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ROME'S LOST SON

ROBERT
FABBRI



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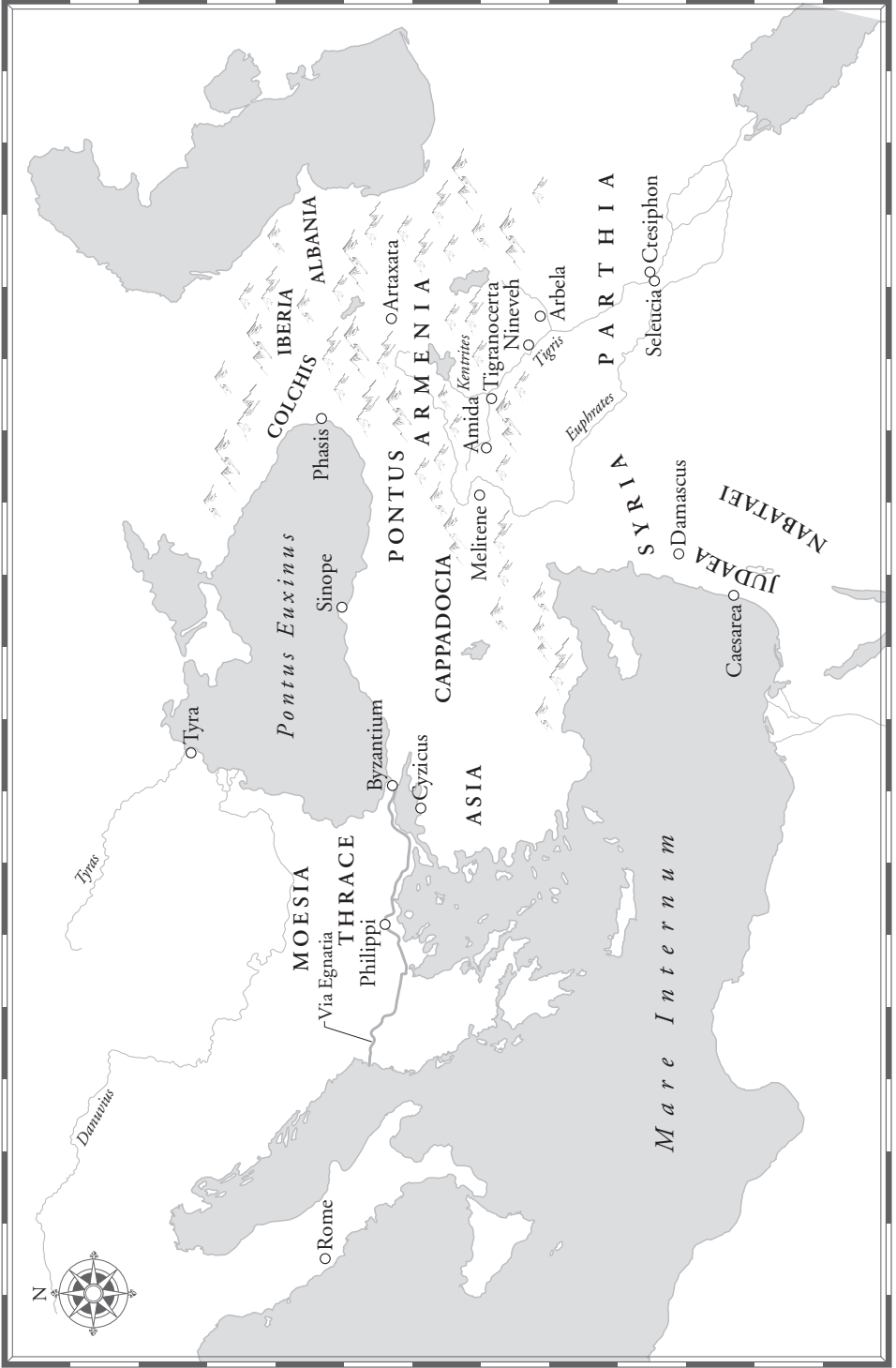
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For my parents-in-law, Eddie and Christel Müller, my
sister-in-law, Liane Olbertz, her husband, Sven, and their son,
Fabian, with thanks for welcoming me into their family.



PROLOGUE



PONTUS EUXINUS, SEPTEMBER AD 51

MOONLIGHT SHEENED THE Stygian-dark surface of the Pontus Euxinus and reflected up, silver and bright, into the pained eyes of Titus Flavius Sabinus. He groaned as he leant over the rail of a trireme, bobbing at anchor, water slapping its hull, opposite the mouth of the Tyras River. The moon's reflection was elongated on the swell and then fractured into many replications before re-emerging and contracting back into a near-perfect likeness, as the ship rose and fell in time to the crash of breakers rolling onto the shore just a hundred paces to larboard and starboard.

The constant gyrations of the one point of light in his vision did nothing to alleviate the upheaval within Sabinus' wracked innards. With another strained convulsion, he sent a thin splatter of bile and red wine down the already tarnished planking to drip onto the rearmost pair of the vessel's sixty double-banked starboard oars. His groans blended in with the creaking of straining rope and wood.

From his position next to the two steering-oars at the stern of the ship, the trierarchus affected not to notice the involuntary, high-pitched flatulence that accompanied Sabinus' latest heave, nor did he comment on the fact that he had chosen to vomit on the windward side of the ship; the Governor of the imperial provinces of Moesia, Macedonia and Thracia could be sick wherever he liked on his command as far as the trierarchus was concerned. Indeed, during the two-day run from Novidunum, the home port of the Danuvius Fleet, a hundred or so miles from the river's delta, to this desolate spot on the Euxine's coast, the Emperor's representative had chosen a variety of places in which to spew – not all of them overboard.

Taking quick, shallow breaths, Sabinus cursed the ill-fortune that had forced him to embark on a ship and remain on-board for

far, far longer than the contents of his stomach; he had never made any claim to being a mariner. Nevertheless, with his appointment as governor, three years previously, came a responsibility not just to the Emperor but to the Empire itself. If the intelligence that he had learnt from an agent amongst the Getic and Dacian tribes, to the north of the Danuvius, was reliable, the Empire – or at least, the eastern part of it – could be in serious peril.

There had been no question of mistrusting the report; the agent was loyal to Tryphaena, the former Queen of Thracia. The great-granddaughter of Marcus Antonius, Tryphaena was a Roman citizen and fiercely loyal to the Empire. Although she now lived in Cyzicus on the coast of the province of Asia – since she had abdicated at Caligula's request – she made it her business to be well informed about the affairs of her former subjects and their enemies. If Tryphaena's agent made a report concerning a threat to the Empire then it was to be taken very seriously.

By the time the man had made the hazardous, overland journey to Novidunum to give Sabinus his account of the arrival of an embassy from Vologases, the Great King of Parthia, to the Kings of the trans-Danuvian tribes, the news was already four days old. Sabinus had then taken the three biremes and single trireme in the harbour and sailed down to the Euxine. There he had headed north up the coast to lay off Tyra, a Greek colony under the sway of the Dacian King Coson, who was no friend of Rome.

Some duties were so critical that they could not be delegated; Sabinus knew that if he reported to the Emperor Claudius, or, more importantly, to the Empress Agrippina and her lover Pallas, the true powers in Rome, that he had sent a subordinate to intercept the Parthian mission but they had slipped through his grasp, then that failure would be seen as Sabinus'. At least if he were unsuccessful he would have no one to blame but himself; but Sabinus had no intention of being so. He could guess what had been discussed. There was nothing that the Dacian, Getic, Sarmatian and Bastanae Kings, all gathered, according to the agent, in a camp on the grasslands fifty miles west of Tyra, had that was of any interest to Parthia other than one uniting attribute: a hatred of Rome. As that hatred spilled over Rome's

northern borders, Parthia, Rome's bitterest enemy to the east, would either sweep west to try once again to take the coast of Syria and gain access to Rome's sea for the first time since Rome came east; or, head north, through the Roman client kingdoms of Armenia and Pontus to gain access to the Euxine.

Either way, Rome's eastern provinces were under threat.

However, Sabinus now had within his grasp an opportunity to find out the timing and direction of such a bold move; with knowledge of how, where and when the blows would fall they could be deflected. It was of vital importance, therefore, that the ambassadors were captured and interrogated as they sailed from Tyra, whose dim lights could be seen on the southern bank of the Tyras estuary.

With another retch and unintentional breaking of wind – one dry this time, the other less so – Sabinus pushed himself upright, sweating despite the cool breeze blowing in from the sea. He watched, in reflection, the ever-shifting image of the half-moon swallowed by a dark bank of cloud; the silver-lined edge undulated on the water's surface for a few moments before fading and becoming one with the darkening sea. Sabinus looked up; the cloud had blocked all light in the sky for the first time since they had begun their dusk to dawn vigil three nights ago. By day they would heave-to just over the horizon, out of sight of the watch-towers of Tyra, but within interception range of any ship that sailed from the estuary to follow the coastline back round to whatever friendly port the Parthians had embarked from. But Sabinus doubted that the Parthians would sail by day as the agent had informed him that they had arrived at Tyra in the dead of night; that, Sabinus knew, was no mean feat for even the most experienced naval trierarchus. Besides, he was under no illusions that, despite their precautions, their presence had not gone undetected and so the Parthians would be waiting for complete darkness, a time such as now, before venturing out to sea.

Still supporting himself on the rail, Sabinus turned towards the trierarchus. 'Have the rowers stand to, Xanthos, and signal the three biremes to prepare for action.' As the trierarchus relayed the order down to the oar-deck below, Sabinus wiped a

trail of vomit from his chin and looked towards the bow; he could just make out the shapes of the half-century of marines, sitting around the carroballista mounted on the deck, respecting the standing night-time order for complete silence. He signalled to the centurion commanding them with a hand gesture that they should rise and prepare themselves. From below came the muted sounds of the ship's one hundred and twenty rowers taking their places, one man each on the lower bank of oars and two on the upper. Trying to clear his head, blurred by nausea, Sabinus glanced down and saw the oars being aligned ready for the initial pull that would propel the vessel forward as the first few drops of rain spattered onto the sea and hit the ship's deck with a slow, irregular drumming.

With the ship readied, Sabinus adjusted his red woollen cloak so that it warmed his arms; he tightened the red sash around the midriff of his bronze back- and breastplates and adjusted the shoulder belt in order that his sword hung straight on his right hip. Having replaced his helmet and tied the chinstrap, he picked up his standard-issue semi-cylindrical shield, walked as steadily as possible forward to the bow and stood next to the marine centurion, beneath the towering *corvus* that they would use to board an enemy ship, and prepared to wait for the remaining three hours of the night, peering into the gloom that deepened as the rain intensified.

It was just an intuition at first. There was nothing visible through the torrent and no sound carried over its incessant beating on wood and water but, with less than an hour until dawn, Sabinus was sure that they were not alone. He wiped the rain from his eyes and squinted into the continuing deluge; it was a black wall of water occasionally penetrated by a glimmer of light from the town over a mile away. But then a new sensation pierced his consciousness: a sound, very faint, but certainly a sound other than the driving rain and the creak of timber and stretching rope as the ship strained against the power of the sea. There it was again, long and low. Sabinus counted to five and the noise was repeated; there could be no doubt now: it was a

steady rhythm, the massed grunts of exertion of scores of oarsmen pulling in time.

He turned, raised his arm at the trierarchus and signalled to move forward. Deck-hands at either end of the ship hauled on ropes and pulled in the anchors and, within a few moments, the shrill note of the stroke-master's pipe heralded the first heave on the oars; they were under way.

'Have your men load the ballista, Thracius,' Sabinus ordered the marine centurion, 'and check that the deck-hands are manning the corvus and standing by with grappling hooks.'

Thracius saluted and went about his business as the trireme gained momentum with each successive, quickening stroke. Around Sabinus the ship burst into activity as the carroballista's torsioned arms were wound back; deck-hands manned the pulley system that would release the spiked corvus to slam down and pinion an enemy ship, creating a bridge, while marines checked their kit and sailors were stationed along the rails and in the bow with grappling hooks at the ready. The straining groans of the oarsmen intensified as they pulled on creaking sweeps, accelerating the huge vessel; they were augmented by those from the three biremes, one to either side and one behind, creating a cacophony of human effort that Sabinus knew could warn the Parthians of their presence. But that did not concern him; there was nothing that he could do about it as it was impossible for so many men to row in silence. What did concern him, however, was spotting the enemy ship before it evaded them; he stared forward into the night, his nausea forgotten, as the ram below him churned the black waters to foaming grey.

And then it was there; a darker shadow on a dark sea, dimly silhouetted by the port's few lanterns behind it. Shouts from about the ship indicated that other members of the crew had also spotted the spectral blur. Imprecise and non-linear but certainly tangible, it grew more distinct with every grunted heave on the oars as the trireme sped forward towards its prey. Sabinus had given the trierarchus orders to intercept and ram and he felt the ship shift its course slightly to do just that. He smiled to himself and then, with a jolt, realised that the shade was not singular but,

rather, split into three as one dark mass fanned out to starboard, another to larboard, leaving the third, the central one, less than fifty paces away, on collision course with the trireme. To either side a bireme split off to intercept the two fleeing ships.

'Release!' Thracius shouted. With an abrupt crack the two arms of the ballista slammed forward, hurling the bolt into the oncoming shadow; its impact registered with a hollow thump but no screams followed.

'Brace!' Thracius roared as the distance between the two vessels lessened dramatically; his men knelt on one leg, bracing themselves with their shields and javeline-like *pila*.

From the stern came a shouted order amplified by a speaking trumpet; it was followed by the mass rasping of oars being hauled inboard to avoid crippling damage should the enemy attempt to rake down one side. Sabinus gripped the rail and went down on his knees as the approaching shadow resolved itself into the outline of a trireme of equal size. And it was with equal weight and equal groaning of timbers that the two vessels ploughed into each other, colliding with their starboard bows. The corvus was released to screech down on its pulleys and crunch through the enemy's rail, shattering it; but the ships were not aligned and the foot-long spike grazed down the side of the hull, failing to penetrate the deck. Their momentum drove the ships on, their rams ricocheting off curved hulls to slew them around, both to their larboard, in opposite rotations, out of control, their crews sprawled out on the deck.

Raising his head over the rail, Sabinus saw that the Roman vessel was spinning on its axis, right to left, its stern heading directly for that of the Parthian's as it rotated, slowly, majestically, inexorably, in the contrary direction as if joining in some strange nautical dance. 'Thracius, take your men back and try and secure us to them with ropes as we hit.'

The centurion picked himself up from the deck, shouting at the sailors with grappling hooks and his men to follow him. Sabinus watched with detached interest as the two ships swung towards each other. With a shuddering impact and the high-pitched grinding of labouring wood, they slammed together at

roughly the point that Sabinus had vomited earlier. Thracius and his men tumbled to the ground only to get up again an instant later at the centurion's bellowed commands as, from out of the darkness behind the trireme, surged the third Roman bireme, under full oars and at ramming speed. On it came, the groans of its labouring rowers clearly audible with every swift stroke, its bow ploughing a temporary furrow through churning water directly towards the Parthian's beam.

And without loss of momentum the smaller ship drove into the trireme, punching its bronze-faced ram through the solid timbers of the hull, a foot below the water-line, with an explosive report that drowned the sound of human exertion and the forces of nature. Pushing deep into the Parthian's belly, the bireme's primary weapon ripped through its innards with an eruption of water until its bow, crunching into the vessel's side, prevented further penetration but set the ship rocking, back and forth, grinding on the impaling ram and opening up the wound even more.

Then the grappling hooks hurtled through the air as Thracius formed up his men in preparation for boarding. The ropes were secured as the first arrows thumped in from the trapped ship, cracking into the marines' shields or hissing unseen across the trireme and on into blackness; here and there a cry as a crewman spun to the deck with a fletched shaft quivering in his convulsing body. With a throat-rasping, inchoate roar, Thracius jumped up onto the rail and hurled himself onto the enemy ship; without any hesitation his men followed him as dark figures struggled to form up into a line of defence across the Parthian deck.

Sabinus got to his feet and walked back towards the stern. He was in no rush; it was not his business to risk life and limb in the menial task of clearing an enemy ship and, besides, Thracius and his men seemed to be doing a very competent job of it, having formed up in two lines and slammed into the defenders. Rain sheeted across the heaving deck on gusts of wind, further diluting the blood that slopped onto the soaked planking as iron clashed with iron, resounded on leather-bound wood and sliced through flesh and bone to the piteous screams of the maimed and dying.

To the rear of the marines, the Parthian steersmen and trier-archus lay dead beneath the steering-oars along with a couple of archers caught in the open as Thracius' men had stormed the ship. Near the corpses, their Roman killers, a half-dozen marines, stood guard over the companionway leading down to the oar-deck; with long spears the marines stabbed at the terrified Parthian crew trying to escape the water flooding in below in order to prevent them from coming up behind their comrades, who were now pushing back the eastern, trouser-wearing defenders with the savage discipline that Sabinus expected of regular close-order Roman troops. Finding the route to safety barred, many of the rowers squeezed through the oar-ports to take their chances in the sea. Beyond them, the bireme was backing oars in an attempt to extricate itself from the crippled and visibly listing Parthian vessel; the blades whipped up the already roiling water so that men now floundering found their screams choked and their struggles useless. Many were sucked under while others suffered grim head wounds as the sweeps cracked into their skulls and faces. With the teeth-freezing squeal of grating and tearing wood on wood, the bireme edged back.

Sabinus vaulted the rail and landed on the stricken ship; he drew his sword and strode towards the line of the melee, which had now almost reached the mainmast, past the many dead and wounded left in its wake. The ship lurched, as the bireme managed to pull itself free, and then settled, tilted markedly towards the side with the gaping rend. Sabinus stumbled but righted himself; his stomach heaved again with the rocking of the ship. A slight movement of a dying man just to his left caused Sabinus to pause and press the tip of his sword into the man's throat, grinding the blade left and right, not wanting to be attacked from behind by an enemy feigning incapacity. He withdrew his weapon, with a gurgle of air bubbling through thick liquid, and went to move on but then stopped abruptly. He peered down at the man's face in the gloom. It was bearded; but with a full, Greek-style beard, not the more shaped version sported in Parthia. He looked down at the man's legs: he was wearing eastern trousers and yet they were not partially covered

by a long tunic. He glanced around; all the enemy dead wore trousers but none of them had eastern-style tunics or beards, nor were they armed in the Parthian manner – scale armour, wicker shields, bows and short spears and swords – but, rather, in the Greek style of the northern Euxine – oval *thureos* shield, javelin and short sword. Sabinus cursed under his breath and then ran back to where the enemy trierarchus lay; he had a beard the colour of copper, natural, not dyed. That settled it: he was definitely not Parthian.

This was not the ship carrying the embassy.

As panic rose in his throat he ran to the rail and looked out; to larboard he could make out that one of the escort ships had been grappled by a bireme, but to starboard he could see nothing. Behind him Thracius' troops broke the remaining resistance of the ships' marines.

'I want prisoners!' Sabinus shouted as the centurion hacked and slashed his way into the retreating enemy, his men reaping bloody harvest to either side. He sprinted into the rear of the marines and barged his way through, manhandling men out of the way, screaming at them to take prisoners, until he reached Thracius. 'Prisoners! I must have a couple of prisoners.'

The centurion turned back to him and nodded, his eyes wide with killing-joy and his face and arms smeared in blood; he shouted at the men to either side and they charged forward, following up the defeated foe. Sabinus trailed them, checking the bodies of the fallen to see if there was enough life left in one to be able to furnish him with the information he was now desperate for. He cursed himself for allowing his seasickness to cloud his mind: in his weakened state, he had assumed that the Parthian embassy would just try to sneak past his flotilla and had not considered the possibility of a diversion. Which of the other two ships held the ambassadors?

Then that word suddenly echoed in his head: diversion, diversion. Bile surged in his throat and this time it was not from the ship's motion: he had been duped; none of these ships contained the Parthians. He ran forward to the bow where Thracius and his men were disarming the last two dozen or so of the enemy; he

looked out to the north as the first vestiges of dawn warmed the thick cloud blanket above.

'Where do you want to question them, sir?' Thracius asked, thrusting a prisoner down onto his knees, pulling his hair back and placing a bloodied blade on the exposed throat.

Sabinus stared, forlorn, at the sleek little liburnian, just visible in the growing light, under full sail and oars, running past them a quarter of a mile away at a speed that neither the trireme nor the biremes could hope to match for very long. 'I don't need to any more. Finish them.'

A scream of terrified pleading erupted from the prisoners as the first was despatched, and Sabinus felt a stab of disgust at himself for ordering their deaths solely out of pique at being outsmarted. 'Hold, Thracius!'

The centurion arrested his stroke as the tip of his sword pricked the throat of a second shrieking prisoner and looked back at his superior.

'Throw them into the water; they can take their chances with the rest. Then get your men back to our ship.'

As the marines obeyed the order, Sabinus walked back to the trireme, calculating just how he would frame what he knew would be a very difficult letter to Pallas, Claudius' favoured freedman and the real power behind the throne of a drooling, malleable fool. Not even his brother Vespasian, who, thanks to the influence of Pallas, was due to become suffect-consul for the last two months of the year, would be able to protect him from the wrath of those in power.

And their wrath would be justified.

Sabinus was under no illusions; he had failed catastrophically and the embassy was now on its way to report back to the Great King in his capital, Ctesiphon, on the Tigris.

There would be no way to hide his guilt. It was a certainty that Pallas also had agents amongst the Dacians and news of the embassy and Sabinus' failure would reach him within the next month or two. It was also a certainty that Narcissus and Callistus, Pallas' fellow freedmen and rivals whom he had outmanoeuvred, by making Agrippina empress, and relegated to second place in

Claudius' pliable estimation, would also hear of Sabinus' failure. They would be sure to use it as a political weapon in the vicious infighting that pervaded the imperial palace.

Sabinus cursed the weakness of the Emperor that gave rise to such combustible politics and he cursed the men and women who took advantage of that weakness for their own gain; but most of all he cursed his own weakness: the nausea he felt each time he stepped onto a ship. Tonight that weakness had addled his mind and caused him to make a mistake.

Because of that weakness he had failed Rome.