

# The Blood of Caesar (Sample Chapter)

## Chapter 1

"This feels like a trap," my friend Tacitus said, putting his hand on my arm. He and I stopped beside the House of the Vestals and the dozen slaves accompanying us came to a halt. "A trap? What are you talking about? We're in the middle of Rome." I looked around, expecting to see a gang of thugs emerging from the shadows. But surely not within sight of the Praetorians who guarded the steps leading up the Palatine Hill. "There's nobody else here." Tacitus pointed to the foot of those steps, twenty paces or so ahead of us on the Nova Via. "Nobody else is going up to dinner. There's something wrong." "Maybe we're just early," I said, glancing at the length of the shadows around us. "Are you sure we've got the date right?" Tacitus asked. I signalled to Aristides, my nomenclator, who handed me the invitation I had received that morning. The broken wax seal reading CAES DOM AUG GERM around the figure of a defeated barbarian still clung to the single sheet of papyrus. I unfolded it and read it over again:

G. Plinius Caecilius Secundus is invited to dine with Caesar Domitian in his house on the Palatine on the Ides of July at the tenth hour.

"That's what mine says, too." Tacitus held his invitation next to mine. The same scribe had written both. "But where are the other guests?" Just as one frightened soldier spreads fear through the ranks, he was undermining my confidence. From our vantage point I couldn't see much of the Forum, only the Lacus Juturnae and the temple of Castor and Pollux straight ahead of us. They lay almost deserted in the shadows cast by the late afternoon sun. By now most people had gone off to bathe and prepare for dinner. The prostitutes who plied their trade in the shadows of the temple showed no interest in the few unfortunate sycophants who'd been unable to cadge an invitation to dinner somewhere. "I don't like the looks of this at all," Tacitus said. "I tell you, it feels like a trap." "By the gods, man. We've been invited to dinner with the princeps. You act like the Cyclops is beckoning us into his cave to devour us. What do you think is going to happen?" "I don't know, and that's precisely what worries me." He craned his neck to look down the side street leading to the Via Sacra. "Caligula used to invite men to dinner after he had killed them. Then he'd pretend to wonder why they didn't answer his invitation." "I don't see the connection. Are you suggesting Domitian is as mad as Caligula was?" Tacitus looked around at our slaves, who were making no effort to disguise their interest in our conversation. "No. No, of course not." Taking my shoulder, he drew me a few steps away from the slaves and lowered his voice. "But what if Domitian has invited us here to arrest us?" "That's a bit far-fetched." "No, it's not. He doesn't dare arrest Agricola, but he could arrest Agricola's son-in-law." In the three months since we returned from Syria, where we became friends, I had learned how much Tacitus despised Domitian. He hated, on principle, anyone who ruled Rome like a king. And then Domitian recalled Tacitus' father-in-law, Julius Agricola, from the governorship of Britain and made it clear Agricola would receive no further appointments. Agricola's popularity, with the army as well as with the people, protected him, but everyone knew Domitian was insanely jealous of him. And why not? He had proved himself a better general than Domitian and, in the opinion of many, would make a better princeps, if Rome must have a princeps. "You can't seriously believe Domitian intends to arrest you," I said. "People who are going to be arrested don't get invitations to dinner. They're rousted out of bed in the middle of the night by the Praetorians." "If he's not going to arrest me -- or worse -- then where are the other guests?" He waved the hand holding his invitation toward the empty street ahead of us. For that I had no answer. As I stared up the Nova Via, a scrawny-legged plebeian in a ragged tunic made his way across it. The wretch would trade his wife and children, I knew, for the note I was carrying. And I would happily be relieved of something that suddenly felt more like a summons than an invitation. Tacitus was right. There ought to be other people coming to dinner. I could not imagine any reason why Rome's ruler would want to have an intimate dinner with two obscure young equestrians, recently returned from holding minor provincial posts. "I don't want to go up there," Tacitus said. "I'd rather leave Rome right now. Cross the frontier into Germany. Or maybe Parthia. Anywhere but the top of that hill." "Are you mad? Where have you gotten such a strange notion?" With his hand on my chest Tacitus pinned me against the wall of the House of the Vestals. Although he's nearly a head taller than I am, I don't usually feel that he looms over me. But at that moment I felt like I was facing a cut-throat in a dark alley. "You know I put no stock in religion, Gaius Pliny." His voice sank to a whisper and he put his face closer to mine. "But Julia consulted an astrologer this morning, to ask about us coming here. The seer said, if we climb that hill, our lives will never be the same again. I dismissed that message until we got here and saw no one else going up to dinner." The desperation in his voice frightened me. I pushed him away and tried to laugh it off. "Your wife wasted her time and your money. That response is as vague as any the Delphic oracle ever gave. It could prove true in several ways, not all of them bad." "But few of them good." "Be reasonable. We can't ignore an invitation from Domitian." I was trying to convince myself as much as Tacitus. "If you aren't on his list of enemies already, you would be after such an affront. And so would I." "Don't you think you're on it already? You're a friend of Agricola's son-in-law. That assures you a spot near the top of any such list Domitian draws up." "You're being overly dramatic about this. Perhaps the other guests have been invited to come a bit later. Domitian may just want to get acquainted with us." "Why would he want to do that?" "Why not? My uncle served his father loyally. Your father-in-law has enjoyed a distinguished career, even if he's out of favor at the moment. That could change." "So you think this is Domitian's way of making peace with Agricola." "Like a drowning man, I grasped at anything that might keep me afloat. "Why not? Why shouldn't he want to get to know the

next generation in both our families? He may have some new appointment in mind for us." I knew I would never win a case in court with such weak arguments. "In any event, we can't ignore this invitation." I stepped out of the shadows and took a few steps up the Nova Via, waving for my slaves to follow me. Tacitus' slaves assumed they were being summoned as well. He could do nothing but fall in with us. The street ran into the Forum at the point where the steps leading up the Palatine began. That was where we stopped. One of the Praetorians guarding the stairway approached us, his hand resting on the hilt of his sheathed sword. "May I help you, sirs?" The words were cordial, but his expression -- which had all the charm of a clenched fist -- and his tone of voice said, "You'd better have some business here or be on your way." We held out our invitations, as though offering a sop to a snarling watchdog. "I'm afraid it may be a mistake," I said. The Praetorian looked up from reading the notes. "Not at all, sir." The menace was gone from his voice, but his expression had not softened. Perhaps he'd been born with it. "You and Cornelius Tacitus are expected. Please, go on up. Someone will meet you on the stairs to escort you in." Once we were on the steps I said, "See, we got past the guards with no trouble." "But will they let us pass when we're going the other way? What do you suppose would happen if we turned around right now?" The marble steps up the hill were slick from the rain of the last two days and the morning's drizzle. Although the sun was trying to break through the clouds, the sky threatened more rain by evening. "I hope the rain holds off until we can eat and get home," I said, hoping to keep any conversation on a safe topic, if one can find such a thing in Rome. "You don't like traveling in the water any more than on it, do you?" "As I've told you, my friend, water belongs in two places -- in a bath and mixed in wine." We fell silent as we concentrated on negotiating the steps. If we had been wearing just tunics, as our slaves were, it would have been less difficult. But our dining gowns threatened to trip us and fling us face-first on the stone. We finally gathered them up like women do to avoid dragging them in the filth in the streets. We were halfway to the landing when Tacitus asked, "Have you been up here before?" "Only once, ten years ago. My uncle brought me with him when Vespasian appointed him procurator of Hispania Tarraconensis. It looks quite different now from what I remember." "I would expect so. Domitian has turned the Palatine into the busiest building site in Rome." His tone made the simple statement an accusation. "But every princeps has built something up here -- a new house or an addition to an older structure." Tacitus said nothing. What could he say? I was right. Augustus, our first princeps, lived atop this hill in a house no grander than any other Roman nobleman's. Domitian, by pushing all other property owners off the hill, had made room for what would be the largest house in the city, complete with its own arena for games and shows. With the workmen done for the day, the scaffolding and the unfinished walls of his edifice loomed so high into the mist that we could barely make out the tops. "Look at that," Tacitus said in disgust. "He's extending the Palatine into the very heavens. This reminds me of the giants that Ovid talks about, piling mountains together to reach the kingdom of the gods. Someone should read that story to Domitian, to remind him of the disaster that struck them at the end." "Someone should remind you of how unwise it is to talk like that -- anywhere in Rome, but especially here." We finally reached a landing where three or four people could stand. A slave -- the most perfectly proportioned dwarf I've ever seen -- greeted us there. "Welcome, my lords. If you'll follow me, I'll take you to the dining room." The Palatine is not much higher than any of Rome's other hills, but it is steeper. We were breathing hard by the time we reached the door of the house. My uncle (who was also my adoptive father) had difficulty with his breathing throughout his life, perhaps because he was so heavy. On those occasions when he had business on the Palatine he was carried up the steps in a chair, as I was when I accompanied him. Now that I had made the climb myself, I felt sympathy for the slaves who bore such a burden all the way up here. "Please, rest here for a moment," the dwarf slave said. Tacitus was panting as he put his hand on my shoulder to steady himself. "That little imp's not even breathing hard," he whispered. "How does he do it?" The dwarf did seem unaffected by the ascent. "My lord Domitian knows the approach to his house is arduous," he said. "He suggests that his visitors pause here, have something to drink, and enjoy a splendid view of the city." He clapped his child-like hands twice and two slave women appeared from somewhere behind us. One carried drinks for our slaves, who were sitting on the steps below us. The one who approached Tacitus and me carried a tray with two cups of wine on it. She must have been German, with her blonde hair, broad hips and full breasts. Tacitus eyed her appreciatively as she served us. She was the type of woman he prefers -- when he prefers a woman -- but he has one inviolable rule: he never plows a field owned by another man. "If you don't require anything else, my lords," the dwarf said, "I will make certain everything is ready for your arrival." As he and the slave women disappeared into the house Tacitus sipped his wine and shook his head slowly. "Something is very odd here. Don't you feel it yet?" I grabbed his gown and pulled him over to me so I could lower my voice to a whisper. "Yes, you've convinced me. There is something odd going on! I would even call it downright peculiar. But I wouldn't discuss it in an audible voice right on the princeps' doorstep." "Who's going to hear us? There's no one within earshot except our slaves." "My dear Tacitus, you know as well as I do that in Rome there's always someone within earshot." I released my grip on his gown and he straightened it. I took another sip of my wine and raised my voice. "We were given an opportunity to enjoy the wine and the view. Let's do that. You must admit, both are superb." Spread out below us lay the Forum, the heart of Rome since the city's foundation. I had looked down on it from other hills. My own house sits on the Esquiline, which is farther from the Forum but about as high as the Palatine. The Palatine, though, offers a view of the Forum that only birds enjoy. The sun, low in the sky behind us, managed to part the clouds for a moment and lit up the glistening, wet tile roofs as though they had been polished by a legion of slaves. "A panorama of Rome's history lies at our feet," I said firmly enough that any eavesdropping imperial spy could hear me. "The temple of Saturn -- as old as Rome itself. The Senate house across from it. And the Basilica Aemilia, where old Cato used to pontificate. The house of the Vestal Virgins here below us and the temple of Jupiter Stator at the other end of the Forum -- they're ancient but just as solid as the day they were built." "I agree," Tacitus said. "The Forum is Rome's history written in stone. And its future as well." "What do you mean?" He pointed to one structure after another. "There's the Basilica Julia. Behind the Senate house is the Forum of Julius. And down that way is the temple of the deified Julius. Oh, and let's not forget the Forum of Augustus across the way and the arch of Augustus right at our feet. Do you see the pattern emerging?" I grasped his point, but I was more concerned about

someone possibly emerging from the doorway to our left and getting it as well. He was not being subtle. "There," Tacitus went on, warming to his topic, is the temple of the Penates, the city's ancient household gods, but it's now overshadowed by the Forum of Vespasian. And at that end of the old Forum are the arch of Titus and the baths of Titus and Vespasian's amphitheater. Look at it, Gaius Pliny! Rome's past is surrounded by the buildings of our rulers, just as surely as the army lays siege to a city." I looked at him as though I'd never seen him before. He was speaking with a fervor I'd heard only in some of the religious fanatics we encountered during our time in Syria. "Am I too old-fashioned, too republican for you?" he asked. I took a sip of wine to calm myself. "You know that, on some level, I sympathize with you, but my uncle taught me to be a pragmatist. Since the time of Augustus, Rome has been ruled by a king, even if no one dares to use that word openly. We've lost the freedom to speak our minds on some subjects, but we live secure from the chaos of the late Republic." "And you're content with that bargain?" "What would life be like without a princeps? You're old enough to remember the fighting that erupted after Nero died and there was no one to succeed him. If we'd been standing here then, we would have seen part of Rome itself in flames. Vespasian restored order and we've enjoyed fifteen years of peace." "Under an iron-fisted dynasty." "Things have changed," I said. "I won't deny that. But can't our future can be as glorious as our past?" I turned to gaze back out over the Forum. "I think if our enemies were to stand on top of this hill, they would be so overawed that all resistance to us would cease." "I think our greatest enemy lives on top of this hill," Tacitus said softly, raising his cup to his lips to keep our slaves from hearing him. I gasped. "By the gods, man! If you keep talking like that, you won't have to worry about whether you're connected to Agricola or not. You'll bring disaster on yourself and everyone around you." As I stepped away from Tacitus I noticed one of my slaves pointing unobtrusively to something behind me. I turned around, expecting to find myself staring at the point of a Praetorian's sword. It was a relief to discover nothing more alarming than a man with a gray beard. He looked foreign, although his dress was entirely Roman. The narrow stripe on his tunic placed him in the equestrian class to which Tacitus and I belong. From his dark skin and hooked nose I guessed his origins to be eastern. From the tiredness -- or was it sadness? -- in his eyes I placed his age at about fifty. "Forgive me for startling you," the man said, his voice deep but soft. "I am Flavius Josephus. I assume you are Gaius Pliny and Cornelius Tacitus." "I'm Pliny," I said, wondering how much of our conversation he had overheard. Josephus stroked his beard. "Ah, Pliny! I greatly admire your uncle's work. I hope we'll have a chance to discuss it during dinner." "I'm always happy to talk about my uncle's work." Especially if it would draw attention away from Tacitus' reckless comments. "Do you know how many others have been invited tonight?" "Only one." He didn't offer a name. "Do you dine with the princeps often?" Tacitus asked. "Not as often as I did with his father or his brother, but on occasion." I knew Josephus only from my uncle's discussion of his history of the Jews' rebellion against Rome, over a decade ago. Josephus took an active part in the war until he deserted his troops at a critical juncture, surrendered to Vespasian, and, like a manumitted slave, took on the family name, Flavius. At my uncle's insistence I had begun to read the book but never finished it. My uncle had met Josephus and told me his observation confirmed what the book revealed of the man: he was a self-serving coward who abandoned his people, his religion, and his family for the security of life as a lap-dog. He now lived in an apartment in the princeps' house. "Is Ajax escorting us?" Josephus asked. "He's the dwarf, my lord Domitian's newest and most exotic pet." I detected in his voice the resentment of a displaced favorite. I nodded as the door opened and the dwarf slave reappeared. We followed him inside. As in any Roman house we entered an atrium, but a far grander one than I could ever imagine. The walls were the height of a basilica. Scaffolding stood in place for the artists who were repainting the frescos in the bolder, darker colors so popular now. I could hear the slaves whispering in awe behind us. My own atrium, which had just been repainted, looked like a smoke-stained peasant's hut by comparison. "This was built by Caligula," Josephus said, "when he enlarged Tiberius' house. It had to be on this scale because that wall" -- he pointed to our left -- "is part of the temple of Castor and Pollux. Caligula incorporated it into his house and cut that door in the wall to pander to his delusion that he was a god himself. The walls have been repainted several times. As you can see, our lord Domitian is putting up scenes of his recent triumph across the Danube." Tacitus snorted derisively and I glared him into silence. Everyone knew Domitian had sat on the Roman side of the Danube while his troops massacred a few disease-ridden German villages. The Senate then awarded him the name Germanicus and voted him a triumph. All of this was done so he could rival Julius Agricola. "Are you going to write a history of that German campaign?" Tacitus asked Josephus. Josephus smiled modestly. "I'll leave that to someone who was there to see it." Tacitus leaned over to me and whispered, "Well, that eliminates Domitian." With Praetorians at every door and at strategic points in between, we passed from the atrium into a peristyle garden that was on a scale with the rest of the house. The center of the garden was decorated with a fountain instead of a piscina. Sea nymphs cast in bronze spewed water from every possible orifice, a memorial to Caligula's crudity. On the other side of the garden, in what would have been the rear wall of a typical Roman house, we went through a door into another atrium, this one of more human proportions. "This is Tiberius' original house," Josephus informed us. "I'm sure you know the story of the antagonism between Tiberius and his mother, Livia." At the mention of some juicy historical tidbit Tacitus stopped gawking like the country mouse in Horace's fable. He reads more history than I do. My tastes run to rhetoric and poetry. I've not even read all of my uncle's historical works. Tacitus has, along with some of his notes. Now my friend was eager to display his knowledge. "When Augustus died," he said, "and his step-son Tiberius took power, he built this house because his mother, Livia, was still living in Augustus' house." "Yes . . . Exactly." Josephus' face showed pleasure at finding someone who enjoyed historical gossip as much as he did, mixed with disappointment that his listener could rival him at his own game. He went on quickly. "Tiberius couldn't force her out because of her status as the widow of the deified Augustus. So he built his own, much grander, house next to Augustus'." At the rear of this atrium we were led into a triclinium of normal size where three couches were arranged around a single table. Tacitus and I exchanged a glance. It looked like we were going to have a most intimate dinner -- us, Josephus, the mystery guest, and the princeps. The only thing that puzzled me more than our presence was Josephus'. Without being told, Josephus took a place on the lower couch. Tacitus and I started to join him there, but the dwarf slave stopped us. "If you please, my lords," he said, pointing to the

middle couch. He directed me to the low place on that couch. I eyed the guest of honor's position with increasing apprehension. "There must be some mistake," I said. "Those are my instructions, my lord. You and Cornelius Tacitus are to have the middle couch and you are to have the low place." Tacitus and I reclined on the couch, looking at each other like men who know a trap is going to be sprung but don't know whether it will happen sooner or later. Nothing so obvious as the sword of Damocles hung over our heads, but the prediction of Julia's fortune-teller rang in my ears. Our slaves stood behind us as a flock of imperial servants entered the room. Some took their places around the spot Domitian would occupy. Others brought bowls of water, removed our sandals and washed our feet. Josephus was tended by a single slave, a woman almost as old as he was. Two slaves placed silver platters of bread, cheese, olives, and mushrooms on the tables in front of our couches. Our slaves gave us our napkins and we began to eat. A few minutes later the dwarf escorted another guest into the triclinium and showed him to the middle place on the high couch. His height was somewhere between mine and Tacitus', but he was already showing the girth of a man who had spent his life in self-indulgence. His hair was blacker than it was a month ago, the last time I saw him. A group of the most handsome and beautiful slaves one could imagine, clothed in tunics of linen and silk in a rainbow of colors, trailed behind him. At the sight of this man, Tacitus choked on an olive because he recognized the one person in Rome whom I regarded as an implacable enemy -- Marcus Aquilius Regulus. Regulus, one of the most powerful -- and, to my mind, most sinister -- men in Rome, employs a web of spies in other people's households and in any public place where useful information might be unearthed. He wielded enormous influence under Nero, who let Regulus do the dirty work of destroying anyone who posed the slightest threat to his regime. Regulus and my uncle frequently found themselves on opposite sides in court as my uncle tried to defend Regulus' victims, who were usually guilty of nothing more than being rich. If they were convicted, Regulus received a quarter of their wealth. In spite of all my uncle and others could do, Regulus became a wealthy man. When Vespasian came to power my uncle managed to convince him that Regulus was a pernicious influence. Finding the princeps' door shut in his face, Regulus never forgave my uncle. I inherited that enmity and prize the legacy. Vespasian's older son, Titus, kept the door barred to Regulus during his short reign. But it looked like Domitian, the younger son, had forgotten the lesson. Regulus was back in his accustomed place at the princeps' elbow. Now I knew Tacitus was right. We had walked into a trap. Regulus lives on the Esquiline hill, but higher up than I do and his house fronts on a different street, so I can avoid running into him. He greeted me the way he greets everyone, as though I were his oldest, dearest friend. The man was so unctuous I was surprised he didn't slide right off the couch. "Friend Pliny, it has been some time since I've enjoyed your company." I've never enjoyed yours, I thought, but I said, "Service in the provinces has drawn me away this past year, Marcus Regulus." He popped a mushroom into his gaping maw. "I hope we'll have a chance tonight to hear about your year in the provinces. Perhaps sort out all the rumors surrounding your exploits. I seem to hear something new at every dinner I attend." I glared at Tacitus. "Are you encouraging the growth of these rumors?" He smiled slyly. "A man has to pay for his dinner. I can't compose witty epigrams like your friend Martial, so I deal in what coin I have." Before I could say anything else, Domitian entered, walking unsteadily and followed by a dozen Praetorians, who dispersed themselves around the room, except for two who remained immediately behind him. He brought only three slaves with him -- all female. We started to stand, but Domitian waved us back down. "Please, no need for formality tonight." He was taller than I'd expected, having seen him prior to this only at a distance. Or maybe it was just in comparison to the dwarf at his side. His complexion was ruddy and his face not particularly imposing. Large, weak eyes in an oversized head were his most remarkable feature. As Domitian reclined next to Regulus, in the host's place on the high couch and picked up the cup of wine that a slave had waiting for him, the dwarf sat on the floor in front of the couch. Domitian patted his head. I almost froze when I realized I was close enough to the princeps to reach out and . . . . By the gods! I was actually thinking about what I could do if I had a knife hidden in my gown. And I could have one. No one had searched me. I was as close to Domitian as Brutus had been to Caesar. This is what comes from spending so much time with Tacitus. Domitian drained his cup. As he held it out for a slave to refill he turned his face full on mine and smiled. "If you were to kill me, Gaius Pliny, you wouldn't get off your couch alive." He waved his cup broadly toward the Praetorians at attention around the room, sloshing some of his wine. I could hardly breathe. Surely I hadn't been thinking aloud! Was there something in my expression? "My lord, I assure you --" "Relax, my dear Pliny." He reached over and patted my arm. "It's what everyone thinks the first time they get this close to me. I can see it in their faces. I'm very good at reading people's faces. It's a gift. Someday I may encounter a man crazy enough to sacrifice himself to rid the world of me. Someone with a grudge. Someone like . . . the son-in-law of Julius Agricola. But not tonight. I can see it in his face." Tacitus went rigid, but he kept his voice controlled, calm. I could tell he was measuring his words as carefully as a stone mason chipping away at the last block that must fit precisely, with no margin for error. "Caesar, my father-in-law has never spoken or acted disloyally toward you. He cast his lot with your father before the outcome of the civil war was clear. You've never had reason to doubt his loyalty or mine." Domitian waved his hand. "Pssh! If I thought for a moment that I was in any danger from either of you, you would never have set a foot on that first step coming up from the Forum. But perhaps my attempt at humor was strained. Please, let's relax and enjoy our meal." He snapped his fingers and slaves brought in the gustatio -- boiled eggs, oysters, and radishes cut into delicate patterns. I was pleased to see his tastes, like mine, ran to simpler, lighter foods, although -- being the princeps -- he couldn't resist showing his power over even the most basic part of life. The oysters were served in bowls of ice, brought down, no doubt, from the peaks of the Apennines. It would never have occurred to me to serve them in this odd way, but I couldn't refuse to eat them. I was surprised to discover that the chill enhanced the flavor. "Now, tell me," Domitian said as we began to eat, "how do things stand in Syria?" "My lord," I said with great hesitation, "I'm sure you've had reports from the governor. He would be able to see the situation in its entirety much better than Tacitus or I. We held the most junior positions." I knew that Domitian, once a year, held a large dinner to welcome back higher-ranking provincial officials and to thank them for their service. I had never heard of him questioning two men of such low rank as Tacitus and I had held. I felt like Tacitus was right. Domitian was driving us one step closer to whatever trap he had set. "The governor of a province," Domitian said, "is

primarily interested in convincing me that he's the best governor since Rome first set foot on conquered soil. I think you and the son-in-law of Agricola here might have a more disinterested view." I didn't believe him for a moment, but I said, "I would describe the province overall as tense, my lord." Tacitus nodded his agreement. "And what is the source of this tension?" "Refugees from Judaea are not well accepted in Syria, my lord. The provincials, especially the Arabs, seem to despise the Jews as much as the Jews dislike them." "Though an outsider," Tacitus put in, "cannot distinguish one from the other, Caesar, except in the baths." "How curious," Domitian said. He turned to Josephus. "Why do the Jews and their neighbors dislike one another so much?" Josephus stroked his beard. "It goes back to the origins of both peoples, my lord. The Arabs claim descent from Ishmael, an illegitimate son of Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation. They resent the Jews for being the genuine heirs and the Jews resent them as usurpers." "Usurpers of what?" Domitian asked with a laugh, which Regulus echoed. "Some arid patch of land without even one navigable river?" "I believe you've just described Greece, my lord," Josephus said. I barely suppressed a smile as he continued. "Whatever it looks like to an outsider, Judaea belongs to the Jews and they have given their lives to hold on to it against Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks." "Some of them have given their lives," Regulus said, provoking a smirk from Domitian and a deep blush from Josephus. "But, in spite of their 'valor'," the princeps said, "now we Romans have it." He clenched his fist. "Others have held it for a time, my lord," Josephus said in a softer voice. Even the lap dog could nip at his master's fingers now and then. "But the Jews always get it back. King David reigned in Jerusalem before Romulus and Remus were even born. Time and fate determine everything. They have taught the Jews patience." "Patience," Regulus snorted, "is a mask behind which the defeated hide their cowardice." Domitian patted Regulus' shoulder in approval. "Oh, a neatly crafted aphorism! Now, my dear Josephus, you saw with your own eyes the devastation which my father and brother unleashed on Jerusalem. Not one stone of your temple was left standing on another. Surely you don't think the city can rise again." "My lord, when Rome in its infancy was still ruled by Etruscan kings, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and left it in ruins. And yet, barely two generations later, before Rome established its Republic, the city had risen from the ashes." Domitian took another drink, something he'd apparently been doing for a while before he joined us in the triclinium. "A city rises from the dead," he muttered. "Fascinating concept." I glanced over my shoulder at Tacitus. His expression told me he was also wondering why we were pursuing this topic of conversation. Was it the bait leading to Domitian's trap? "What do you think, Marcus Regulus?" Domitian said. "Can we construct a syllogism?" Regulus' mouth dropped open, showing us the egg he was chewing. "I'm sure you can, my lord," he sputtered. "You are the princeps, after all." "Yes, so I am." Domitian giggled. "Dear Regulus, how do you endure to have the smell of my arse in your nostrils all day? Now, let's see. A syllogism we must have." He stroked his chin and looked at the ceiling for a moment. "First proposition: People make up a city. True?" We all nodded. "Second proposition: A city can rise from the dead. True?" Again we all concurred, not daring to look at one another, lest we have to admit what we all must have been thinking: this drunken lout was the ruler of the Roman world, the man who held our destinies in his hands. Domitian pointed to spots in the air. "The middle terms of the syllogism agree. Ergo, people can rise from the dead!" Beaming, he turned to me. "What about you, Gaius Pliny? Do you think people can rise from the dead?" "That would be . . . a valid inference from the premises you've stated, my lord." My chest was so tight I could hardly breathe. He was driving me closer to the trap, I was sure, but I still couldn't tell what it was or why he wanted me in it. "I can't disagree with your logic." "No one can, dear Pliny." He slapped his hand on his couch, making us all jump. "But your uncle was a scientist. He recorded extraordinary events. Did he ever hear of a man rising from the dead?" "Not strictly speaking, my lord. He recorded a few instances of people presumed to be dead but who awoke or were revived during their funerals. Including one poor man who woke up after the pyre had been lit and no one was able to get him off, so he was burned alive." "Now that would have been something to see." Domitian flopped on his back and pretended to be wrapped tightly in grave clothes. "Help me! Help me!" he squeaked. Regulus was the only one who laughed. Domitian rolled over onto his stomach and took a sip of wine. "But someone being mistaken for dead is not quite the same as someone being indisputably dead for a lengthy period of time -- say, cremated or the body tossed into the Tiber -- and then being alive again, is it?" "No, my lord, it's not." "There are cases in the Jewish holy books," Josephus put in, "of people rising from the dead. For instance, the prophet Elijah --" "Speak when you're spoken to," Domitian snapped. "Like my other servants." Josephus' shoulders slumped, like a slave who'd been cuffed. "The Jews' holy books should have perished along with their holy city," Regulus said. Tacitus cleared his throat. "What is it, son-in-law of Agricola?" Domitian asked. "Well, Caesar, don't the Christians claim their leader was raised from the dead after being crucified?" "The Christians?" Domitian looked addled, whether from the wine or from this unexpected turn in the conversation, I couldn't tell. "Aren't the Christians some sort of renegade Jew? Josephus, on this topic you have permission to speak." "Thank you, my lord." Josephus swallowed his pride along with a large gulp of wine. "Yes, the Christians began as a part of Judaism, a school not unlike the Pharisees. But they have broken off from the main body because of the claim that their prophet was resurrected." "Do they offer any proof?" Regulus asked. "Some witnesses say they saw him, mostly hysterical women and illiterate fishermen." "Can we even be certain he was dead?" Domitian asked. "He was crucified, Caesar," Tacitus said. "How could he not be dead?" "Men have been known to pass out from the pain," Domitian said, "then come to after they're taken off the cross. They have to be dispatched by the soldiers conducting the execution." "I suppose that could have happened in this case, Caesar," Tacitus said. We all nodded in agreement. "So," Domitian said, "although it seems logically demonstrable that a man could rise from the dead, we can't seem to find any sure instance of such a thing happening. Would that be a fair assessment?" "Certainly, my lord," Regulus said. The rest of us murmured our agreement. "Then why," Domitian said in a petulant voice, "have I heard stories, since I was a boy, of Nero returning from the dead?" Silence. "Why is that?" Domitian's voice rose. "I want someone to give me an answer." "It may be, Caesar," Tacitus ventured, much to the relief of the rest of us, "because the only witnesses to Nero's death and the burning of his body were a few of his personal slaves." "The young man is correct, my lord," Josephus added. "Nero did not have a public funeral. Under such circumstances rumors find fertile ground. The common people will believe anything. A few

months after Nero's death a man who strongly resembled him appeared in the province of Asia and stirred up quite a tumult until he was captured and executed. The Christians, I've heard, even have a strange book which claims that Nero has come back from the dead. Or will come back. I'm not sure of the details." Domitian started to say something but was interrupted by a man appearing at the door of the triclinium. When the Praetorians blocked his way, Josephus said, "He's from the archives, my lord." Domitian signaled for the man to be admitted. "Forgive me, my lords," the man said, "but something awful has happened. Nicanor requests that Josephus come to the archives at once." "What's the matter?" Regulus said with a chuckle. "Somebody knock over an ink pot?" "No, my lord. Someone's been hurt. I believe he's dead." "Dead?" Josephus' alarm seemed genuine. "My lord, if you'll excuse me . . . ." "Yes, of course," Domitian said. As the slave attending Josephus helped him put on his sandals, the princeps added, "For that matter, why don't we all go? This sounds more interesting than the entertainment I had planned for the evening." As we sat up and slipped on our sandals I whispered to Tacitus, "You were right. This is a trap, and we're being driven right into it."