

SIMON SCARROW

Author of the No. 1 bestseller CENTURION



THE EAGLE'S CONQUEST

AS SAVAGE ENEMIES RISE AGAINST THE ROMAN ARMY,
A TREACHEROUS BATTLE BEGINS

THE EAGLES CONQUEST

Cato Series – Book Two

Simon Scarrow



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Chapter One

‘I don’t think I fancy the odds on the tall one,’ muttered Centurion Macro. ‘Why’s that, sir?’

‘Look at him, Cato! The man’s all skin and bones. Won’t last long against the opposition. ‘ Macro nodded to the other side of the makeshift arena where a short, thickset prisoner was being armed with a buckler and short sword. The man took the unfamiliar weapons reluctantly and eyed up his opponent. Cato looked over to the tall, thin Briton, naked except for a small leather loin guard. One of the legionaries assigned to arena duties thrust a long trident into his hands. The Briton hefted the trident experimentally and adjusted his grip for the best balance. He seemed to be a man who knew his weapons and moved with a certain amount of poise.

‘I’ll bet on the tall one,’ Cato decided.

Macro swung round. ‘You mad? Look at him.’

‘I have looked, sir. And I’ll back my judgement with money.’

‘Your judgement?’ The centurion’s eyebrows rose. Cato had only joined the legion the winter before, a fresh-faced youth from the imperial household in Rome. A legionary for less than a year and already throwing his judgements about like a veteran.

‘Have it your own way then.’ Macro shook his head and settled down to wait for the fight to begin. It was the last bout of the day’s games laid on by the legate, Vespasian, in a small dell in the middle of the Second Legion’s marching camp. Tomorrow the four legions and their support troops would be on the march again, driven on by General Plautius in his determination to seize Camulodunum before autumn closed in. If the enemy capital fell, the coalition of British tribes, led by Caratacus of the Catuvellauni, would be shattered. The forty thousand men under Plautius were all that Emperor Claudius could spare for the audacious invasion of the misty isles off the coast of Gaul. Every man in the army was aware that they were greatly outnumbered by the Britons. But as yet the enemy were dispersed. If the Romans could only strike quickly at the heart of British resistance before the imbalance in numbers weighed against the legions, victory would be within their grasp. To push forward was in all their hearts, although the tired legionaries were grateful for this day’s rest and the entertainment provided by the fights.

Twenty Britons had been paired against each other, armed with a variety of weapons. To make things more interesting the pairs had been picked by lot out of a legionary helmet and a handful of the bouts had been entertainingly unbalanced. Like this last one appeared to be.

The legion’s eagle-bearer was acting as master of ceremonies and strode out to the centre of the arena, arms waving for silence. The eagle bearer’s assistants rushed to take final bets and Cato sat back down beside his centurion, having got odds of five to one. Not good, but he had staked a month’s pay and if the man won, Cato would make a tidy sum. Macro had bet on the muscle-bound opponent with sword and buckler. Much less money, at much tighter odds, reflecting the assessment of the fighters.

‘Quiet! Quiet there!’ the eagle-bearer bellowed. Despite the holiday atmosphere, the automatic grip of discipline exerted itself over the gathered legionaries. Within moments over two thousand shouting, gesticulating soldiers stilled their tongues, and sat waiting for the bout to begin.

‘Last fight, then! On my right I give you a swordsman, well-built, and a skilled warrior, or so he claims.’

The crowd howled with derision. If the Briton was so bloody good, why the hell was he here fighting for his life as their prisoner? The swordsman sneered at the audience, and suddenly raised his arms, screaming out a defiant war cry. The legionaries jeered back. The eagle bearer allowed the shouting to continue a moment, before calling for silence again. ‘On my left we have a trident. Says he’s a squire to some chief or other. A weapon-carrier by trade, not a user. So this should be nice and quick. Now then, you lazy bastards, remember that normal duties begin right after the noon signal.’

The crowd groaned rather too much to be convincing and the eagle bearer smiled good-naturedly. ‘Right then, fighters - to your marks!’

The eagle-bearer backed away from the centre of the arena, a grassy sward, smeared with glistening patches of crimson where previous fighters had fallen. The contestants were led up behind two divots scored in the turf and made to face each other. The swordsman raised his short sword and buckler, and lowered himself into a tense crouch. By contrast the trident held his weapon vertically and almost seemed to be leaning on it, thin face completely expressionless. A legionary gave him a kick and indicated that he should prepare himself. The trident merely rubbed his shin instead, wincing painfully.

‘Hope you didn’t bet much on that one,’ Macro commented.

Cato didn’t reply. What the hell was the trident up to? Where was the poise of a moment ago? The man looked unconcerned, almost as if the whole morning had been a boring drill instead of a series of fights to the death. He had better be acting.

‘Begin!’ the eagle-bearer shouted.

At the word the swordsman howled, and hurtled forward at his opponent fifteen paces away. The trident lowered the shaft of his weapon and jabbed the wicked points towards the throat of the shorter man. The war cry died away as the latter ducked, knocking the trident to one side and thrusting for a quick kill. But the response was neatly worked. Rather than trying to recover the point of the trident, the tall Briton merely allowed the butt to swing round and smash into the side of the swordsman’s head. His opponent dropped to the ground, momentarily stunned. The trident quickly reversed the weapon and moved in for the kill.

Cato smiled.

‘Get up, you dozy bastard!’ Macro shouted, hands cupped.

The trident lanced down at the figure on the ground, but a frantic sword swipe knocked the points aside from his neck. The trident still drew blood, but only from a shallow slash on the shoulder. Those in the audience who had taken the long odds groaned in dismay as the swordsman rolled to one side and got back onto his feet. He was panting, eyes wide, all arrogance gone now that he had been so neatly tricked. His tall opponent tipped the trident free of the soil and went into a crouch, a fierce expression twisting his face. There would be no more pretending from now on, just a trial of strength and skill.

‘Get on with it!’ Macro shouted. ‘Stick the bastard in the guts!’ Cato sat silently, too self-conscious to join in with the shouting, but urgently willing his man on, fists clenched by his sides - despite his aversion to such fights.

The swordsman quickly side-stepped, testing the other man's reactions to see if the earlier move had been a fluke. But an instant later the tips of the trident were back in line with his throat. The crowd cheered appreciatively. This had the makings of a good fight after all.

The trident suddenly feinted, matched by his opponent's well-balanced backward hop, and the crowd cheered again.

'Good move!' Macro thumped one fist into the palm of the other. 'If we'd faced more like this it'd be us fighting out there. These two are good, very good.'

'Yes, sir,' Cato replied tensely, eyes fixed on the pair now circling each other over bloodstained grass. The sun blazed down on the spectacle. The birds singing in the oak trees surrounding the dell seemed quite out of place. For a moment Cato felt disturbed by the comparison between the fight-crazed soldiers hoarsely cheering men on to their deaths, and the placid harmony of wider nature. He had always disapproved of gladiatorial spectacles when he had lived in Rome, but that distaste was impossible to voice in the company of soldiers who lived by a code of blood, battle and discipline.

There was a metallic ring, and a frenzied exchange of clattering blows. With no advantage gained, the two resumed their circling motion. A swelling mood of frustration became evident in the cries of the watching legionaries and the eagle-bearer signalled the heated iron holders to move in behind the fighters, black rods tipped with red, glowing ends that wavered through the air. Over the shoulder of the swordsman, the trident caught sight of the approaching danger and threw himself into a furious attack, slashing at the shorter man's sword, trying to knock the blade from his grasp. The swordsman parried for his life, using both sword and buckler as he was forced back towards the side of the arena, straight into the path of the heated irons.

'Come on!' shouted Cato, waving his fist, caught up in the excitement. 'You've got him!'

A piercing shriek split the air as the heated iron came into contact with the swordsman's back and he instinctively recoiled, straight onto the barbed tips of the trident. He howled as one prong entered his thigh, high up near the hip, and tore free with a thick gout of blood which flowed down his leg and dripped onto the grass. The swordsman swiftly side-stepped away from the heated iron and tried to get some distance between himself and the wicked tips of the trident. Those who had bet on him shouted their support, willing him to close the distance and stick it to the trident while he still could.

Cato saw that the trident was grinning, aware that time was on his side. He just had to keep his opponent at a distance long enough for the loss of blood to weaken him. Then close in for the kill. But the crowd was in no mood for a waiting game and jeered angrily as the trident backed away from his bleeding foe. Up came the heated irons again. This time the swordsman sought the advantage, knowing that his time for effective action was short. He rushed at the trident, raining blows on the tip of his weapon, forcing the tall Briton back. But the trident was not going to fall for the same trick. He slid his grip down the shaft and suddenly swung it at the legs of the swordsman, then ran round to the side, away from the irons. The shorter man jumped awkwardly and landed off balance.

A series of thrusts and parries clattered out and then Cato noticed that the swordsman was swaying, his steps becoming more and more uncertain as his lifeblood

ebbed from his body. Another attack from the trident was beaten off, but only just. Then the swordsman's strength appeared to give out and he slowly sank down onto his knees, sword wavering in his hand.

Macro jumped to his feet. 'Get up! Get up before he guts you!'

The rest of the crowd rose, sensing that the end of the fight was near, most of them desperately urging the swordsman to stand up.

The trident thrust forward, catching the sword between the prongs. A quick twist and the blade spun from the swordsman's grip and landed several feet away. Knowing all was lost the swordsman slumped onto his back, waiting for a quick end. The trident shouted his victory cry, and shifted his grip forward as he advanced to stand over his opponent and deal the final blow. Legs astride the heavily bleeding swordsman, he raised his trident high. The swordsman's buckler suddenly swung up with savage desperation and slammed into the taller man's groin. With a deep groan the trident doubled up. The crowd cheered. A second blow from the buckler smashed into the man's face and he went down on the grass, weapon slipping from his grip as he clutched at his nose and eyes. Two more blows to the head from the buckler and the trident was finished.

'Marvellous stuff!' Macro jumped up and down. 'Bloody marvellous!' Cato shook his head bitterly, and cursed the trident's cockiness. It never paid to assume your foe was beaten simply because he appeared that way. Hadn't the trident tried that very trick earlier in the fight?

The swordsman rose to his feet, far more easily than a critically wounded man could, and quickly retrieved his sword. The end was merciful, the trident was sent to his gods with a sharp thrust under the ribcage into his heart.

Then, as Cato, Macro and the crowd watched, a very strange thing happened. Before the eagle-bearer and his assistant could disarm the swordsman, the Briton raised his arms and shouted out a challenge. In crudely accented Latin he screamed out, 'Romans! Romans! See!'

The sword swept down, the grip was quickly reversed and with both hands the Briton thrust it into his chest. He swayed a moment, head lolling back, and then collapsed onto the grass beside the body of the trident. The crowd was hushed.

'What the fuck did he do that for?' Macro muttered. 'Maybe he knew his wounds were fatal.'

'He might have survived,' Macro replied grudgingly. 'You never know.'

'Survived, only to become a slave. Perhaps he didn't want that, sir.' 'Then he was a fool.'

The eagle-bearer, concerned about the uncertain change in the audience's mood, hurried forward, arms raised. 'Right then, lads, that's your lot. Fight's over. I declare the swordsman the winner. Pay up the winning bets, and then back to your duties.'

'Wait!' a voice cried out. 'It's a draw! They're both dead.' 'The swordsman won,' the eagle-bearer shouted back.

'He was finished. The trident would have bled him to death.' 'Would have,' agreed the eagle-bearer, 'if he hadn't screwed it up at the end. My decision's final. The swordsman won, and everyone's to pay their debts. Or they'll have me to deal with. Now, back to your duties!'

The audience broke up, quietly streaming through the oak trees towards the tent

lines while the eagle-bearer's assistants heaved the bodies onto the back of a wagon, to join the losers of the earlier bouts. While Cato waited, his centurion hurried off to collect his winnings from his cohort's standard-bearer, surrounded by a small mob of legionaries clutching their numbered chits. Macro returned a short while later, happily weighing up the coins in his purse.

'Not the most lucrative bet I've ever made but nice to win all the same.'

'I suppose so, sir.'

'Why the long face? Oh, of course. Your money went on that cocky twat with the trident. How much did you lose?'

Cato told him, and Macro whistled.

'Well, young Cato, you've still got a lot to learn about fighting men, it seems.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Never mind, lad. It'll come in time.' Macro clapped him on the shoulder. 'Let's see if anyone's got any decent wine to sell. After that we've got work to do.'

As he watched his men leave the dell from the dappled shadows of a large oak tree, the commander of the Second Legion silently cursed the swordsman. The men badly needed something to take their minds off the coming campaign, and the spectacle of British prisoners taking it out on each other should have been entertaining. Indeed, it had been entertaining, until the end of the last fight. The men had been in high spirits. Then that damn Briton had picked his moment for that pointless gesture of defiance. Or not so pointless, reflected the legate grimly. Maybe the Briton's sacrifice had been deliberately aimed at undermining the morale-boosting diversion.

Hands clenched behind his back, Vespasian slowly walked out of the shadows into the sunlight. Certainly these Britons did not lack spirit. Like most warrior cultures, they clung to an honour code which ensured that they embraced warfare with a reckless arrogance and a terrible ferocity. More worrying was the fact that the loose coalition of British tribes was being led by a man who knew how to use his forces well. Vespasian felt a grudging respect for the Britons' leader, Caratacus, chief of the Catuvellauni. That man had more tricks up his sleeve yet, and the Roman army of General Aulus Plautius had better treat the enemy with more respect than had been the case so far. The death of the swordsman illustrated all too well the merciless nature of this campaign.

Pushing thoughts of the future aside for the moment, Vespasian made his way over to the hospital tent. There was an unfortunate matter he could put off no longer. The chief centurion of the Second Legion had been mortally wounded in a recent ambush, and had wanted to speak to him before he died. Bestia had been a model soldier, earning men's praise, admiration and fear throughout his military career. He had fought in many wars across the empire, and had the scars on his body to prove it. And now he had fallen to a British sword in a minor skirmish that no historian would ever record. Such was army life, Vespasian reflected bitterly. How many more unsung heroes were out there waiting to be snuffed out while vain politicians and imperial lackeys grabbed the credit?

Vespasian thought of his brother, Sabinus, who had raced up from Rome to serve on General Plautius' staff while there was still some glory to be won. Sabinus, like most of his political peers, saw the army only in terms of the next rung on their career ladder. The cynicism of high politics filled Vespasian with a cold fury. It was more

than likely that Emperor Claudius was using the invasion to strengthen his hold on the throne. Should the legions succeed in subduing Britain, there would be plenty of spoils and sinecures to oil the wheels of state. Some men would make fortunes, while others would be granted high office, and money would flow into the thirsty imperial coffers. The glory of Rome would be reaffirmed and its citizens be given further proof that the gods blessed Rome's destiny, yet there were men to whom such great achievements meant little, for they viewed events only in terms of the opportunities they presented for personal advancement.

This savage island, with its restless, feuding warrior tribes, might one day be afforded all the benefits of order and prosperity conferred by Roman rule. Such an extension of civilisation was a cause worth fighting for, and it was in pursuit of this vision that Vespasian served Rome, and tolerated those Rome placed over him - for now at least. Before that, the present campaign must be won. Two major rivers must be crossed, in the teeth of fierce resistance by the natives. Beyond the rivers lay the capital of the Catuvellauni - the most powerful of the British tribes opposing Rome. Thanks to their ruthless expansion in recent years, the Catuvellauni had swallowed up the Trinovantes and their prosperous trading city of Camulodunum. Now many of the other tribes viewed Caratacus with almost as much dread as they viewed the Romans. So, Camulodunum must fall before autumn to demonstrate to those tribes still wavering that resistance to Rome was futile. Even then, there would be more campaigns, more years of conquest, before every corner of this large island was incorporated into the empire. Should the legions fail to take Camulodunum then Caratacus might well win the allegiance of the uncommitted tribes, and raise enough men to overwhelm the Roman army.

With a weary sigh Vespasian ducked under the hospital tent's flap and nodded a greeting to the legion's senior surgeon.

Chapter Two

‘Bestia’s dead.’

Cato looked up from his paperwork as Centurion Macro entered the tent. The summer shower thudding down on the canvas had drowned out Macro’s announcement.

‘Sir?’

‘I said Bestia’s dead,’ Macro shouted. ‘Died this afternoon.’

Cato nodded. The news was expected. The old chief centurion’s face had been laid open right down to the bone. The legion’s surgeons had done all they could to make his final days as comfortable as possible, but loss of blood, the shattered jaw and a subsequent infection had made death inevitable. Cato’s first instinct was to welcome the news. Bestia had made his life a grinding misery throughout the months he had spent in training. Indeed, the chief centurion had seemed to positively enjoy picking on him and a smouldering hatred had grown in Cato in response.

Macro undid the clasp of his wet cloak and threw it across the back of a camp stool which he pulled up in front of the brazier. The steam from a variety of garments drying on other stools rose in orange wisps, and added to the muggy atmosphere of the tent. If the rain outside was the best weather that the British summer could offer, Macro wondered if the island was worth fighting for. The British exiles accompanying the legions claimed that the island had vast resources of precious metals and rich agricultural lands. Macro shrugged. The exiles might be telling the truth but they had their own reasons for wanting Rome to triumph over their own people. Most had lost land and title at the hands of the Catuvellauni and hoped to regain both as a reward for aiding Rome.

‘Wonder who’ll get Bestia’s job?’ Macro mused. ‘Be interesting to see who Vespasian will pick.’

‘Any chance of you, sir?’

‘Hardly, my lad!’ Macro snorted. His young optio had not long been a member of the Second Legion and was not wise to the promotion procedures of the army. ‘I’m out of the running for that job. Vespasian has to choose from the surviving centurions of the First Cohort. They’re the best officers in the legion. You must have several years of excellent service behind you before you get considered for promotion to the First Cohort. I’ll be in command of the Sixth Century of the Fourth Cohort for a while yet, I think. Bet there are some pretty anxious men in the First Cohort’s mess tonight. You don’t get a chance to make chief centurion every day.’

‘Won’t they be grieving, sir? I mean, Bestia was one of their own.’ ‘I guess so.’ Macro shrugged. ‘But that’s the fortune of war. Anyone of us could have been for the Styx crossing. Just happened to be Bestia’s turn. Anyway, he had had his time in this world. Two years from now he’d only have been going quietly mad in some dull veterans’ colony. Better him than someone with something to look forward to, like most of the other poor sods who’ve copped it so far. And now, as it happens, there are quite a few vacancies to be filled in the centurionate.’ Macro smiled at the prospect. He had been a centurion for only a few weeks longer than Cato had been a legionary and had been the most junior centurion in the legion. But the Britons had killed two of the centurions in the Fourth Cohort, which meant that he was now officially fourth in seniority, with the happy prospect of having two newly appointed centurions to lord it

over. He looked up and grinned at his optio.

‘If this campaign goes on for a few more years, even you might make centurion!’

Cato smiled at the back-handed compliment. Chances were that the island would be conquered well before anyone credited him with enough experience and maturity to be promoted to the centurionate. At the tender age of seventeen that prospect was years away. He sighed and held out the wax tablet he had been working on.

‘The effective strength report, sir.’

Macro ignored the tablet. Barely able to read and write, he was of the opinion that attempting either was best avoided if at all possible; he depended heavily on his optio to ensure that the Sixth Century’s records were kept in order. ‘Well?’

‘We’ve got six in the field hospital - two of those aren’t likely to survive. The senior surgeon told me that three of the others will have to be discharged from the army. They’re to be conveyed to the coast this afternoon. Should be back in Rome by the end of the year.’

‘And then what?’ Macro shook his head sadly. ‘A pro-rata retirement gratuity and the rest of their lives spent begging on the streets. Some life to look forward to.’

Cato nodded. As a boy he had seen the disabled veterans scrabbling for a pittance in the filthy alcoves of the forum. Having lost a limb or suffered a disabling wound, such a lifestyle was all that was open to most of them. Death might well have been a more merciful outcome for such men. A sudden image of himself mutilated, condemned to poverty, and an object of pity and ridicule caused Cato to shudder. He had no family to fall back on. The only person who cared for him outside the army was Lavinia. She was far from him now, on the road to Rome with the other slaves in the household of Lady Flavia, wife of the Second Legion’s commander. Cato could not hope that, if the worst happened, Lavinia would be able to love a cripple. He knew he could not bear her pity, or her staying with him out of any misguided sense of duty.

Macro sensed a change in the young man’s attitude. It was strange, he considered, how much he had become aware of the lad’s moods. Every optio he had ever known had been just a legionary on the make, but Cato was different. Quite different. Intelligent, well-read, and a proven soldier, yet perversely critical of himself. If he lived long enough, Cato would surely make a name for himself someday. Macro could not understand why the optio did not seem aware of this, and tended to regard Cato with a mixture of guarded amusement and admiration.

‘Don’t worry, lad. You’ll live through this lot. If you were going to cop it, you’d have done so by now. You’ve survived the worst army life can throw at you. You’ll be around for a while yet, so cheer up.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Cato replied quietly. Macro’s words were false comfort, as the death of even the finest soldiers -like Bestia - had shown.

‘Now then, where were we?’

Cato looked down at the wax tablet. ‘The last man in the hospital is making a good recovery. Sword slash to the thigh. Should be back on his feet in a few more days. Then there’s four walking wounded. They’ll be back on our fighting strength soon. Leaves us with fifty-eight effectives, sir.’

‘Fifty-eight.’ Macro frowned. The Sixth Century had suffered badly at the hands of the Britons. They had landed on the island with eighty men. Now, only days later, they had lost eighteen for good.

‘Any news on the replacements, sir?’

‘We won’t be getting any until the staff can organise a shipment from the reserve pool back in Gaul. Take them a week or more at least before they can ship them over the Channel from Gesoriacum. Won’t join us until after the next battle.’

‘Next battle?’ Cato sat up eagerly. ‘What battle, sir?’

‘Easy, lad.’ Macro smiled. ‘The legate told us at the briefing. Vespasian has had word from the general. It seems the army is facing a river. A nice big, wide river. And on the far side Caratacus is waiting for us with his army, chariots and all.’

‘How far from here, sir?’

‘Day’s march. The Second should arrive at the river tomorrow. Aulus Plautius doesn’t intend to hang around, apparently. He’ll launch the attack the following morning, as soon as we’re in position.’

‘How do we get at them?’ Cato asked. ‘I mean, how do we get across the river? Is there a bridge?’

‘You really think the Britons would leave one standing? Just for us to use?’ Macro shook his head wearily. ‘No, the general still has to figure that one out.’

‘Do you think he will order us in first?’

‘Doubt it. We’ve been pretty roughly handled by the Britons. The men are still feeling very shaken. You must have sensed it.’

Cato nodded. The low morale of the legion had been palpable in the last few days. Worse still, he had overheard men openly criticising the legate, holding Vespasian responsible for the heavy casualties they had suffered since landing on British soil. That Vespasian had fought the enemy in the front rank alongside his men was of little account to most legionaries who had not witnessed his valour in person. As things stood, there was considerable resentment and mistrust of the legion’s senior officers, and that did not bode well for the next engagement with the Britons.

‘We’d better win this one,’ Macro said quietly. ‘Yes, sir.’

Both men were silent a moment as they gazed at the flickering tongues of flames in the brazier. Then a loud rumble from the centurion’s stomach abruptly shifted his thinking to more pressing issues.

‘I’m bloody hungry. Anything to eat?’

‘There on the desk, sir.’ Cato gestured towards a dark loaf of bread and a hunk of salted pork in a mess tin. A small jug of watered wine stood beside a battered silver cup, a memento of one of Macro’s earlier campaigns. The centurion frowned as he looked at the pork.

‘Still no fresh meat?’

‘No, sir. Caratacus is doing a thorough job of clearing the land ahead of our line of march. The scouts say that nearly every crop and farm has been fired as far as the banks of the Tame sis, and they’ve driven their livestock away with them. We’re stuck with what comes up to us from the victualling depot at Rutupiae.’

‘I’m sick of bloody salted pork. Can’t you get anything else? Piso would have got us something better than this.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Cato replied with resentment. Piso, the century’s clerk, was a veteran who had known every dodge and scam in the book, and the men of the century had done very well by him. Only days before, Piso, a mere year off his honourable discharge, had been cut down by the very first Briton he encountered. Cato had

learned much from the clerk, but the more arcane secrets of working the military bureaucracy had died with him, and Cato was on his own now.

‘I’ll see what I can do about the rations, sir.’

‘Good!’ Macro nodded as he bit into the pork with a grimace and started the long process of chewing the tough meat into a consistency soft enough to swallow. As he chewed he continued to grumble. ‘Much more of this stuff and I’ll quit the legion and take up the Jewish faith. Anything’s got to be better than putting up with this. I don’t know what the fuck those bastards in the commissariat do to the pigs. You’d have thought it would be almost impossible to screw up something as simple as salted pork.’

Cato had heard it all before and got on with his paperwork. Most of the dead men had left wills bequeathing their camp property to their friends. But some of those named as beneficiaries had died as well, and Cato had to trace the order of bequests through the documents to ensure that the accumulated possessions reached the right recipients. The families of those who had died intestate would require notification in order to claim the man’s savings from the legion’s treasury. For Cato, the execution of wills was a new experience, and since the responsibility was his, he dared not risk any errors that might lead to a lawsuit being brought against him. So he carefully read through the documentation, and checked and rechecked each man’s accounts in turn, before dipping his stylus in a small ceramic inkpot and writing up the final statement of possessions and their destinations.

The tent flap swished open and a headquarters clerk hurriedly stepped inside, his sodden army cloak dripping all over the place.

‘Here, keep that off my work!’ Cato shouted as he covered the scrolls piled on his desk.

‘Sorry.’ The headquarters clerk stood back against the flap.

‘And what the fuck do you want?’ Macro asked as he bit off a piece of brown bread.

‘Message from the legate, sir. He wants to see you and the optio in his tent, at your earliest convenience.’

Cato smiled. A senior officer’s use of that phrase meant at once, preferably sooner. Quickly ordering the documents into a pile, and ensuring that none of the leaks in the tent were dripping anywhere near his campaign desk, Cato stood up and retrieved his cloak from its position in front of the brazier. It was still heavy with moisture and felt clammy as he pulled it round his shoulders and fixed the clasp. But the warmth in the folds of greased wool was comforting.

Macro, still chewing, pulled on his cloak and then waved impatiently at the headquarters clerk. ‘You can piss off now. We know the way, thank you.’

With a longing look at the brazier, the clerk pulled his hood up and backed out of the tent. Macro crammed in a last mouthful of pork, crooked his finger at Cato and mumbled, ‘Come on!’

The rain hissed down on the glistening ranks of the legion’s tents and formed disturbed puddles on the uneven ground. Macro looked up at the dark clouds in the night sky. Away to the south occasional flashes of sheet lightning marked the passage of a summer storm. The rain streamed down his face and he flicked his head to clear a loose strand of drenched hair from his forehead. ‘What crap weather this island has.’

Cato laughed. ‘I doubt it’ll get much better, sir. If Strabo is anything to go by.’

The literary allusion caused Macro to grimace at the boy. 'You couldn't just agree with me, could you? Had to bring some bloody academic into it.'

'Sorry, sir.'

'Never mind. Let's go and see what Vespasian wants.'

Chapter Three

‘At ease,’ ordered Vespasian.

Macro and Cato, standing a pace back from the desk, adopted the required informal posture. They were rather shocked to see clear signs of exhaustion in their commander as he leaned back from the scrolls on his desk and the light from the overhead oil lamps fell on his heavily lined face.

Vespasian considered them for a moment, unsure how to proceed.

A few days ago the centurion, the optio and a small party of Macro’s hand-picked men had been sent on a secret mission. They had been tasked with retrieving a pay chest that Julius Caesar had been forced to abandon in a marsh close to the coast nearly a hundred years earlier. The Second Legion’s senior tribune, a smooth patrician named Vitellius, had decided to seize the pay chest for himself and, with a gang of horse archers he had bribed, had fallen on Macro’s men amid the mists of the marsh. Thanks to the fighting skills of the centurion, Vitellius had failed and fled the scene. But the fates seemed to favour the tribune; he had come across a column of Britons trying to outflank the Roman advance and had been able to warn the legions of the danger just in time. As a result of the subsequent victory, Vitellius was now something of a hero. Those who knew the truth about Vitellius’ treachery felt disgust at the praise that was showered on the senior tribune.

‘I’m afraid I can’t press any charges against Tribune Vitellius. I’ve only your word to go on, and that isn’t enough.’

Macro bristled with barely contained rage.

‘Centurion, I know the type of man he is. You say he tried to have you and your men killed when I sent you after the pay chest. That mission was secret, quite secret. I suspect that only you, me and the lad there knew about the chest’s contents. And Vitellius of course. Even now it is still sealed, and on its way back to Rome under heavy guard, and the fewer who know about the gold it contains the better. That’s the way the Emperor wants to keep things. No one will thank us for exposing this in court if charges are brought against Vitellius. In addition, you might not be aware that his father is a close friend of the Emperor. Do I need to say more?’

Macro pursed his lips and shook his head.

Vespasian let his words sink in, well understanding the expression of resignation settling on the faces of the centurion and his optio. It was too bad that Vitellius should be the one to emerge from the situation smelling of roses, but that was typical of the tribune’s luck. That man was destined for high office, and the fates would let nothing stand in his way. And there was far more behind his treachery than Vespasian could ever let these two men know. Besides his duties as a tribune, Vitellius was also an imperial spy in the service of Narcissus, the Emperor’s chief secretary. If Narcissus ever came to know he had been fooled by Vitellius, the tribune’s life would be forfeit. But Narcissus would never find out from the lips of Vespasian. Vitellius had seen to that. While gathering information on the loyalty of the officers and men of the Second Legion, Vitellius had uncovered the identity of a conspirator involved in a plot to overthrow the new Emperor.

Flavia Domitilla, the wife of Vespasian.

For the moment, then, a stand-off existed between Vitellius and Vespasian; both had information that could fatally wound the other if it ever came to the ears of

Narcissus.

Aware that he must have been staring vacantly at his subordinates for some time, Vespasian quickly turned his mind to the other reason he had summoned Macro and Cato.

‘Centurion, there is something that should cheer you up.’ Vespasian reached to the side of the table and picked up a small bundle wrapped in silk. Carefully unfolding the silk, Vespasian revealed a gold torc which he gazed at momentarily before holding it up in the dim light of the oil lamps. ‘Recognise it, Centurion?’

Macro looked a moment, then shook his head. ‘Sorry, sir.’

‘I’m not surprised. You probably had other things on your mind when you first saw this,’ Vespasian said with a wry smile. ‘It’s the torc of a chief of the Britons. It used to be the property of one Togodumnus, fortunately no longer with us.’

Macro laughed, suddenly recalling the torc as it had been, worn round the neck of the huge warrior he had killed in single combat a few days earlier.

‘Here!’ Vespasian tossed the torc and Macro, caught by surprise, fielded it awkwardly. ‘A small token of the legion’s gratitude. It comes out of my share of the spoils. You deserve that, Centurion. You won it, so wear it with honour.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Macro replied as he examined the torc. Plaited bands of gold gleamed in the wavering light, and each end curled back on itself round a large ruby that sparkled like a blood-soaked star. Strange swirling designs had been worked into the gold surrounding the rubies. Macro felt the weight of the torc and made a rough calculation of its value. His eyes widened as he registered the significance of the legate’s gesture.

‘Sir, I don’t know how to thank you for this.’

Vespasian waved a hand. ‘Then don’t. As I said, you deserve it. As for you, Optio, I have nothing to give except my thanks.’

Cato coloured, his lips thinning into a bitter expression. The legate couldn’t help laughing at the young man.

‘It’s true I may not have anything of value to give you. But someone else has, or had, rather.’ ‘Sir?’

‘You’re aware that Chief Centurion Bestia has died of his wounds?’ ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Last night, before he lost consciousness, he made a verbal will in front of witnesses. He asked that I be his executor.’

‘A verbal will?’ Cato frowned.

‘As long as there are witnesses, any soldier can state verbally how his camp property is to be disposed of in the event of his death. It’s a custom rather than a rule enshrined in law. It seems that Bestia wanted you to have certain items of his property.’

‘Me!’ Cato exclaimed. ‘He wanted me to have something, sir?’ ‘Apparently.’

‘But why on earth? He couldn’t stand the sight of me.’

‘Bestia said he’d seen you fight like a veteran, with no armour, just helmet and shield. Going at it just as he had taught you. He told me he had been wrong about you. He’d thought you a fool and a coward. He learned otherwise, and wanted you to know he was proud of the way you’d turned out.’

‘He said that, sir?’ ‘Precisely that, son.’

Cato opened his mouth, but no words came. He could not believe this; it seemed impossible. To have misjudged someone so completely. To have assumed that they

were irredeemably bad and incapable of positive sentiment.

‘What did he want me to have, sir?’

‘Find out for yourself, son,’ replied Vespasian. ‘Bestia’s body is still in the hospital tent, with his personal effects. The surgeon’s assistant knows what to give you. We’ll burn Bestia’s body at dawn. You’re dismissed. ‘

Chapter Four

Outside, Cato whistled with astonishment at the prospect of Bestia's bequest. But the centurion was paying little attention to his optio; he fingered the torc, relishing its considerable weight. They walked towards the hospital tent in silence until Macro looked up at the tall figure of the optio.

'Well, well. Wonder what Bestia's left for you.'

Cato coughed, clearing the tightness in his throat. 'No idea, sir.'

'I had no inkling the old boy had it in him to make that kind of gesture. Never heard of him doing anything like this the entire time I've served with the eagles. Guess you must have made quite an impression after all'

'I suppose so, sir. But I can hardly believe it.'

Macro thought about it a moment, and then shook his head. 'Neither can I. No offence meant or anything but, well, you just weren't his idea of a soldier. Must admit, it took me a while to work out there was more to you than a beanpole bookworm. You just don't have the look of a soldier about you.'

'No, sir,' came the sullen reply. 'I'll try and look the part from now on.'

'Don't worry about it, lad. I know you're a killer, through and through, even if you don't know it. Seen you in action, haven't I?'

Cato winced at the word 'killer'. That was the last thing he wanted to be known as. A soldier, yes, that word had some measure of civilised credibility. Obviously being a soldier entailed the possibility of killing but that, Cato told himself, was incidental to the essence of the profession. Killers, on the other hand, were just brutes with few, if any, values. Those barbarians who lived in the shadows of the great German forests were killers. They slaughtered for the sheer hell of it, as their endless, petty tribal conflicts illustrated all too well. Rome may have had civil wars in its past, Cato reminded himself, but under the order imposed by the emperors the threat of internal conflict had all but passed. The Roman army fought with a moral purpose: the extension of civilised values to the benighted savages who lived on the fringes of the empire.

What of these Britons? What kind of men were they? Killers, or soldiers after their fashion? The swordsman who had died in the legate's games haunted his mind. The man had been a true warrior and had attacked with the ferocity of a born killer. His self-destruction was an act of sheer fanaticism, a trait in some men that deeply disturbed Cato, filling him with a sense of moral terror, and a conviction that only Rome offered a better way. For all its corrupt and cynical politicians, Rome ultimately stood for order and progress; a beacon to all those terrified huddled masses hiding in the shadows of dark barbarian lands.

'Still regretting your bet?' Macro nudged him out of his self-absorption.

'No, sir. I was just thinking about that Briton.'

'Ah, forget him. Stupid thing to do, and that's all there is to it. I might have more respect for him if he'd used the sword on us and tried to make a break for it. But to kill himself? What a waste.'

'If you say so, sir.'

They had reached the hospital tent, and waved away the insects crowding the oil lamps by the tent flaps, before ducking inside. An orderly was sitting at a desk to the side. He led them to the rear of the tent where the injured officers were quartered.