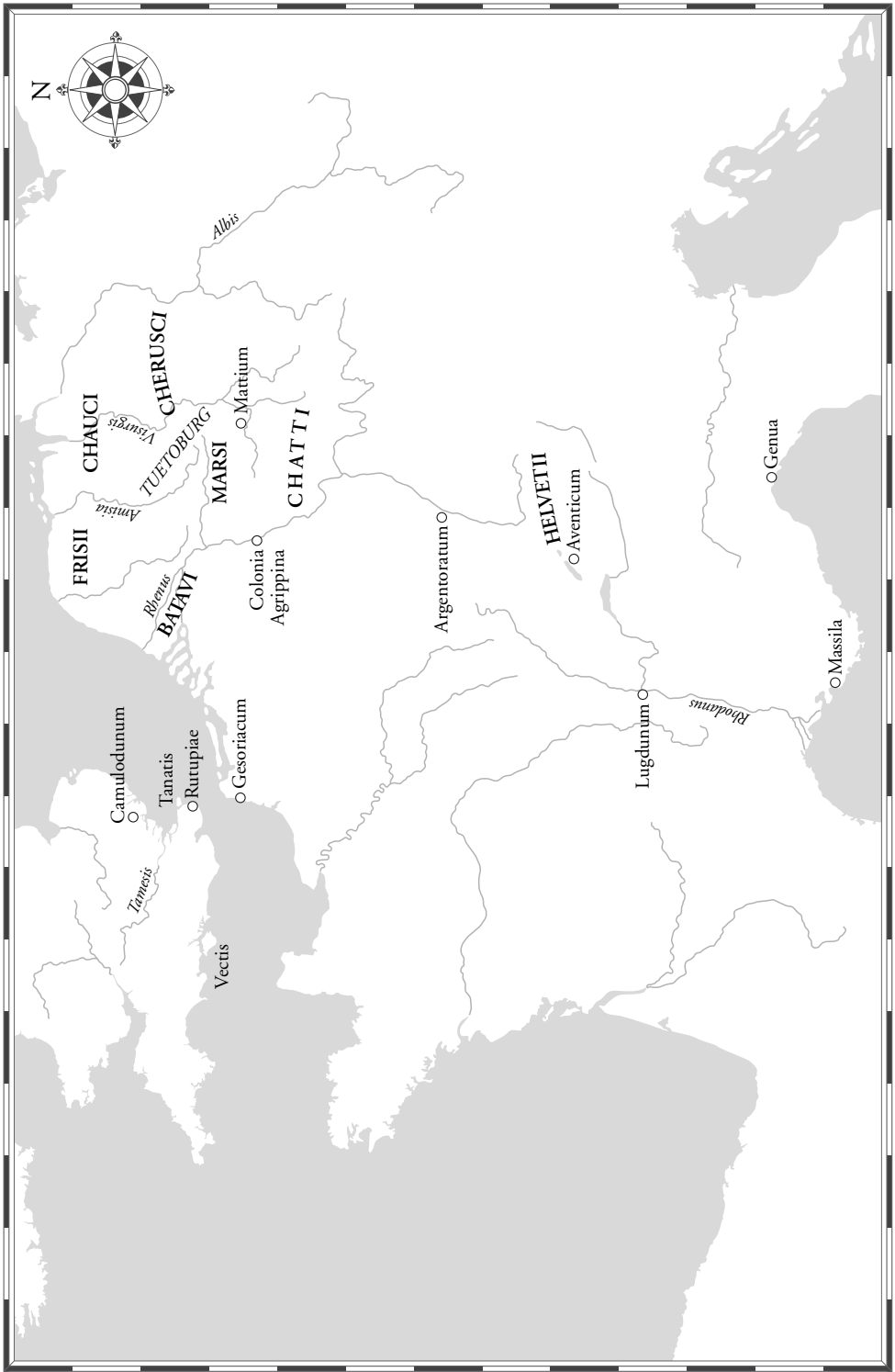
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CHAUCI

CHERUSCI

TUETOBURGI

MARSI

CHATTI

FRISII

BATAVI

HELVETHI

Camulodunum

Tanatis

Rurupiae

Gesoriacum

Colonia

Agrippina

Argentoratum

Aventicum

Lugdunum

Genua

Massila

Albis

Amisia

Rhenus

Tamesis

Vectis

Rhodanus

Visurgis

# PROLOGUE



ROME, 24TH JANUARY AD 41

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

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

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

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

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

The audience's mirth was even more vigorous than at the first rendition, loud and raucous – but forced. The two actors held their bellies and doubled up in unrestrained hilarity. Caligula

came out of the pose, a sneer on his face, and, throwing his arms wide, turned slowly to the left, then to the right to encompass the whole audience in the semi-circular construction, bathing in their adulation.

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

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

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

Sabinus turned to his companion, a pale, thin-faced, auburn-haired man in his thirties. 'Who's the unashamed sycophant, Clemens?'

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

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

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

Down on the stage a hearty kick by the young lover up the backside of his newly arrived slave sent him tumbling to the ground and the audience into a fresh fit of laughter that grew as the players then proceeded to chase each other around, with many trips, turns and near misses. In the imperial box Caligula gave his own demonstration of comedy running, chasing his lame uncle, Claudius, up and down, this time to the genuine amusement of the crowd, who never failed to appreciate a cripple being mocked. Even the Emperor's sixteen full-bearded German Bodyguards, lined up across the rear of the box, shared in the enjoyment of the hapless man's degradation. The two Praetorian

tribunes standing to either side of the enclosure made no effort to reprimand their subordinates.

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

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

‘Not if we assassinate him as well.’

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

‘Claudius doesn’t know yet?’

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

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

Clemens shrugged.

‘I say he should die.’

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



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

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

United in their fears for their future, the officers had hesitantly begun to share their unease with one another. Clemens had soon been able to recruit the tribune Cassius Chaerea, whom he had long suspected of harbouring murderous intent towards the Emperor who constantly mocked his high voice. Chaerea had brought his close friend and fellow tribune Cornelius Sabinus into the plot as well as two disaffected centurions. With the conspirators finally in place, Clemens had kept his promise to

Sabinus that he would be the one to strike the first blow and had written informing him that all was ready and he should return to Rome in secret; Sabinus had arrived two days earlier. Since then he had remained hidden in Clemens' house; not even his brother, Vespasian, nor his uncle, Senator Gaius Pollo, whom he could see seated next to each other near the imperial box, knew of his presence in the city. Once the deed was accomplished he would return to his posting. He was confident that he could leave unnoticed and that the alibi he had given the junior officers he had left in command of his legion in winter quarters was secure: that he had been visiting his wife and two children, who were staying, out of Caligula's reach, with his parents in Aventicum in the south of Germania Superior. This way, Clemens had reasoned, if there were to be any vengeance meted out to the conspirators by the incoming regime, Clementina would just lose her brother and not her husband as well.

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

'To all our friends here, we would gladly extend an invitation to join us; but though enough is as good as a feast, what is enough for six would be poor fare for so many thousands. So let us wish you good feasting at home and ask, in return, your thanks.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A troupe of acrobats took to the stage and began hurling

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

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

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

All was set.

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

'Liberty,' Sabinus whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sabinus surged around the corner, sword raised.

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

Sabinus swept his sword through the air; it sliced into Caligula's flesh at the base of his neck. Caligula shrieked; a goblet of blood

slopped onto Chaerea's face. Sabinus' sword arm jarred and he lost his grip as the blade wedged, abruptly, into the collarbone.

There was a moment of shocked silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Good; get going.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



punching with their left arms in lieu of shields and stabbing with their shorter swords at the groins and thighs of their assailants, whose numbers quickly dwindled. Soon five of their companions were lying dead or dying on the floor, and the last two Germans disengaged and ran headlong back the way that they had come.

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

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

'My husband will hear of this.'

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

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

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

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

Clemens walked towards her with his sword drawn.

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

'No.'

Milonia Caesonia clutched her daughter tightly to her breast.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A shriek curtailed by a sickening crunch made Sabinus wince.

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

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

With smart salutes Lupus and Gratus led their men off.

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

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

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

People had started to die.