

THE ROMAN MYSTERIES



CAROLINE LAWRENCE

THE ENEMIES OF JUPITER



— A Roman Mystery —

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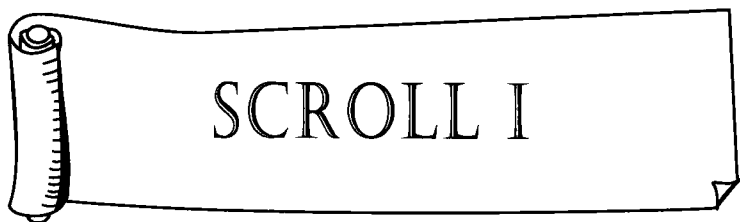
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SCROLL I

Jonathan ben Mordecai stared at the charred flesh.

'It's horrible,' he said to his friend Lupus in a strangled voice. 'Horrible.'

Lupus could not speak because he had no tongue. So he merely nodded.

The two boys were crouching before a brick oven and peering in through the arched doorway. A blackened haunch of venison lay on a platter among the glowing coals.

'Do you think maybe I left it in too long?' asked Jonathan.

Lupus nodded again.

Using a napkin, Jonathan gripped the platter and began to pull it out.

'Yeoww! It's hot!'

There was a resounding crash and Jonathan stared down at burnt meat and broken pottery on the concrete floor of the kitchen.

'Oh Pollux!' Jonathan cursed and blew on his scorched fingers. 'Now dinner is completely ruined. And it's all Miriam's fault!'

Lupus stared at Jonathan with raised eyebrows.

'Well it is! Everything's gone wrong since she got married and left home!' Jonathan stood up and tried to

blink away the tears filling his eyes, so he could read what Lupus was beginning to write on his wax tablet.

YOU COULD SCRAPE

But before Lupus could finish, a big black puppy pushed between his legs, seized the burnt leg of venison in his teeth and scampered back out of the kitchen.

‘Tigris! Bad dog! Come back with that!’ yelled Jonathan. ‘That’s father’s birthday dinner! Oh Pollux!’ he cursed again. ‘This is a total disaster. It’s going to be even worse than your birthday party last week. At least we had food, even if it was burnt.’

Lupus nodded, then shrugged and pointed to his tongueless mouth, as if to say: I couldn’t taste it anyway.

Jonathan gave his friend an affectionate glance. Less than a year ago Lupus had been a half-wild beggar boy with head lice and ragged fingernails. Now, with his hair oiled and combed, wearing a white birthday tunic, he looked like a young Roman boy of good birth.

From the direction of the atrium came the sound of the door knocker.

‘That must be father,’ said Jonathan. ‘He probably forgot his key again. He’s just in time for the total disaster that’s supposed to be his birthday party. Could you let him in, Lupus? I’ll start picking up these broken pieces of pottery before one of us steps on them and bleeds to death.’

A moment later Lupus was back, followed by a dark-

skinned girl in a lionskin cloak and a fair-haired girl wearing a blue palla. Behind them came two adult slaves: a plump woman and a big muscular man carrying a covered cauldron.

‘Salve, Jonathan!’ said the dark-skinned girl, and the girl with light brown hair said: ‘What happened?’

‘Oh, hello, Nubia. Hello, Flavia. I dropped father’s birthday dinner and Tigris ran off with it and it’s a total disaster.’

‘Don’t be wretched,’ said Nubia, the dark-skinned girl. The rear paws of her lionskin trailed on the floor as she knelt to help Jonathan pick up the shards of clay.

Flavia grinned down at Jonathan. ‘After Lupus’s party last week,’ she said, ‘we thought you might need some help with the cooking. So Alma made her special goat stew with plums and pine-nuts. Caudex will help serve it.’ Flavia stepped out of the kitchen into the columned peristyle. She looked around the inner garden. ‘Where’s your father?’ she asked, tapping a cylindrical package against her leg. ‘We have a present for him.’

‘He’s not back yet,’ said Jonathan. ‘He’s still out seeing his patients. Thanks, Alma.’ This last was addressed to the plump woman who was settling the cauldron among the glowing ashes on top of the hearth.

‘My pleasure, dear.’ Alma turned to hang her cloak on a peg fixed to the wall behind her. ‘Why don’t you four go and tidy the dining room? Leave the kitchen to Caudex and me. We’ll get everything ready. If one of you could just bring a broom, Caudex can sweep up these shards of clay.’

Beside her, Flavia's big door-slave yawned and nodded.

'It's a mess in here, too,' said Flavia to Jonathan a few minutes later as they entered the dining room.

'Your house is not being of the tidy,' Nubia agreed. She had only been in Italia for eight months and her Latin was not yet fluent.

'I know,' Jonathan said. He had taken a piece of flatbread from the kitchen and now he tore off a chunk with his teeth. 'Cleaning is usually my job but I've had to be the cook, too, since Miriam left. Sometimes we get dinner from the tavern by the Baths of Thetis, but the food is nowhere near as good as Miriam's. I wish father would let us keep slaves – oh, sorry, Nubia! I forgot you used to be a slave.'

'I do not mind,' said Nubia. She plumped one of the embroidered floor cushions. 'I am not a slave any more.'

'I'm glad we have slaves to do all the chores,' said Flavia, as she brushed crumbs from the low hexagonal table in the middle of the dining room. 'I don't know how we'd manage without Alma and Caudex. It's a shame your father has such strange ideas.'

Behind them, Lupus was lighting hanging oil-lamps with a thin taper. It was a late afternoon in February and already the light was draining from the sky.

'And that's another thing,' said Jonathan through his mouthful. 'It's the Sabbath and there should be a woman to light the candles.' He gestured with his bread at the unlit candles on the table. 'And to say the blessing.'

'Maybe Miriam can say it when she gets here,' said Flavia. 'I can't wait to see her!'

'She's not coming,' said Jonathan.

'But it is your father's birthday!' said Nubia.

'She hasn't had the fever. Neither has Gaius. Father sent them a message telling them not to come into Ostia until the epidemic is over.'

Flavia and Nubia exchanged a glance. 'But we haven't seen her or Gaius since the wedding last month,' said Flavia. 'We really wanted to see them.'

'I know,' Jonathan sighed. 'I miss her, too.'

'Stew's ready,' said Alma, putting her head into the dining room. 'Shall I bring it in?'

'Not yet,' said Flavia. 'The guest of honour still isn't back. Where could your father be?' she asked. 'It's almost dark.'

'He's out tending the sick,' said Jonathan. 'As usual.'

'He tends sick on the birthday?' asked Nubia.

'Yes,' sighed Jonathan. 'Though he's usually back by dusk on the Sabbath.'

Flavia's eyes grew wide. 'You don't think he's caught the fever, do you?'

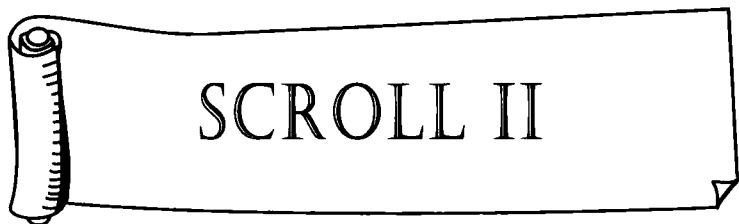
'Probably,' said Jonathan. 'In fact, I'm amazed he hasn't caught it before now. He's probably lying in a gutter somewhere, moaning for his loved ones . . .'

'Who's lying in a gutter?' said an accented voice.

'Father!' Jonathan spun round. And then: 'Father?'

A tall, clean-shaven Roman in a white tunic stood in the doorway of the dining room. His heavy-lidded dark eyes gleamed with amusement.

Jonathan's jaw dropped. 'Great Neptune's beard, father! What have you done to yourself?'



SCROLL II

'Doctor Mordecai!' gasped Flavia. 'You look just like a Roman.'

'Behold!' said Nubia. 'You have cut your hairs.'

With his forefinger, Lupus pretended to shave his own smooth cheeks.

'And shaved off your beard!' agreed Jonathan. 'Great Jupiter's eyebrows, father! Why did you do that?'

'I have a growing number of Roman patients,' said his father with a sigh, 'who prefer a "Roman-looking" doctor. Besides,' he added, 'since you saved the Emperor Titus and he made us Roman citizens, I thought it was time I started looking like one!'

Later that night, Jonathan stared up into the dark shadowed ceiling of his bedroom. He couldn't sleep. Something he had overheard Alma say earlier that evening kept nagging at his thoughts.

He had been taking the wine jug into the kitchen for a refill just as she muttered to Caudex, 'There's only one reason I know for a forty-three-year-old man to change his looks like that and it's not Roman citizenship. I'll wager he's got a new woman in his life.'

Alma had looked up to see Jonathan standing in the kitchen doorway and she had furiously shushed

poor Caudex, although the big door-slave hadn't said a word.

Now Jonathan was wondering whether Alma was right. A few months earlier Flavia's father had almost taken a new wife. What if his father was thinking of remarrying as well?

The brand on Jonathan's left shoulder began to throb, so he rolled onto his good side.

'You *can't* have a new woman in your life, father,' he murmured. 'Mother's still alive and well and living in Rome, less than fifteen miles away.'

He reached out and touched the plaster-covered wall inches from his nose. The surface was silky smooth and slightly damp on this winter night. His finger found a rough edge, where the plaster had cracked, and he absently picked at it.

'If only she hadn't made me promise not to tell you.'

Something woke Lupus.

For a moment he tried to remember his dream. He had been swimming with dolphins in water so clear that it felt like flying.

His ear caught the remote clatter of the fire-gong somewhere near the harbour, and the distant sound of dogs barking. Was that what had woken him? No, that was a common sound on winter nights. He listened as hard as a rabbit for something closer. There! The soft grating of wooden chair legs on a mosaic floor. Someone was downstairs in the study.

For a moment Lupus hesitated. It was a cold night and he was deliciously warm in his burrow of soft

blankets. Abruptly he laughed at himself. This time last year he would have been sleeping half-naked near the furnace in the Baths of Thetis, trying to find some warmth in the cooling ashes. How soft he had grown in the last eight months!

Lupus lifted himself on one elbow. The tiny flame of a night oil-lamp in one corner showed that both Jonathan and Tigris were gone.

Lupus rose from his warm bed and padded across the cold bedroom floor onto the balcony overlooking the inner garden of the house. The bare branches of the fig tree made it easy to see down through the columns of the peristyle. The gauzy curtains of the study were drawn, but a lamp shining behind illuminated them with a golden glow.

Slowly Lupus crept downstairs, avoiding the squeaky third step from the top. Presently his bare feet felt the cold roughness of the mosaic path with its diamond pattern of white chips, barely visible on this moonless night.

When Lupus reached the study, he peeked through a gap between the edge of the wide doorway and the curtain pulled across it.

The light from the oil-lamp showed Jonathan – a blanket wrapped round his shoulders – sitting at his father's desk. He held a half-eaten apple in his left hand and a quill pen in his right and, as Lupus watched, he dipped the pen into a blue glass inkpot on the desk before him and wrote carefully on a piece of papyrus.

Something moved under the desk. It was Tigris,

gnawing the bone from the leg of venison he had stolen earlier.

Lupus watched Jonathan replace the pen, blow on the sheet, re-read it, and fold it. Another letter lay on the desk beside him. Finally, Jonathan lit the special red wax taper his father used to seal letters and dripped wax onto the edge of the papyrus where it overlapped.

Lupus stifled a grunt of surprise as he saw Jonathan press the liquid wax with a ring on the middle finger of his right hand. The only ring Jonathan wore on that hand was a signet ring which had been a gift to him from the Emperor Titus.

Lupus also knew that the seal carved into the ring was not Jonathan's.

It was the Emperor's.

'Father,' said Jonathan two days later, 'would you like me to help you receive your patients today?'

It was the first day of the week, which they called the Lord's day.

Jonathan, Mordecai and Lupus had just returned from their pre-dawn meeting with the other followers of the new Jewish sect who called themselves Christians.

Now Mordecai was standing over his desk, grinding cardamoms with a mortar and pestle made of dark green marble. He stopped and looked up at Jonathan.

'Don't you have lessons with Aristo this morning?'

Jonathan shook his head. 'Flavia's household are observing the first day of the Parentalia. Except for Aristo. He and Lupus are going hunting. I know you've been

busy these past few weeks and you haven't had Miriam to help you and I thought you could use some help.'

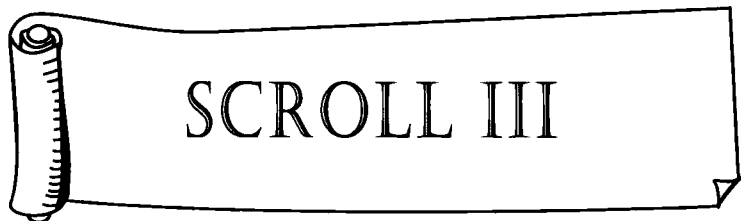
'That is extremely thoughtful of you,' said his father. 'I would greatly appreciate your assistance.'

Jonathan was surprised by the look of gratitude on his father's face and turned quickly to hide the guilty expression on his own. His real motive for helping his father was to see if any suspicious women patients appeared. Especially ones who preferred a clean-shaven Roman to a bearded Jew.

'Will you open the front door?' said his father. 'Show the patients into the atrium as usual and bring the first one in.'

'Yes, father.' Jonathan went into the atrium and unbolted the front door.

It had been a long time since he had helped his father receive patients and he was surprised to see there were already a dozen of them waiting on the pavement outside. And most of them were women.



SCROLL III

Jonathan studied his father's last patient of the day, a plump woman with a little red mouth and dark brown hair arranged in the latest fashion: a wall of curls rising up above her forehead. She looked up at Jonathan from her chair and smiled at him.

'You've met my son Jonathan?' said Mordecai. 'He's assisting me today. Jonathan, this is Helena Aurelia.'

'Hello, Jonathan,' she said. 'I was just telling Marcus how much I like his new look.'

'Marcus? Who's Marcus?' Jonathan frowned.

'Your father.'

'His name is Mordecai,' said Jonathan coldly.

'Oh!' cried Helena, 'I can never pronounce that name. I always call him Marcus.' She had such a pretty laugh that Jonathan smiled despite himself.

'Tell me, Helena Aurelia,' said Jonathan's father, smiling too. 'What is bothering you?'

'It's the usual thing, Marcus. I can't sleep. My mind is racing. I'm forgetful. And I become very frightened for no reason.' She looked up at Mordecai from under long eyelashes. 'My husband died two years ago and we have no children. Apart from the slaves, I'm all alone in that big house.'

Jonathan's father nodded. 'Show me your tongue please, domina.'

Helena obligingly stuck out her tongue.

'Just turn towards the garden, the light's better there . . . Thank you. You can close your mouth now.'

Jonathan watched her with narrowed eyes.

'Well, Jonathan,' said his father, looking over at him. 'What do you think?'

'Me?' Jonathan was surprised. 'You want to know what I think?'

'I do. The patient's tongue and colour are fine. You heard her complaint. What's your opinion?'

'She probably has an excess of vicious humours.'

His father nodded. 'Treatment?'

'Bleed her,' said Jonathan with relish, and then added, 'and a tonic might help.'

'Which tonic?' asked Mordecai.

'Either *hydromel* or the special elixir.'

'Special elixir?' Helena's eyes lit up.

'I hadn't thought of that,' said Mordecai, reaching up to stroke his beard. Jonathan saw the look of surprise flash across his father's face as his hand encountered a beardless chin.

'Oh, Marcus!' cried Helena. 'You never told me there was a special elixir. I want it!'

'It's not cheap . . .' said Mordecai.

'I'll pay any price!'

'Very well. I'll prepare some as soon as we've bled you. I think I have most of the ingredients here . . . Jonathan, can you go to my cabinet upstairs and bring me some poppy-tears, turpentine and honey?'

‘Um . . . I don’t think there’s any honey left.’

His father turned, frowning. ‘What do you mean? Just last week one of my patients paid me with a large jar of the finest Hymettan honey.’

‘It’s gone.’

‘Already? But how?’

Jonathan hung his head. ‘I ate it.’

‘You ate it? You ate an entire jar of honey?’

Helena laughed her silvery laugh and this time Jonathan shot her a glare.

‘I just wanted a little taste,’ he said to his father. ‘And then I went back for another and . . . I’m sorry.’

Helena was still laughing and Mordecai tried not to smile. ‘Thank you for telling me,’ he said, ‘I appreciate your honesty. But honey isn’t just food: it’s medicine!’

‘I know,’ said Jonathan. He didn’t tell his father that food was the only thing that seemed to fill the empty ache inside him.

‘Did you devour the sugar, too?’ said his father dryly.

‘Sugar? What’s that?’

‘The sugar loaf is the large greyish-white cylinder in the medicine cabinet of the upstairs storeroom. Be careful, Jonathan, it’s extremely expensive and rare.’

‘I’ll get it,’ said Jonathan and a few moments later he carried an object as long as his forearm back into the atrium. It looked like a big marble pestle, so he was astonished to see his father take a scalpel and scrape a small amount of white powder from its surface onto a piece of papyrus.

‘Hold out your hands.’

Both Helena and Jonathan obligingly held out their

hands and Mordecai sprinkled a little powder into the palm of each.

‘Taste it,’ said Mordecai, with a smile.

‘Mmmm,’ said Jonathan.

‘It’s delicious!’ Helena giggled. She licked her small red lips and batted her eyelashes at Jonathan’s father. ‘Almost as sweet as you are, Marcus.’

‘Helena Aurelia. She’s the one to watch,’ growled Jonathan, as he and Lupus stepped through Flavia’s door into the atrium. It was shortly past dawn on the following day. ‘I’m sure she’s after father. She’s always – Great Jupiter’s eyebrows! What are those?’

‘Those are the death masks of my family ancestors.’ Flavia led the boys around the rainwater pool to the family shrine. The lararium was a wooden cupboard with a miniature temple on top. Usually the red and blue doors were shut but today they were wide open, revealing painted beeswax masks of men and women.

‘They look so real,’ said Jonathan with a shudder. He counted fourteen of them. Six on the central shelves and four hanging on the inside of each door.

Lupus was writing on his wax tablet:

DEATH MASKS?!

‘Yes,’ said Flavia quietly. ‘Whenever one of my family dies they make a mould of their face with plaster, then pour in beeswax and paint it. We bring them out during the festival of the Parentalia to show them reverence. And on the last day we go to the tombs.’