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The Gladiator

Simon Scarrow

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SIMON SCARROW

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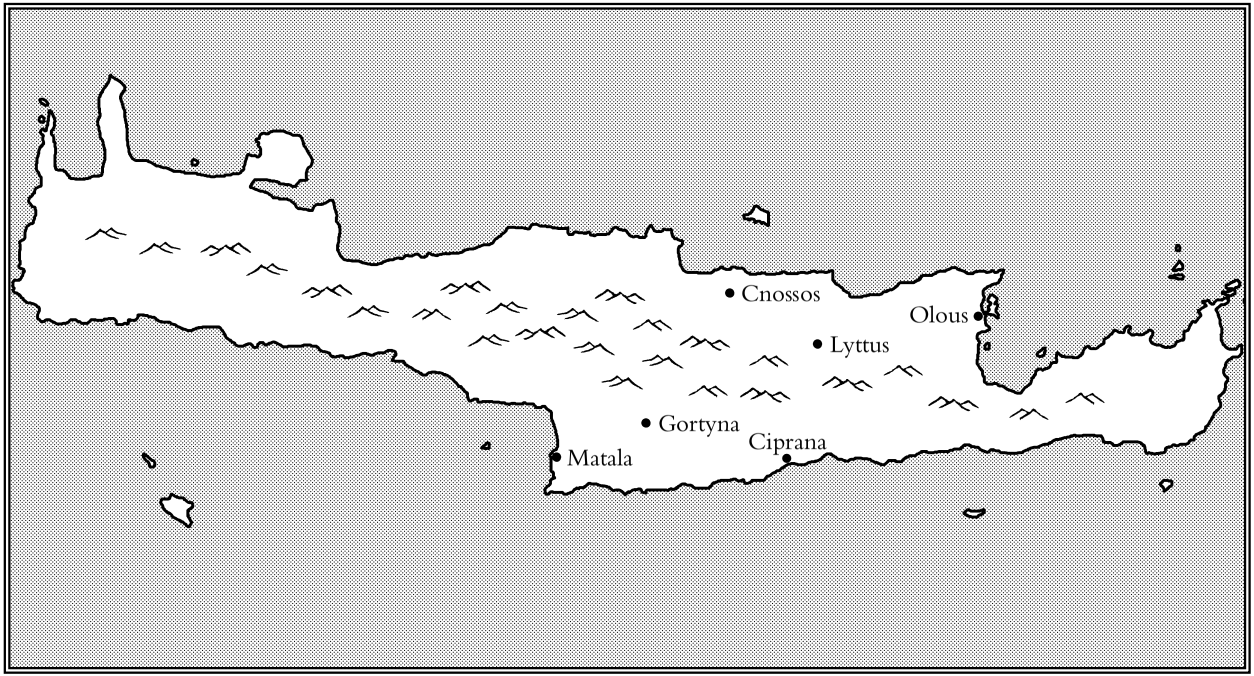
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The Heart of the Roman Empire 49AD



Roman Province of Crete



CHAPTER ONE

'We should reach Matala on the next tack,' announced the captain as he shaded his eyes and gazed at the coastline of Crete off the starboard beam, burnished by the late afternoon sun. Beside him on the deck stood some of his passengers, a Roman senator, his daughter and two centurions, bound for Rome. The four had boarded at Caesarea together with the daughter's maidservant, a young Judaean girl. The captain was proud of his vessel. The *Horus* was an old ship from Alexandria, retired from the fleet that shipped grain across the Mediterranean to Rome. Despite her years she was still a tough, seaworthy vessel and the captain was confident and experienced enough to take her out of the sight of land when necessary. Accordingly, the *Horus* had headed directly out to sea when she left the port of Caesarea, and had made landfall off the coast of Crete three days later.

'Will we arrive at Matala before night?' asked the senator.

'I'm afraid not, sir.' The captain smiled faintly. 'And I'm not going to attempt an approach in the dark. The *Horus* has a full hold and rides low in the water. Can't risk running her up on any rocks.'

'So what happens tonight then?'

The captain pursed his lips briefly. 'We'll have to stand off the coast, hove to until dawn. Means I'll lose a day, but that can't be helped. Best offer a quick prayer to Poseidon that we make up the time after we leave Matala.'

The older centurion let out a frustrated sigh. 'Bloody sea travel. Never straightforward. Should have taken the land route.'

The other officer, a tall, slender man with a curly mop of dark hair, laughed and slapped his stout comrade on the shoulder. 'I thought I was the impatient one! Easy there, Macro, we'll still reach Rome long before we ever could if we had gone by land.'

'You've changed your tune. Thought you were the one who hated the sea.'

'I'm not fond of it, but I have my reasons for wanting to reach Rome as soon as I can.'

'No doubt.' Centurion Macro winked, with a faint nod towards the senator's daughter. 'I'll just be glad to get a new posting. Back with the legions, permanently. The gods know we've done enough to earn it, Cato, my friend. Two years on the eastern frontier. I've had my fill of heat, sand and thirst. Next time I want a nice cushy post somewhere in Gaul. Somewhere I can rest a while.'

'That's what you say now.' Cato laughed. 'But I know you, Macro. You'd be bored witless before the month was out.'

'I don't know. I'd like to get back to some proper soldiering. No more doing the dirty work of the imperial palace for me.'

Cato nodded with feeling. Ever since they had carried out their first mission for Narcissus, the emperor's private

secretary and head of the imperial spy network, Macro and Cato had faced perils from every quarter, besides the usual dangers of being soldiers. Cato's expression hardened. 'I fear that's rather out of our control. The more problems we solve, the greater the chance that we'll be called on again.'

'Ain't that the truth,' Macro muttered. 'Shit . . .'

Then, remembering that the senator and his daughter were present, he glanced at them apologetically and cleared his throat. 'Sorry, miss. Pardon my Gallic.'

The senator smiled. 'We've heard worse in recent months, Centurion Macro. In fact I think we have become rather used to the rough ways of soldiers. Otherwise I'd hardly countenance the attention Cato has been showing my daughter, eh?'

She grinned. 'Don't worry, Father, I'll tame him sure enough.'

Cato smiled as she took his arm and gave it an affectionate squeeze. The captain looked at them and scratched his chin.

'Getting married then, Miss Julia?'

She nodded. 'As soon as we return to Rome.'

'Damn, had hoped to ask for your hand myself,' the captain joked. He examined Cato briefly. The centurion's features were unmarked by the scars one tended to see on the faces of experienced soldiers. He was also, by far, the youngest centurion the Greek sea captain had ever met, barely in his twenties, and he could not help wondering if such a man could only have been promoted to the rank through the patronage of a powerful friend. But the medallions fixed to the centurion's harness spoke of real achievements, hard won. Clearly there was far more to

Centurion Cato than the captain had first thought. By contrast, Centurion Macro looked every inch the hard fighting man. Shorter by a head, but built like a bull, with well-muscled limbs on which numerous scars clearly showed. Some fifteen years older than his comrade, he had cropped dark hair and piercing brown eyes, yet the creases in his face hinted at a humorous side, should a suitable occasion arise.

The captain turned his attention back to the younger officer, with a touch of envy. If he married into a senatorial family, then Centurion Cato was set up for the rest of his life. Money, social position and career preferment would be his for the taking. That said, it was clear to the captain that the affection between the young centurion and the senator's daughter was real enough. At the end of each day the two of them were on deck to watch the sun set, arms around each other as they gazed across the sparkling waves.

As evening approached the *Horus* steered parallel to the coast, passing one of the bays that the captain had become familiar with in the long years that he served aboard merchant vessels sailing the length and breadth of the Mediterranean. While the sun slipped below the horizon, brilliantly gilding the edges of the island's mountains and hills, those on deck stared towards the shore. A large agricultural estate lay close to the sea, and in the gathering dusk, long lines of slaves returned from their labours in the fields, groves and vineyards. Shuffling wearily, they were herded back into their compound by overseers with whips and clubs.

Cato felt Julia tremble at his side and turned to her. 'Cold?'

'No. It's just that.' She indicated the last of the slaves entering the compound, and then the gates were shut and barred. 'A terrible existence for any man or woman.'

'But you have slaves back in Rome.'

'Of course, but they are well cared for and have a degree of liberty in Rome. Not like those poor souls. Worked hard from first light to last. Treated no better than farm animals.'

Cato thought a moment before responding. 'That is the common lot of slaves. Whether they work on estates like that one, or in mines, or construction sites. It is only a small portion of them that are lucky enough to live in households like yours, or even to have the chance to train in the gladiator camps.'

'Gladiators?' Julia looked at him with raised eyebrows. 'Lucky? How could you consider anyone lucky who suffered such a fate?'

Cato shrugged. 'The training is hard, but once that's done they don't have it so bad. Their owners take good care of them and the best fighters make small fortunes and enjoy the high life.'

'As long as they survive in the arena.'

'True, but they risk no more than any man in the legions, and have a far more comfortable life than most. If they live long enough, gladiators can win their freedom and retire wealthy men. Only a handful of soldiers ever achieve that.'

'Too bloody true,' Macro grumbled. 'I wonder if it's not too late to retrain as a gladiator.'

Julia stared at him. 'I am sure you don't mean that.'

'Why not? If I am going to kill people then I might as well be nicely paid for it.'

Senator Sempronius chuckled at the disgusted expression on his daughter's face. 'Ignore him, my child. Centurion Macro is joking. He fights for the glory of Rome, not a slave's purse, no matter how loaded with gold.'

Macro cocked an eyebrow. 'Now who's joking?'

Cato smiled and then looked back towards the shore. The slave compound was an ugly blot on the side of the hill overlooking the bay. All was still, save for a single flickering torch above the gate, and the dim form of a sentry standing close by as he kept watch over the slaves inside. This was the industrial side of slavery, which was largely invisible to most Romans, especially those well born, like Senator Sempronius and his daughter. The perfumed, uniformed slaves of a rich household were a far cry from the ragged masses who laboured in work camps, always tired and hungry and carefully watched for any sign of rebellion, which would be punished with brutal swiftness and severity.

It was a harsh regime, but the empire, and indeed every civilised nation that Cato knew of, depended on slavery to create wealth and feed its urban multitudes. For Cato it was a harsh reminder of the terrible differences in destiny that fate dealt out to people. The worst excesses of slavery were a blight on the world, he reflected, even if the institution was, for the present, a necessity.

He suddenly felt a faint tremor in the deck beneath his boots and glanced down.

'What the fuck?' Macro growled. 'Do you feel that?'

Julia grabbed Cato's arm. 'What is it? What's happening?'

There were cries of surprise and alarm around the ship

as the crew and other passengers of the *Horus* glanced down at the deck.

'We've run aground,' said Sempronius, as he gripped the side rail.

The captain shook his head. 'Impossible! We're too far off the shore. I know these waters. There's no shallows for fifty miles. I swear it. In any case . . . Look there! At the sea.'

The captain thrust out his arm and the others followed the direction and saw that the surface of the water was shimmering faintly. For a brief time, that seemed far longer than it was, the dull shudder of the deck and the quivering surface of the sea continued. Several of those on board fell to their knees and began to pray fervently to the gods. Cato held Julia in his arms and stared over her head at his friend. Macro gritted his teeth and glared back, hands clenched into fists at his sides. For the first time, Cato thought he saw a glimmer of fear in the other man's eyes, even as he wondered what was happening.

'A sea monster,' Macro said quietly.

'Sea monster?'

'Has to be. Oh, shit, why the hell did I agree to travel by sea?'

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the faint shuddering stopped, and a moment later the surface of the sea returned to its steady chop as the *Horus* gently rose and dipped on the easy swell. For a moment no one on the ship moved or spoke, as if they were waiting for the strange phenomenon to begin again. Julia cleared her throat. 'Do you think it's over, whatever it was?'

'No idea,' Cato replied softly.

The brief exchange had broken the spell. Macro puffed

his cheeks as he let out a deep breath and the ship's captain turned away from his passengers and scowled at the steersman. The latter had released his grip on the tiller of the great paddle at the stern of the *Horus* and was cowering beneath the fantail decoration overhanging the stern post. Already the ship was slowly swinging round into the wind.

'What in Hades do you think you're doing?' the captain blazed at the steersman. 'Return to your bloody post and get us back on course.'

As the steersman hurriedly took up the tiller, the captain turned round to glare at the other sailors. 'Back to work! Move yourselves.'

His men reluctantly returned to their duties as they adjusted the sail that had begun to flutter at the edges as the *Horus* luffed up for a moment, before the steersman leaned into the tiller and the ship settled back on to her original course.

Macro licked his lips nervously. 'Is it really over?'

Cato sensed the deck under his feet, and glanced at the sea, which looked just as it had before the tremor had begun. 'Seems to be.'

'Thank the gods.'

Julia nodded, then her eyes widened as she recalled her maid, who had been resting on her mat in the small cabin she shared with her mistress and the senator. 'I'd better check on Jesmiah. Poor girl will be terrified.'

Cato released her from his arms and Julia hurried across the deck towards the narrow gangway leading down to the passengers' quarters, where those who could afford it had paid for a cabin. The rest of the passengers simply lived and slept on the deck of the *Horus*.

As Julia disappeared from sight, a faint cry reached them from the shore and Cato, Macro and Sempronius turned towards the land. Though the light was dim, they could clearly see figures stumbling away from the estate's slave compound. Or what was left of it. The walls had been flattened, exposing the barrack blocks inside. Only two were still standing; the rest were in ruins.

'Bloody hell.' Macro stared at the ruins. 'What could have done that?'

'An earthquake,' said Sempronius. 'Has to be. I've experienced something like it before while I was serving as a tribune in Bythinia. The earth shook, and there was a dull roar. It went on for some moments, and shook some buildings to pieces. Those inside were crushed and buried under the rubble.' He shuddered at the memory. 'Hundreds died . . .'

'But if it's an earthquake, then why were we affected, out here at sea?'

'I don't know, Macro. The work of the gods is beyond the understanding of men.'

'Perhaps,' Cato remarked. 'But surely, if the tremor on land is severe enough, it would communicate itself through the water to us?'

'That may be so,' Sempronius admitted. 'In any case, we're the lucky ones. It is those on land who will have felt the full power of the gods' wrath.'

For a moment the three men stared towards the ruined slave compound, slowly slipping into the distance as the *Horus* sailed steadily away along the coast. A fire had broken out in the ruins, most likely from the kitchens preparing the evening meal, Cato decided. Flames licked up into the

dusk, illuminating the shocked figures of the survivors. A handful were desperately picking away at the rubble to free those trapped beneath. Cato shook his head in pity.

'Be thankful we are at sea. I would not want to be ashore now. You should be grateful for that at least, Macro.'

'Really?' Macro replied quietly. 'What makes you think the gods have finished with us yet?'

'Deck there!' a voice suddenly cried from aloft. 'Captain, look!'

The sailor sitting astride the spar close to the top of the mast had thrust his spare arm out, along the coast to the west.

'Make your report properly!' the captain bellowed up to him. 'What do you see?'

There was a pause before the sailor replied anxiously. 'I don't know, sir. Never seen its like. A line, like a wall, right across the sea.'

'Nonsense, man! That's impossible.'

'Sir, I swear, that's what it looks like.'

'Fool!' The captain crossed to the side of the ship, swung himself up on to the ratlines and began to clamber aloft to join the lookout. 'Now then, you bloody fool, where is this wall of yours?'

The lookout thrust his hand towards the horizon, into the fading light of the setting sun. At first the captain could see little as he squinted. Then, as his eyes adjusted to the distant gleam, he saw it. A faint glitter of reflected light rippling along the horizon, above a dark band that stretched from out to sea right up to the coast of Crete. Where it touched the land there was a churning foam of water.

'Mother of Zeus,' the captain muttered as his guts instantly turned to ice. The lookout was right. There was a wall ahead of the *Horus*, a wall of water. A vast tidal wave was sweeping along the coast directly towards the ship, no more than two or three miles away and racing towards them faster than the swiftest of horses.

CHAPTER TWO

'A tidal wave?' Cato's eyes widened. 'How big?'

'Big as a bloody cliff,' the captain replied. 'And heading this way, straight along the coast.'

'Then we must alter course,' said Sempronius. 'Get out of its way.'

'There's no time for that. In any case, the wave stretched as far as I could see. We can't avoid it.'

The senator and the two centurions stared at the captain for a moment before Sempronius spoke again. 'So, what now?'

'Now?' The captain gave a brittle laugh. 'We say our prayers and make our final farewells and wait until the wave hits us.'

Cato shook his head. 'No. There has to be something you can do to save the ship.'

'There's nothing, I'm telling you,' the captain said bleakly. 'You haven't seen the size of that thing yet. But you will, any moment.'

All eyes turned towards the horizon, and then Cato noticed what looked like a dark shadow on the rim of the world, at the moment only a fine line and one that looked wholly unthreatening as yet. He stared at it briefly before turning back towards the captain. 'You've been in storms before, haven't you?'

'Oh, yes. Storms are one thing. A tidal wave is something else. There's no hope for us.'

'Bollocks!' Macro growled, and then grabbed the captain's tunic in both hands and drew the Greek close to his face. 'There's always hope. I haven't survived fuck knows how many fights and injuries just to die on this tub. Now then, I ain't a sailor. That's your job. You've got a dangerous situation on your hands. So you deal with it. Do what you can to give us the best chance to live through this. You understand me?' He gave the captain a shake. 'Well?'

The Greek wilted before the intense gaze of the centurion and nodded. 'I'll do what I can.'

'That's better.' Macro smiled and released his grip. 'Now then, is there anything we can do to help?'

The captain swallowed nervously. 'If you don't mind, it would be best if you stayed out of the way.'

Macro's eyes narrowed. 'Is that all?'

'You could tie yourself to the mast, or one of the cleats, to save yourselves from being swept over the side when the wave hits us.'

'All right then.'

The captain turned away to shout orders to his crew and the sailors hurried aloft to shake out the reefs in the huge mainsail. At the stern, the steersman strained at the tiller, turning the *Horus* towards the sunset.

'What is he doing?' asked Sempronius. 'The fool is heading straight for the wave.'

Cato nodded. 'Makes sense. The bows are the strongest part of the ship. If we meet the wave head on, we might break through it, if we can't ride over it.'

Sempronius stared at him. 'I hope you are right,

young man. For all our sakes.'

As soon as the senator had spoken, Cato's mind focused at once on Julia and he called to Macro as he hurried towards the gangway leading to the cabins. 'Get yourself tied to the mast, and take the senator with you.'

'Where are you going?'

'To get Julia and Jesmiah. They'll be safer on deck.'

Macro nodded, then glanced towards the horizon, and now he could see the wave more clearly, rising up in a great bar that extended far out to sea, while the other end foamed and crashed along the coast. 'Be quick, Cato!'

Cato ran across the deck and jumped down the short flight of steps into the passengers' quarters, where thin stalls accommodated those who had paid the most for their passage to Rome. Thrusting aside the canvas curtain that formed the makeshift entrance to Julia's quarters, he ducked his head inside. Julia sat on the deck, cradling Jesmiah in her arms.

'Cato! What's the matter?'

'No time to explain.' He stepped towards her, stooped and drew her to her feet. Jesmiah scrambled up at her side, wide-eyed with terror.

'Master Cato,' her lips trembled, 'I heard someone say there's a monster.'

'There's no monster,' he snapped, thrusting them both out of the stall and up towards the gangway. 'We have to get on deck, as quick as possible.'

Julia stumbled up the steps towards the deck. 'Why? What's happening?'

With a quick glance at Jesmiah Cato replied, 'Trust me and do as I say.'

They emerged on to the deck in a scene of terror and chaos. Macro had tied the senator to the foot of the mast and was hurriedly doing the same for himself. All around the other passengers and crew were doing the best they could to secure themselves to the vessel. The captain had joined the steersman on the small steering deck and both men braced their arms on the tiller and stared grimly ahead.

Jesmiah stared round in horror and drew up.

Cato grabbed her arm and dragged her roughly towards the mast. 'Come on, girl! There's not much time.'

As soon as they reached Macro and Sempronius, Cato thrust Julia and her maid down on to the deck and took up the tail end of the rope Macro had used to secure himself to the mast. Glancing up, he saw that the wave was much closer now, travelling at an extraordinary speed as it swept along the coast. He snapped round to the two women.

'Raise your arms!'

Running the rope round their stomachs, Cato circled the mast and tied the end into the loop round Macro's waist.

'What about you, lad?' Macro looked up anxiously.

'I need more rope.' Cato stood up and glanced round. Every spare length seemed to have been taken. Then his eyes caught sight of something over the side of the *Horus*, no more than fifty paces away in the sea. The glistening tip of a rock was exposed above the surface, and as Cato looked, more rocks emerged. Closer to the shore it seemed that some tidal current had drawn the water away, laying bare reefs and even the stunted upper works of an old wreck. The sight astonished him for an instant before a

terrified shout from one of the crew snatched his attention back towards the wave. It was visible to everyone on the deck now. A great dark monster, crested with a haze of white spray as it came on in a rippling, glassy mass, straight towards the *Horus*. Ahead of it, the tiny wings of a seagull glimmered in the fading glow of the sunset, then the bird was lost in the shadow of the wave.

'Cato!'

He turned and saw Julia staring at him, struggling to reach out and grasp his hand. Cato knew there was no time to tie himself down. It was too late for him. He slumped down on the deck and squeezed himself between Macro and Julia as best he could, grasping them both round the shoulders. The light breeze that had been blowing along behind the ship abruptly died and the sail sagged like old skin from the spar, before suddenly being taken aback as the wave thrust the air ahead of it. The great mass of water rose up ahead of the ship, high, higher than the mast, and Cato felt his stomach knot as he gritted his teeth and squinted at the oncoming monster.

The deck suddenly lurched as the bows swept up, and the air was filled with cries and wails of terror and the sound of the sea surging past the sides of the *Horus*. Those clustered about the base of the mast clung to each other as the deck canted at a crazy angle and a mountain of sea swelled up above the ship, dwarfing it. For an instant Cato was lost in abject awe before the mighty apparition hanging over the ship, and he saw the spume and spray fringing the top of the wave. With a scream, one of the crewmen came tumbling down the deck, silenced as his head cracked against the deck hatch.

At that moment the *Horus* lost the brief struggle with the wave and slid back. A torrent of water crashed down over the vessel, snapping the mast off ten feet above the heads of the Romans tied to its base. Just before the black deluge of tons of water smashed down on the ship, Macro shouted up at the wave, 'Fuck you!'

Then the sea crashed over them. Cato's head was snapped back against the mast and for an instant he saw white. He opened his mouth to cry out and at once it was filled with salt water. A great force tore at him, dragging him out of the grasp of his comrades. He tightened his grip on the rope around Julia's waist while he clamped his fingers into Macro's shoulder for all he was worth. All sense of direction was lost as the ship rolled over, and his ears were filled with the roar and rumble of water boiling around him. Something struck him, and then thrashed around, tearing at him, and he realised it must be another of the crewmen. Fingers groped at his face and tore at his cheek. Fearing for his eyes, Cato had to release his grip on Macro and fight back, desperately thrusting the other man away. Then a fresh surge of water swept up both him and the other man, swirling them away from the stump of the mast into the darkness. For a moment the other man struggled like a wild animal, fighting for its life. Then he was gone and Cato felt himself rolling and twisting, over and over, as he clamped his mouth tightly shut and held his breath as best he could. Then, at last, he could bear it no longer and opened his mouth, desperate for air to ease the fire in his chest. Salt water surged down his throat and into his lungs, suffocating him, and he knew he would die.

★ ★ ★

The wave swept on, leaving a swirling maelstrom in its wake. The hull of the merchant vessel came to the surface in a froth of bubbles and spray and lay glistening in the failing light for a moment before it slowly rolled upright. As the side rail and then the deck struggled to break the surface of the sea, there was little of the original superstructure that could be recognised. The figurehead of the Egyptian god had sheared off, leaving a splintered stump. The mast, sail and rigging had been swept away and the steering paddles were gone, taking the captain and the steersman with them. As the waters parted across the deck and gushed out of the scuppers, the *Horus* continued to roll, and for an instant it seemed that she might overturn again. Then, at the last moment, she paused and rolled back to settle low in the water, a floating wreck where once there had been a proudly kept vessel. Around the *Horus* swirled the flotsam of the shattered mast and spar, together with tendrils of the rigging. A few bodies bobbed to the surface and then settled on the water like old rags.

Macro's head swayed to one side, and he blinked his eyes open and coughed, spraying salt water as he struggled to clear his lungs. He shook his head and looked around the deck. A handful of other figures were stirring, battered and dazed but alive, thanks to the ropes that secured them to the ship. Macro vomited up some water from the pit of his stomach, and spat on the deck to clear his mouth.

'Charming . . .'

He turned his head to see Sempronius smiling weakly at him, before he too began to cough and splutter. Sensing movement on his other side, Macro turned and saw Julia's face tightened into a painful grimace as she retched.

'All right, miss?'

'Oh, perfectly fine, thank you,' she muttered, and then froze. 'Cato! Where's Cato?'

Macro's gaze swept the deck, but there was no sign of his friend. He tried to think back, through the terrible darkness of the sea that had engulfed him. 'He was holding on to me when the wave struck. Then . . . then I can't remember.'

'Cato!' Julia cried out into the gloom, struggling to free herself from the rope that still bound her to the stump of the mast. Once she had loosened it enough she wriggled out and stood up. 'Cato! Where are you?'

Macro eased himself out of the cords looped round him and rose up beside her. He took a good look around the deck, but it was clear that there was no sign of Cato.

'Cato's gone, miss.'

'Gone?' She turned to him. 'No. He can't be.'

Macro stared at her helplessly, then gestured around the deck. 'He's gone.'

Julia shook her head and stepped away from the centurion, raising her voice to cry out hoarsely, 'Cato! Cato! Where are you?'

Macro watched her for a moment and then turned to help the senator to his feet.

'Thanks,' Sempronius muttered. 'Better see to the girl, Jesmiah.'

Macro nodded and looked down at the maidservant. She sat slumped against the foot of the mast, her head flopping loosely as the ship wallowed heavily on the swell. He knelt down and raised her chin tenderly. The girl's eyes stared blankly into the mid-distance. Then he saw the dark

bruising that had begun to appear on the nape of her neck, visible even in the failing light. He lowered her chin and stood up with a heavy heart. 'She's had it. Broken neck.'

Sempronius whispered, 'Poor devil.'

'Dead?' Julia looked round. 'She can't be. She was tied down beside me.'

'She's gone, miss,' Macro said gently. 'Something must have hit her when the wave struck. A loose block, part of the mast. Could have been anything.'

Julia crouched down in front of her maid and grasped her shoulders. 'Jesmiah! Wake up. Wake up I tell you! I order you to wake up.' She shook the shoulders violently and the dead girl's head wobbled obscenely. Macro knelt down at her side and took her hands in his. 'Miss, she's gone. She can't hear you any more. There's nothing you can do for her.' He paused and took a breath to calm his own emotions. 'And nothing for Cato, neither.'

Julia looked at him angrily, and then her features crumpled and she was racked by a deep sob as she clasped her hands to her face. Macro hesitantly put an arm round her and tried to think of some words to comfort her. But none came and they sat there as the dusk thickened about the ship. Now that the wave had passed on down the coast, the sea gradually settled into a calm, gentle swell. At length Macro rose to his feet and tugged the sleeve of Sempronius's tunic.

'You'd better take care of her, sir.'

'What?' The senator frowned for a moment, still dazed by the wave, and the fact that he was still alive. Then he looked down at his daughter and nodded. 'Yes, you're right. I'll look after her. What now, Macro?'

'Sir?'

'What are we going to do now?'

Macro scratched his chin. 'Try to keep the ship afloat for the night, I guess. Have to see where things lie in the morning.'

'Is that it?'

Macro took a deep breath. 'I'm no bloody sailor, sir. I'm a soldier. But I'll do what I can. All right?'

As the senator sat down and put his arm round his daughter, Macro straightened his back and called out across the deck. 'On your feet, your dozy bastards! Over here, on me, sharpish. We've got a bloody ship to save!'

As the figures shambled towards him out of the gloom, Macro glanced over them, still hoping to see Cato emerge from the shadows, alive and well. But he was nowhere to be seen amongst the scared and stunned expressions of the survivors who clustered around the stump of the mast.