

M.C. SCOTT ROME

THE ART OF WAR



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About the Book

Rome: AD 69, the Year of the Four Emperors. Three emperors have ruled in Rome this year and a fourth, Vespasian, has been named in the East.

As the legions march towards civil war, Sebastos Pantera, the spy whose name means leopard, returns to Rome intent on bribery, blackmail and persuasion: whatever it takes to bring the commanders and their men to Vespasian's side.

But in Rome, as he uses every skill of subterfuge, codes and camouflage he has ever learned, it becomes clear that one of those closest to him is a traitor who will let Rome fall to destroy him.

Together, the two spies spin a web of deceit with Rome as the prize and death the only escape.

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Author's Note

About the Author

Also by M. C. Scott

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ROME

THE ART OF WAR

M. C. Scott

For Bill and Mark,
with many thanks



EVENTS LEADING TO THE YEAR OF THE FOUR EMPERORS

AD 54 Claudius dies. Nero takes the throne

AD 62 Seneca retires. Nero's wife Octavia dies

AD 65 Pisoan conspiracy exposed. Seneca forced to suicide

AD 66 Corbulo forced to suicide

AD 67 Vespasian leads Judaeen legions against Galilee

AD 68 Nero forced to suicide. Galba takes the throne
8/9 June

AD 69 Galba slain, Otho takes the throne
15 January

AD 69 Otho's suicide. Vitellius takes the throne
16 April

AD 69 Vespasian hailed as emperor by eastern legions
July 1 - 3

ON THE USE OF SPIES

Knowledge of the enemy's dispositions can only be obtained from other men. Hence the use of spies, of whom there are five classes:

1 Local spies – Having local spies means employing the services of the inhabitants of an enemy territory;

2 Internal spies – Having internal spies means making use of officials of the enemy;

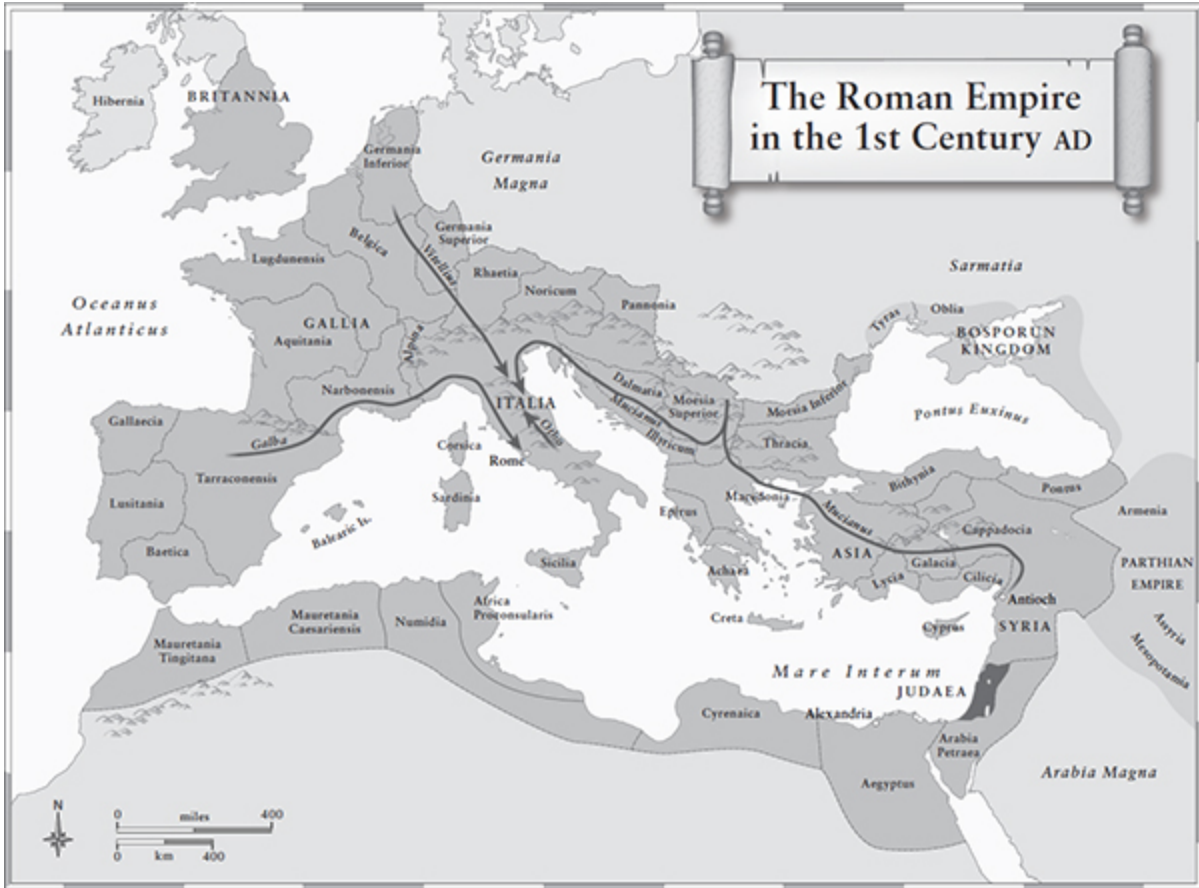
3 Double agents – Having double agents means getting hold of the enemy's spies and using them for our own purposes;

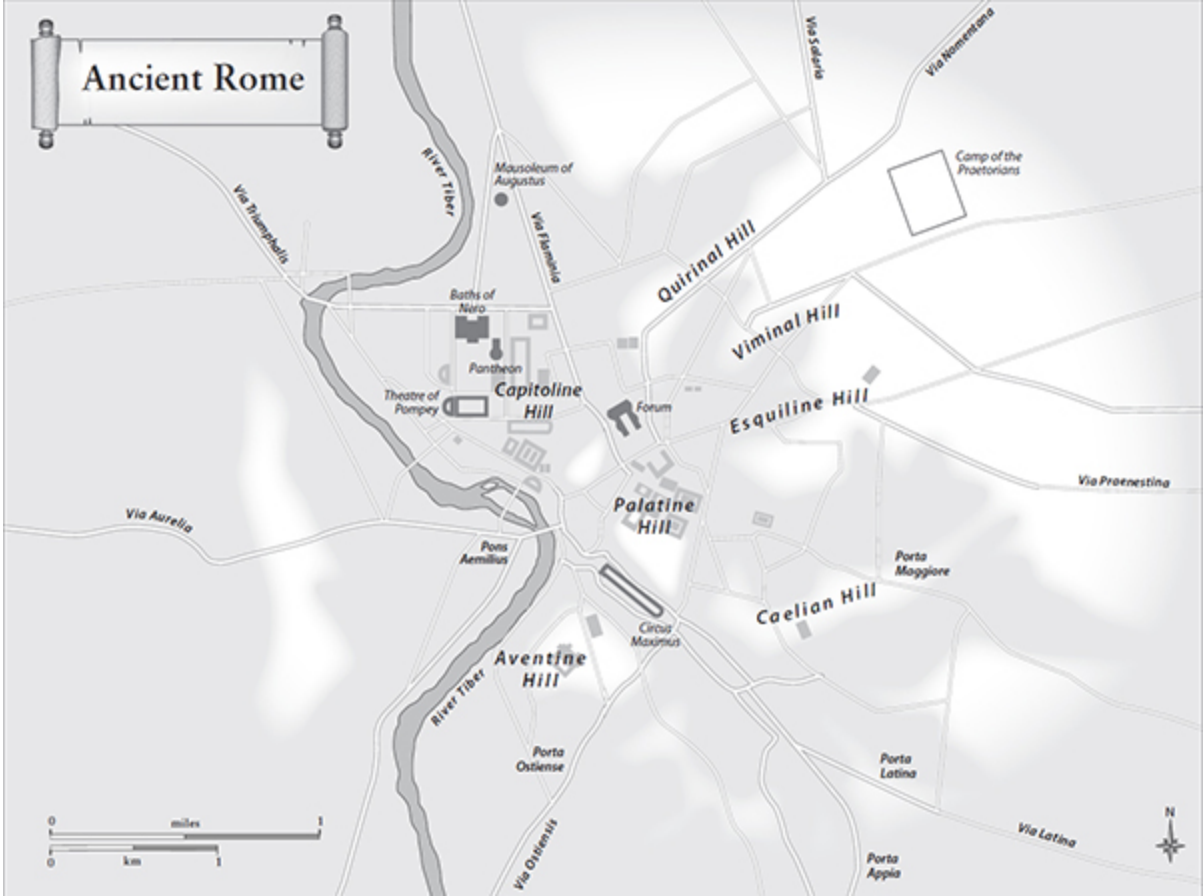
4 Doomed spies – Having doomed spies means doing certain things openly for purposes of deception, and allowing our spies to know of them and report them to the enemy;

5 Surviving spies – Surviving spies are those who bring back news from the enemy's camp.

Sun Tzu *The Art of War*

The Roman Empire in the 1st Century AD







FOREWORD

ON 9 JUNE AD 68, in the thirteenth year of his reign, the dangerously dissolute Roman emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus died by his own hand, having been named an 'enemy of the state' by the senate, and thereby ending a dynasty that had ruled Rome and her empire for close to a century.

There followed what has become known as the Year of the Four Emperors, but was, in fact, eighteen months in which four successive men, generally with several legions behind them, claimed the title of emperor.

The ensuing civil war ripped the empire apart, setting legion against legion, brother against brother, father against son. Most of the destruction occurred far afield in battles prosecuted by absentee emperors who ruled Rome from the relative safety of their legionary encampments.

But in June of AD 69, Vitellius, the third man to claim the title, entered Rome at the head of sixty thousand legionaries. Thus, as his opponent's legions marched closer, the nightmare of civil war threatened the capital itself ...

PROLOGUE

There follows the evidence as related to me concerning the spy Pantera and his role in the conflagration, both literal and metaphoric, that has assailed Rome in the past year.

The spy cannot speak for himself, and so, at the emperor's insistence, I have interviewed all those available to me who might shed light on his culpability, from the emperor himself to those in custody awaiting execution.

Time is short, for which reason, I have presented here an unedited transcript of the interviews as they were spoken to me. I offer no apologies for the coarseness of the language in places, nor the obvious imprecisions in memories of those who were involved.

The names and ranks detailed are those held by the relevant individuals at the time the events occurred, and are not necessarily those they hold now.

This is a true and accurate representation, from which the truth may be deduced.

This I swear in the name of Isis, for I am her Chosen, and must remain impartial in the affairs of men.

Hypatia of Alexandria

PART I

LOCAL SPIES

CHAPTER ONE

Judaea, June, AD 69

Titus Flavius Vespasianus - Vespasian

IT BEGAN, AS it ended, with the scent of wild strawberries. Sharp, sweet, erotic beyond words, it was the scent of Caenis, of her skin, her hair, of the flat channel between her breasts and the ambrosia-sweat that dripped from them on to my face.

It surrounded me, carried me far from myself. I swept my thumb up and round and brought it to my lips. My eyes sought hers to share my tasting of her. She was kneeling over my hips, drawing me inside with the chaotic abandon that had never failed to startle me when the rest of her life was so ordered.

She smiled and was fierce: a tigress; she was wild: a harpy; she was perfect: Athena, or Artemis, or the bright god-woman of the moon who spins her foam down to seduce poor men who cannot stand against her.

I couldn't keep still any longer. However hard I tried, I couldn't keep my eyes open, either, to see if she had met her climax as I met mine. Later, of course, I would find out. Later, I would attend to her need. Later, when I could bear to—

'My love ...' She leaned forward on to me. Her breasts were heavy on my chest. Her lips kissed away the sweat from the sides of my eyes.

She was resting on her small, sharp elbows and her hair fell on my face, tickling my cheeks. She swept it up, and hooked it over her ear. 'Must you go?'

Lost in the undertow, it took me a moment to understand her question. I had to drag back memories of who and what and where.

Slowly ... we were in Greece, on the island of Kos, in exile for the sin of sleeping under the spell of a song.

The sleep was mine. The song had been the emperor's and Nero was not kind to men who offended him. Only a year before, Corbulo had been forced to suicide for no greater crime than being a good general, loved by his legions; I was only alive because I had no money and posed no threat and had not, until that point, mortally offended the emperor.

And so we had run away to Greece together, Caenis and I, and through the long winter we had awaited the messenger who would order me to fall on my sword and surrender my pitiful estate to the crown.

But then Nero's messenger finally came, and his order was not the one we had so feared.

Far from being required to fall on my sword, I, Vespasian, had been given command of the Judaeian legions, with a remit to subdue the insurgents who had taken Jerusalem and stolen the eagle of the XIIth legion. If I failed, of course I would have to die, and even if I succeeded there was every chance that I might still face Corbulo's fate, but for now, I was safe.

Duty said I must go, but, more, I *wanted* to: war was my lifeblood, the hard matter of my bones, the joy of my ageing days, and no amount of love could hold me back from it. I tried to speak, to tell her so softly, and could not.

Nearby, a man groaned. I am shamed to say that it took me some time to realize that the voice was my own, and that it bounced back to me soft with the echoes of goatskin,

not crisp from a plaster wall; that the scents around me were not of strawberries at all, but the autumnal fragrances of the legionary encampment: old fire smoke, men's sweat, honed iron and rusting armour.

Everything was rusted here, in Judaea, because I was *here* in my tent, not *there* on Kos, and *here* was ... a mile south of the Syrian border, and more than a year had passed since I had last lain with Caenis.

I was a general in command of Nero's armies: three legions were camped with me and two more with Mucianus half a day's march away.

I had been wounded twice in the past year. I had led the charge from the front more times than I chose to remember and I had won back a province as I had been ordered to do; all but Jerusalem was once again under Roman rule and death had not taken me yet.

I tried to open my eyes, and failed, and in the moment's half-held breath between sleep and true awakening I knew two things: that I was alone in my bed – my act of emission had been solitary and wasted – but I was not alone in my sleeping quarters. An intruder was in there with me and he had not come with kindness in his heart.

I was not armed, that was the hard part. My sword was on my kit box at the far side of the tent, and might as well have been in Greece. A knife hung from the crossed poles of my camp bed, closer, but still too far away for me to reach it without being seen to move.

Beneath the thin linen that covered me, I was naked as a child, with the stain of my own lust fresh on my loins. A shadow stood poised in the grey-milk light to my left.

What I did next was all instinct. I bunched both hands into fists, took a deep, rollicking breath, rolling a little, as a man does in disturbed sleep. For good effect, I whistled and grumbled on the exhalation.

And then I shouted.

'Haaaaaaaaaaa!'

It was more of a scream, really. On the battlefield, I would have been ashamed of its pitch; my men knew me as their general who roared like a bull.

Here in the close confines of the tent the noise crashed around, coming from all places at once, and it was powerful enough to scare a man who was already on the edge of his fear.

I couldn't sustain it long, but it gave me time enough to hurl myself off the bed and tumble across the floor away from the deadly shadow.

I hit my head and scrabbled for my pack, which had to be close. My hands closed on cold metal: the long thin plates of the banded legionary armour that has come into use these last few years.

You have to understand that in battle I wear what my men wear, and usually I am glad of it, but this once, a general's solid breastplate would have been better. I fumbled for a weapon, but the shadow charged at me, snarling.

'No!'

I jerked aside, and felt a blade sting as it skittered over my ribs. I was bellowing like a bull now, no words, just a noise that might keep this hound of Hades away from my throat long enough for me to find ... *ha!* The hilt of my gladius. This, too, was what the men carried into battle, and it was perfect: short, savage, sharp enough to gut a man.

I thrust it forward, kneeling, and felt it slide across a leather jerkin, but I had already punched my left shoulder and forearm forward in a following blow. Perhaps a year ago I could not have done this, but I was battle fit by now, my body as much of a weapon as my shield. I felt muscle yield, the impact of bone, solid against me, the slide of leather. I drew my arm back for another thrust and—

A sudden flare of firelight, dazzlingly bright. Shapes shifted within it, and even as I wrenched my head away I felt

the body beneath me flinch under a blow I had not delivered, felt hands grab past me to hold arms that were not mine, heard a voice I knew, but could not immediately place, shout, 'Alive! Keep him alive!'

Thus, rescued, I, Titus Flavius Vespasianus, senator, second son of a tax farmer and current commander of the armies of Judaea, rolled away, and sat up.

On the far side of my tent was a flurry of contained violence, in which I took no part.

CHAPTER TWO

Judaea, June, AD 69

Vespasian

'MY LORD?'

I was sitting hunched on a folding camp stool in front of a brazier in the outer, more public, section of my tent.

My hands were wrapped round the old silver mug that was my grandmother's gift when I first left home. I've had it with me on every campaign since Britain; I have it still.

It's my mirror as well as my drinking vessel. Once in a while, it shows me a handsome man, flushed with victory. That night - I suppose it was morning by then - a ruddy-faced farmer stared back at me with haunted eyes, cheeks too broad and chin too sharp, hair grey as a winter's dawn and two fat brows creeping to kiss in the folds of a frown.

I had faced death in battle so often that I had come to think myself immune to fear. That morning, I had learned that I was not.

Sweat ran like rain off my face, while the rest of me was shaking with cold and fright. I wrapped my arms about my ribs, testing the bruises and the long line of the knife cut, and discovered that someone had draped my campaign cloak about my shoulders.

For decency's sake, I should have pulled it tight and belted it, but I made a decision a long time ago not to hide myself from my men, and so I let them see for themselves the crusting on my thighs and the shivers that racked me,

and the heavy, hollow breathing, like a horse that had just lost its race.

It wasn't enough though; they were waiting for more and the press of their patience was giving me a headache.

I looked up, squinting against the brazier's heat. 'Demalion?'

Demalion of Macedon had been my personal aide for the past two years. He was the only man I knew who would have had the compassion to think of a cloak at a time like this.

Demalion is tall and dark of hair and would be heart-breakingly comely were he not so weighed down by old grief. When I first took him on as my aide, I promised myself that if I ever saw him smile, I would open the flask of Falerian I had brought with me when I left Caenis.

'My lord?'

Not tonight, evidently, for the man who stood just beyond the rim of the fire's red glow was not smiling, and was not Demalion.

If Demalion was striking, Pantera - the spy, whose name meant 'leopard' - was the kind of man who could blend into the background in a crowd of two.

And, of course, he was the one who had broken into my tent and led the capture of the assassin; I should have known him sooner.

What can I say of him? If you know Demalion's story, you will know how Pantera and I first met. After the re-formation of the XIIth, he joined me for some of the Judaeian campaign and I made use of him, or him of me; I never knew which, although in an odd kind of way I trusted him more than many of the men around me.

He was a spy, subterfuge was his world, but he had a kind of integrity that seemed real to me and I believed that he spoke the truth when he chose to speak.

He wasn't saying anything just then. He was simply standing on the other side of the fire, a shadow beyond the rim of light, with nothing exceptional about him. He was of middling height, of middling build, with hair of a middling brown and middling skin tanned by wind and sun, neither as dark as the Syrians nor as pale as the northmen of the Germanies.

It was only when he moved that he set himself apart: despite all his injuries, he had a feline grace about him that had my hair standing on end, such as I have left.

'Pantera,' I said. No joyous reunion this, everything quiet; he demanded that, somehow. 'I thought you were in Rome?'

'I was. I left at the end of April.'

Which would have been when he heard news of Otho's death; when Vitellius was acknowledged emperor.

I didn't ask why he had left then, nor why he had come to me now; the answers were obvious, and I hated them.

Even so, to have travelled from Rome to our camp in two months was impressive, but I couldn't find anything to say that didn't sound patronizing and so instead I tipped my head towards the tent flap, and the growing sounds of chaos outside.

'Where's Demalion?'

'Making the assassin ready for questioning.'

Two questions answered, and neither of them had I asked: yes, the intruder was an assassin; yes, he had survived his capture. Such economy of thought.

'A centurion?' I asked, but it was more of a comment than a question. It's always the centurions who are sent to do the dirty work; they make the most dedicated and efficient killers.

In any case, this one was hardly the first. Galba had sent one to kill me when he first made himself emperor just after Nero's death. Otho, his murderer and successor, would no doubt have got round to sending another if he hadn't been

so busy trying to fend off Vitellius. And now Vitellius, or more probably Lucius, his younger, more ambitious, more ruthless brother, had sent yet another to accomplish what the others had failed to do.

Truly, any questioning was only for the men, to assuage their need for retribution; we knew the answers, or so I thought. My only real doubt was whether, without Pantera, he would have been stopped in time.

But the legions expect certain things, and there are rituals that must be observed, not least by a general whose life has been saved by the diligence of his staff.

I set down the mug and lumbered to my feet when I would have just as happily gone back to bed. 'What do I need to know before we go out there?'

That was the thing about Pantera, you could ask him these things and expect a decent answer.

'Not a great deal. His name is Publius Fundanius. He was a local man, a Syrian, recently promoted to the third cohort of the Tenth. Seneca always said that the best agent was the officer of the enemy you turned to your own ends, but the second best was the local man, who knew the lie of the land and could chart his way about it. With this man, Vitellius had both woven into one; a local man who was also an officer in your ranks.'

'What did they offer him?'

'A commission in the new Praetorian Guard.'

'But he isn't Roman.'

'That doesn't matter any more. The new emperor is in the process of turning the entire First Germanica and the Fourth Macedonica into Guards.'

'Hades, is he?'

That was news, and there was little enough of that from Rome just then. I was like a starving man shown a roast goose, desperate to rip it apart with my bare hands.

‘He’s taking risks, isn’t he? The men of the Macedonica are raised from the barbarian tribes around the Rhine. They may be citizens, but only because their grandfathers fought for Caesar and their fathers for Tiberius. The Germanica are worse. If you’re going to pay your Guard twice what you pay everyone else, you’d have thought you’d take care to choose them wisely; at least pick real Romans. In any case, Rome has nine cohorts of the Guard already; how many does a man need to make himself feel safe?’

Pantera smiled, just a little. Have you ever seen him with a smile on his face? He was a different man, suddenly; younger, with a spark like a street urchin.

He cocked one brow and said, ‘He’s made sixteen new cohorts of the Guard and four Urban cohorts, each of a thousand men.’

‘That’s twenty thousand men!’ You could have heard that shout in Syria. ‘Is he insane? Rome will burn, those parts that have not been pillaged!’ And then, ‘What’s he doing with the old Praetorians, the ones who supported Otho?’

‘He decommissioned them; paid their pensions and ordered them out of Rome. Also the astrologers: they have to be gone by the first of October, on pain of death.’

I wanted to sit down, to call for wine, to bank up the brazier and pepper Pantera with questions about Rome and her new emperor. What was Vitellius doing with his power? Was it true that he was driven by his brother, that Lucius was the real power behind the throne?

But outside, a man gave a single, quiet order and another voice was choked off in the kind of noise that only animals make, or men in great pain.

I stood and Pantera handed me my belt and made me presentable, as Demalion would have done.

‘I suppose,’ I said, ‘we’d better learn what we can from our nocturnal visitor and then kill him before half the camp tries to tear him apart with their bare hands.’

CHAPTER THREE

Judaea, June, AD 69

Vespasian

'SAY IT.'

It was only just after dawn. The day was milk-white cool, a faint mist draped along the horizon waiting for the sun to burn it off.

The Syrian assassin hung by his wrists from the whipping post that had become both more and less than that.

Pantera stood nearby, his face and tunic mottled with blood. I saw his hands make a small, sharp movement and there was a pained, inaudible mumble that ended in a grunt.

'Louder. Who sent you?'

'Lucius Vitellius!'

The name bounced off the silence. Half the camp had heard what had happened and had come to watch. They were standing in lines, armour bright, glaring hatred at this man who had been their friend.

There was nothing more to be learned. My mouth was dry and my spit had the iron-sweet taste of another man's blood. How many men had I killed in battle, without pause for thought? How few had I killed like this, hanging by their wrists from a high hook, drained of all that made them men?

It could have been worse. Fundanius might have been a traitor and a failed murderer, but he had not lost his eyes to hot irons, or his fingers to a dull, serrated knife; his skin had

not been peeled slowly from his back, nor his limb bones crushed and wrenched from his torso.

In honesty, there had been no need for more than a cursory beating and even that had been as much to satisfy his pride as to appease the rage of the men.

He had nothing to gain by lying and all he could tell us was what we already knew: that a successful general on the eastern borders of the empire was deemed a mortal threat to the men who now ruled in Rome.

I was not safe in Judaea.

Pantera knew it, had known it from the moment Vitellius had taken the throne.

Like Corbulo, I had been too successful. I had subdued the rebels in Judaea as I had been ordered to do and now I commanded the absolute loyalty of three victorious legions plus the goodwill of at least five others.

Vitellius, by contrast, was an indolent hedonist who had happened to find himself at the head of four Germanic legions at a time when their generals needed a figurehead to put on the throne, and even then they'd offered it to someone else first, and been turned down: Vitellius was everyone's second choice, and the world knew it.

And so now that world was looking to the east, to the eight legions of Judaea, Syria and Egypt, to see if they, too, would choose to name their own emperor.

Out there on the parade ground, with the milk-dawn sun just colouring our flesh, I was surrounded by the men of those legions, who knew exactly the power they held.

The ones nearest to me shifted and shuffled when I looked at them. Demalion caught my eye and didn't look away. He thought his face was closed, when in fact expectation was written all across it, and he was hardly alone; the same look was printed on the face of every officer I could see.

A centurion had been sent against them, Roman against Roman, and it offended their sense of the world even as it

churned their blood to battle froth. They wanted vengeance and restitution and action; before all of these, they wanted blood.

The assassin sensed their mood. He lifted his bruised head and spat a few spiteful words at Pantera. Even at this distance, half a dozen paces away, I could hear the venom in his voice, if not the detail.

I thought it a last foul defamation, 'Fuck you all and may you rot for ever,' the kind of thing condemned men the world over say to their executioners before sentence is carried out.

But Pantera was interested, suddenly, in ways he hadn't been before. His face grew still. He asked a question and got another spit-thick answer which was clearly not enough. With barely a nod, he reached back to the brazier, selected an iron and slid it into the fire's red heart.

He pumped the bellows himself. The heat sent the nearest men back a pace. Everyone was still now; this was more than just the routine questioning of an assassin.

With a look of weary distaste, the spy slid his right hand into a leather glove and lifted the iron from the fire. The tip was white hot.

The assassin's skin blistered along his cheekbone in a line towards his eye. The smell of singed flesh tickled the air. Pantera's lips moved, but it was impossible to hear his question over the high shriek of his victim. The iron moved away. The question came again, and this time Fundanius drew breath to answer.

I think I stepped forward. Certainly I leaned closer to listen, to ask my own question.

'What did he—'

'Lord!'

Pantera and Demalion dived at me together. They collided in a crack of bone and flesh and brought me down, held within the solid shield of their bodies.

Above, a flash of silver caught the sun. I heard a grunt tinged with triumph and then, amid the sudden uproar, a howl of defeat that sent bile shooting sour up my throat.

I know the sound of a cohort shocked into fury. There were only two possible reasons to hear it now and I wasn't dead, which meant ...

I shoved myself free, rolled to my feet, spun round to the whipping post.

Publius Fundanius, failed assassin, hung limp from his wrists, a squat-bladed throw-knife lodged in his throat. Blood traced a faltering arc from the wound; even as I watched, it slowed to a dribble.

He was gone beyond reach: dead; slain to secure his silence.

'Who did this? Hold him! Bring him to me now!'

Rarely have my men seen me angry. They fell back before the force of it.

'Now!'

It is not hard to find a traitor who throws a knife when he stands in a row with loyal men on either side, before and behind. Before the echoes of the last word had become dust in the sand, the crowd parted and two centurions dragged a third between them.

'Albinus?'

I would not have believed it, and yet could not do otherwise, for a wide, scarlet gash marked his throat, still leaking blood, and his own right hand was scarlet to the wrist.

'Albinus?' I said again.

I *knew* this man. True, he was a Syrian, but he wasn't some new conscript, brought in under duress and hating us for it; he was a volunteer of fifteen years' service, a cohort commander. He had fought at my side for the past two years. He had led, come to think of it, the third cohort of the