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Written by Robert Fabbri

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VESPASIAN

ROME'S EXECUTIONER

ROBERT FABBRI



CORVUS

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PROLOGUE



ROME NOVEMBER, AD 29

A STACCATO CLATTER – hobnailed sandals striking wet stone – echoed off the grimy brick walls of an unlit alley on the Viminal Hill up which two cloaked and hooded figures made their way at a brisk walk. The deep, moonless night had been made yet more oppressive by the first fog of winter, which had descended upon the city earlier that evening; condensed by smoke that oozed up from the countless cooking fires of the densely populated Subura below, it clung to the men’s damp, woollen cloaks and swirled in their wake as they passed. Guttering, pitch-soaked torches held by each man provided the only light by which they could navigate their way through an otherwise all-enveloping gloom.

Both men were aware that they were being followed but neither looked back, it would only have slowed them down, and besides, they were not in any imminent danger; judging by the stealth and even pace with which their pursuers were trailing them, they were being tracked by spies, not thieves.

They hurried on as fast as was possible, picking their way past heaps of rubbish, a dead dog, piles of excrement and an unfortunate victim of a street robbery lying, groaning faintly, in a pool of his own blood. Not wishing to share the dying man’s fate they passed by without a glance and pressed on up towards the summit of the Viminal. Here the wider residential streets benefited from the occasional patrols of the club-wielding Vigiles, the Night Watch. However, the two men knew they would have to avoid the attentions of that branch of Rome’s law enforcement; they could not afford to be stopped and questioned and had purposely chosen a direct route from their starting point on the Palatine Hill through the lawless alleys of the Subura to the

Viminal so as to avoid, for as long as possible, the wider and more patrolled thoroughfares. In travelling so late at night and so conspicuously unguarded they would immediately arouse suspicion and the success of their errand depended, in part, upon arriving at their destination unchallenged and without being followed.

In an attempt to shake off the pursuit they broke into a run and made a few quick turns left and right, but, in the effort to keep up, the following footsteps gained on them; they were now plainly audible above the smog-dampened cries and the ceaseless night-time rattle of wagon wheels and horses' hooves that emanated from the stew of human desperation and misery simmering below in the Subura.

As they turned another corner one of the men looked at his companion. 'I think we should take them before we go any further,' he hissed, pulling him into a doorway.

'If you say so, sir,' the other man replied evenly. He was older than his companion, with a full black beard just discernible beneath his hood in the torchlight. 'And how would you suggest we go about it? From the sound of their footsteps I would say that there are four of them.'

A look of irritation passed over what was visible of the younger man's round face, but having known his companion for nearly four years he was used to his impeccable manners and deference; he was, after all, still a slave.

'No real plan, just up and at them as they pass,' he replied, quietly unsheathing his *gladius* beneath his cloak. The carrying of swords in the city was the privilege of only the Praetorian Guard and the Urban Cohort; it was the main reason why they wished to remain unchallenged by authority.

The elder man smiled at the impetuosity of his young friend as he too unsheathed his *gladius*. 'The simple plans are often the best sir, but may I suggest one slight refinement?'

'What?'

'I'll stay here with both the torches and you hide yourself on the other side of the alley and then take them from behind as they come for me; that will give us a good chance of evening the odds.'

Bridling somewhat at not having thought of such a simple ruse the young man did as his companion suggested. He pulled out a short dagger from his belt and waited, with a weapon in each hand, invisible in the treacle-dark smog, wondering how his companion had managed to shield the glare of the torches.

A few moments later he heard voices at the end of the alley. 'They turned down there, I'm sure of it,' the leader growled to the man next to him as they rounded the corner. 'They know we're on to them, they've speeded up . . . What the—'

Before he had time to finish his expletive a flaming torch flew through the air and hit him on the side of the neck, scraping burning pitch over the oily wool of his cloak and his hair, both of which caught alight instantly. He screamed maniacally, dropping to his knees as his head became engulfed in a fireball, filling the already heavy atmosphere with the sharp acidic smell of burning hair and fibre. His associate had just enough time to take in the fast-moving turn of events before feeling the razor-sharp point of a gladius punch into the base of his chin and out through his left ear, half severing his jaw, filling his senses with unimagined pain and his windpipe with hot blood. He fell to the ground clutching at the wound and sprayed a thick, dark mist from his mouth as he rattled out a long, gurgling scream.

The younger man leapt from his hiding place straight at the two following spies, trapping them. The new threat bearing down from out of the shadows behind them was too much for men used to covert work and taking their victims by surprise in murky alleys; they threw down their daggers and, silhouetted by the flames from their still writhing leader's burning cloak and tunic, dropped to one knee in token of surrender.

'You cowardly little maggots,' the younger man sneered, 'sneaking around after us. Who sent you?'

'Please, master, we mean you no harm,' the nearest man begged.

'No harm?' the younger man seethed. 'Then this is no harm.' With a straight military thrust he jabbed his gladius into the spy's throat and through the spinal cord; the man slumped to the ground without a sound, dead. His one remaining colleague

looked aghast at the fresh corpse and pleaded with his eyes for his life. He lost control of his bladder and started to sob.

'There's a chance of a way out of this for you,' the young man insisted. 'Tell us who sent you.'

'Livilla.'

The young man nodded, his suspicions evidently confirmed.

'Thank you,' his bearded companion said, coming up behind the kneeling spy. 'But obviously we can't let you go.' He grabbed the man's hair, pulled his head back and abruptly slit his throat, then threw him, convulsing, to the ground. 'Now finish him off, sir,' he said pointing to the smouldering leader whimpering on the ground, 'and then let's get on.'

A quarter of a mile later, without further incident, they reached their destination: an iron-studded wooden door in the lamp-makers' street, close to the Viminal Gate. The bearded man knocked three times, paused and then repeated the signal. After a few moments the shutter in the door slid back and a heavily shadowed face peered through to inspect the new arrivals.

'Your business?'

The two men pulled back their hoods and brought their torches closer to illuminate their faces.

'I am Titus Flavius Sabinus and this is Pallas, the Lady Antonia's steward,' replied the younger man. 'We're here for the arranged meeting with Tribune Quintus Naevius Cordus Sutorius Macro of the Praetorian Guard on business that concerns only the lady and the tribune.'

The shutter slammed shut and the door creaked open. Leaving their torches in the holders on the wall outside, Sabinus and Pallas entered a small, dimly lit room, which, in comparison to the oppressive gloom they had travelled through, seemed warm and homely. Scattered around the bare wooden floor were a few folding stools and a couple of tables upon which oil lamps flickered. At the far end, in front of a curtained doorway, was a plain wooden desk; two more lamps at either end of the desk provided the only other light in the room.

'The tribune will see you shortly,' the door guard said curtly.

He was dressed in the uniform of the Praetorian Guard when on duty within the bounds of the city: a white-bordered black tunic, belted at the waist; and a white toga, under which a gladius hung from a baldric slung over his shoulder. 'Your weapons please.'

Reluctantly they handed their swords and daggers to the guard who placed them, out of reach, upon the desk. Having not been invited to sit, Sabinus and Pallas stood in silence; the Praetorian walked over to the curtained doorway and took up position there, hand on gladius hilt, his blank, pale-blue eyes staring at them steadily from beneath a mono-brow.

From beyond the curtain came the unmistakable sound of a woman being pleased. The guard showed no emotion as the soft moans gradually escalated, becoming shriller and longer, culminating in a loud cry of ecstasy that was abruptly cut short by a series of sharp, hard slaps; the woman started to sob but was silenced by a crashing blow that evidently knocked her out cold. In the ensuing quiet Sabinus looked nervously at Pallas who remained as impassive as the guard; being a slave he was used to being treated as part of the furniture and knew better than to let his emotions play on his face.

The curtain was abruptly swept aside; the guard sprang to attention. Out of the doorway stepped Naevius Sutorius Macro, a huge, barrel-chested man, well over six feet in height, in his late forties, dressed only in a Praetorian tunic, belted at the waist. His thick, tightly muscled forearms and legs were covered in short, wiry, black hair, great tufts of which also sprouted from beneath the collar of his tunic. Square-jawed, thin-lipped with dark, calculating eyes and hair cut short, military style, he was a man who exuded authority and the desire for power.

Pallas remained inscrutable but smiled inwardly; he could see that his mistress had chosen the man well for what she had in mind. Sabinus found himself snapping to attention even though he was no longer under military discipline. A flicker of amusement passed over Macro's face, he was used to having that effect on people and enjoyed the superiority that it made him feel.

'At ease, civilian,' he drawled, enjoying the young man's discomfiture at having made a fool of himself. 'You know who I

am otherwise you wouldn't be here. Introduce yourself and then tell me why the Lady Antonia has seen fit to send me a young man of no importance and a slave to bear her message.'

Sabinus choked back the rage that he felt at the deliberate insult and drew himself up and met Macro's eye. 'I am Titus Flavius Sabinus and this is—'

'I know who the slave is,' Macro interrupted tersely, easing himself on to the stool behind the desk, 'it's you that interests me; where's your family from?'

'We are from Reate; my father was the pilus prior centurion of the second cohort of the Twentieth Valeria Victrix and fought under our beloved Emperor in Germania before receiving a medical discharge. My mother's brother, Gaius Vespasius Pollo, is of senatorial rank and was a praetor seven years ago.' Sabinus stopped, pitifully aware of just how mediocre his family was.

'Yes, I know Senator Pollo; I used to be his client but he was too weak and ineffectual for what I want from Rome, so I did him the dishonour of repudiating him. A family insult you might wish to address some day?'

Sabinus shook his head. 'I'm here solely on the Lady Antonia's business.'

'Well, nephew of an ex-praetor, what are you to Antonia?' Macro's eyes bored into Sabinus'.

'My uncle is in her favour,' he replied simply.

'So the little fish of an ex-praetor seeks the protection of the great she-whale and in return he does her dirty work and his nephew is promoted to the lofty rank of messenger. Well, messenger, sit and deliver your message.'

Sabinus took the invitation, grateful that he no longer was being made to feel like a naughty schoolboy having to explain himself to his *grammaticus*. 'I do not bear the message, Tribune; I am here only to add authority to the voice of a slave. Pallas has the message.'

'Authority?' Macro scoffed. 'I suppose the good lady thought that I would not listen to a slave? Well, she was right, with or without "authority" why should I listen to a slave?'

'Because if you don't you might miss an interesting opportunity,' Pallas said quietly, looking straight ahead.

Macro stared at him in disbelief, a quiver of rage shook his body. ‘How dare you speak to me, slave?’ he said with quiet menace. He turned back to Sabinus. ‘An interesting opportunity you say, go on.’

‘I’m afraid that I can’t tell you, Tribune, it was to Pallas that she entrusted the message, you will have to listen to him or we shall leave.’ Sabinus’ heart raced as he felt that he had overstepped the mark by pushing Macro into a corner.

Macro remained silent, torn between wishing to know what the most powerful woman in Rome could want with him and not wishing to compromise his *dignitas* by listening to the words of someone so beneath him. His curiosity won. ‘Speak then, slave,’ he said finally, ‘and make it brief.’

Pallas looked at Macro and then flicked his eyes towards the guard standing behind him.

‘Satrius Secundus stays, slave,’ Macro said, understanding the gesture. ‘He won’t betray any confidences; he’s my man to the hilt, aren’t you Secundus?’

‘To the hilt sir!’ the Praetorian barked.

‘As you wish sir,’ Pallas agreed, making a mental note of the man’s name to give to his mistress upon his return. ‘The Lady Antonia sends her greetings and apologises for not inviting you to her house and doing you the courtesy of speaking with you in person, but she feels sure that you will understand that there should be no evidence to connect the two of you, for the safety of you both.’

‘Yes, yes, get on with it,’ Macro said, disliking the smooth-talking Greek intensely.

‘My mistress’ feud with Sejanus is no secret to you, sir. She now feels that she has the ability to bring this feud to an end, and expose Sejanus to the Emperor as a traitor bent upon usurping the Purple.’

Macro raised an eyebrow. ‘That is quite a claim. What proof does she suppose she has to convince the Emperor of this alleged treachery?’

‘Although she has for some time now been collecting evidence of Sejanus’ disloyalty it does not amount to a full case

against him; a few documents corroborated by hearsay and speculation, but nothing solid, no witnesses, until now.'

'A witness?' Macro was intrigued. 'What testimony will he be able to supply?'

'My mistress naturally hasn't taken me into her confidence on that matter.'

Macro nodded.

'However,' Pallas continued, 'he is not a citizen; he won't be testifying under oath, his testimony will be extracted under torture in front of Tiberius himself.'

'How does she imagine she can get this man to the Emperor when we Praetorians control all access to him?'

'This is where the Lady Antonia needs your help and she has this proposition for you: help her to bring down Sejanus and in return she will see to it that you become the next prefect of the Praetorian Guard.'

Macro's eyes gleamed momentarily; he brought himself under control and smiled thinly. 'How can she guarantee that?'

'If the word of the Emperor's sister-in-law is not enough then consider this: when Sejanus falls, and fall he will, the new prefect of the Guard will have to step in immediately to control the rank and file and to execute officers who remain loyal to old regime. This will have to be set up in advance and will cost money, a lot of money, which you don't have. The Lady Antonia will provide you with what you need to buy the loyalty of key officers for when the time comes; meanwhile you work out who you will need to buy and start to cultivate them.'

Macro nodded his head slowly. 'What about the problem of getting your witness to the Emperor?'

'With all due respect sir, my mistress considers that to be your problem; she suggests that somehow you get yourself transferred to Capreae.'

'Oh, does she now?' Macro sneered. 'As if it could be easily done just by putting in a transfer request.' He fixed Pallas with an icy glare and studied him for a few moments; the Greek remained, as always, unreadable. 'What is to prevent me', Macro continued slowly, 'from going to Sejanus now and telling him all

that you have said? I wouldn't give much for your life or the lives of this ex-praetor's nephew and his family, would you?'

'No, sir, but then I wouldn't give much for your life either after you told him.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that the very fact that you agreed to see us will give him cause to doubt your loyalty; he will assume that this time you were just not offered enough, but next time you may well be. I think that we will all be dead if you go to him.'

Macro stood and slammed his palm down on the desk. 'Secundus, sword!' he shouted, grabbing a sword from the desk. The guard instantly drew his gladius and rushed at Sabinus and Pallas.

'Ennia!' Pallas shouted.

Macro raised his hand to stop his man. 'Hold,' he commanded. Secundus obeyed. 'What has my wife got to do with this?' Macro growled.

'Nothing at the moment sir,' Pallas replied flatly. 'She is in very good company and no doubt enjoying herself.'

'What do you mean, slave?' Macro was becoming visibly agitated.

'Soon after you left your house this evening the Lady Antonia sent a litter for your wife Ennia with an invitation to come and dine with her and her grandson Gaius; of course she could not refuse such an honour. We left as she arrived, and she will stay there until our safe return, so it may be advisable to have Secundus escort us.'

Macro tensed as if ready to fling himself at Pallas and then flopped back down on to his stool. 'It seems that you leave me little choice,' he said softly. He looked up at Pallas with hatred burning in his dark eyes. 'But believe me, slave, I will have the balls off you for this insolence.'

Pallas knew better than to express an opinion on that subject.

'Very well,' Macro said, collecting himself. 'Secundus will escort you back. Tell your mistress that I will do as she asks, but I do it for myself, not for her.'

'She did not expect anything else from you, sir; she is well

aware that this is an alliance of convenience. Now, with your permission we shall leave.'

'Yes, go, get out,' Macro snapped. 'Oh, one question: when does Antonia want to get the witness before the Emperor?'

'Not for at least six months.'

'At least six months? You mean he's not in Rome?'

'No, sir, he's not even in Italia. In fact he hasn't even been captured yet.'

'Where is he then?'

'Moesia.'

'Moesia? Who's going to find him there and bring him back to Rome?'

'Don't concern yourself about that, sir,' Pallas replied, turning to go, 'it's all in hand.'