

GLADIATRIX

THE SUPREME WARRIOR



FRANCES HENDRY

GLADIATRIX

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藏书章

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Also in this trilogy. . .

Victoria

Victrix

From the author

I've invented only the characters of Victoria and her Amazon friends and servants. Julia Felix's house in Pompeii can still be visited; Caenis, Sabinus, Domitian, Acte and the Emperors themselves are as true to actuality as I can make them, given the small amount of evidence actually available; and all the details about events in the Year of the Four Emperors, as it was known even then, are correct as far as I can discover them. Apart from the last dinner of Vitellius, the downfall and death of Nero and the other Emperors are as they really happened, according to the reports available, though I've sometimes inserted Victoria and her friends instead of the people we are told were actually there. In especial, Nero's incredible actions, orders and threats to the Senate are all as they were reported – though of course after his death, by his enemies.

Romans of importance usually had a given name or names, then the name of their family, then of a branch within the main tribe, e.g. Titus Flavius Vespasianus – the man named Titus, of the Flavian family, and the Vespasian branch (his mother's; his older brother carried on the father's name, Sabinus). They could also add extra names to celebrate some

particular action or characteristic, or other members of the family, or adoptive parents, which sometimes led to very long names, e.g. Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus Britannicus – the Emperor Claudius. A freed slave took the name of his or her former owner, e.g. Antonia Caenis – Caenis, the freedwoman of Antonia. Victoria should actually be formally known as Glaevia Victoria Aegypta – Victoria, daughter of Aegyptus, former slave of Glaevius.

It was polite to call a person by the sub-family name, e.g. Vespasianus, or the family and last names, e.g. Julia Felix; only close friends would use the personal name of Titus or Julia. In fact, Julia Felix probably had another forename which has not been recorded, e.g. Portia Julia Felix, making 'Julia' her family name, one of the ancient Julian family, like Gaius Julius Caesar. However, for simplicity's sake I've stuck with what little we know about her from the villa where her mosaic portrait as a young woman adorned a wall.

The early 60s CE was a time of terrible brutality and decadence in Rome. Anyone who annoyed the Emperor, often merely by being too rich or too popular, could at any time receive a letter telling him to kill himself. If he refused, he would be charged with treason and executed anyway, after a show trial with paid witnesses and forged documents, and everything he owned would be confiscated so that his family was ruined. If he did kill himself, he could at least die with

honour and only a quarter of his wealth would go to the Emperor. To survive took cleverness, the ability to toady charmingly to your superiors, and a lot of luck; to try to change society, as Victoria and her friend Caenis did, took a special kind of lunacy.

I hope you enjoy reading about Victoria as much as I have enjoyed writing about her and her gladiatorial exploits.

Frances Mary Hendry

I

He was aiming at the horses! Hissing in fury, Victoria hauled on the reins and fought for balance as her tiny chariot skidded round in a tight juddering swerve. Sprayed with gravel and sand thrown up right over the barrier, the legionaries and their families, almost twenty thousand people, yelled in excitement. Instead of in the chest, the Roman's javelin struck low in the front of Thunder's right haunch. The pony screamed and bucked, jerking the chariot and almost throwing Victoria out. The wooden spear-shaft dropped off as it was designed to do, but the iron head with its tang as long as Victoria's forearm stuck, half crippling the pony.

Even while he agreed before the combat that the horses were not to be harmed, the legionary charioteer, short and pugnacious, had been sneering. Many conservative people – and the legions were definitely traditional-minded – were disgusted by women in the arena at all, especially if they fought seriously against men, rather than in comedy bouts with dwarves or other women. Besides, a lot of Romans thought that you didn't need to keep your word to either a barbarian or a woman. He – and they – would learn that that didn't pay!



The Fifth, Twelfth and Third Legions were garrisoned near Antioch, the third biggest city in the Empire, to fight the constant rebellions at the eastern end of the Mare Nostra. The evening before, they had laid on a lavish party for the Amazons' touring troupe of gladiatrices and their opponents; the traditional last dinner before games in which a gladiator might well die.

Victoria always took a sardonic pleasure in the awkwardness people had in dealing with her. Romans, even slaves, saw ordinary gladiators as scum, and gladiatrices as worse, but she was special; a rich champion, a celebrity all over the world, and a favourite of Emperor Nero himself. The hard-bitten centurions, career soldiers risen from the ranks, most in their second fifteen-year enlistment, would have welcomed her with bawdy gusto, as they did her comrades of the Amazons. Most of the young officers were noblemen serving three or four years with the army as a first step on the career path which they hoped would lead them to a consulship. They would be raffishly intrigued. But she'd never fit on the top couches with the legion commanders, the legates and their snobbish wives.

This lot had handled it quite well. The feast was set out on a wide ring of trestle tables on the parade ground, where next day an arena would be laid out with a wooden barrier and tiered benches, and the packed sandy gravel would be stained

with blood. The senior officers, the three legates and their tribunes, were in small groups of couches dotted round the circle of carpet-draped benches for almost two hundred centurions, their wives and guests. She was ushered round by a snooty young junior tribune, to pause, perch, eat and chat as she went.

Handy. No-one would realise what she was doing. Bored garrison officers would talk about her for months, she knew, so she chatted gently, spreading hints and scandal wherever she stopped, for them to discuss and develop in their own time.

Here – ‘Yes, my tattoos are British.’ She proudly smoothed the vivid patterns swirling over her scarred, hairless scalp. ‘Striking, eh? My father was a centurion there under Vespasian. Excellent officer, he said. But my mother was British, that’s why I have these, and this torc.’ She touched the ring of twisted gold round her neck. ‘I nearly died in the burning of Londinium during Boudicca’s rebellion, and the tribes killed my family.’ That was true, if not all the truth, and well known; and it established her on Rome’s side.

No-one here knew of her vivid memories of Queen Boudicca back in Britain, who had whispered as she died, ‘Destroy Rome. I lay it on you, a command from the gods. Destroy Rome . . .’ No-one would realise what Victoria was trying to do, not until she succeeded.

If she succeeded. If Bouda favoured her . . .

She moved on to the next group – ‘Where have we toured? You name it, we’ve been there!’

Her second-in-command, the retiarius Africa, being lavishly entertained by the Third’s centurions, added details. ‘North to Germania, both Gauls, south through Hispania, Lusitania, east all along the coast of Africa from Morocco to Egypt. Alexandria loved us!’ Her wide grin bright against her dark skin, she shimmied in triumph, sending the tiny bells on her deep-yellow fringes into a tinkling frenzy, to whistles and deep growls of approval. ‘Then we sailed here, north past Judaea. No, we didn’t stop there. Gladiators don’t like wars. Bad for business – people who are fighting don’t want to pay to watch us do it!’

‘The trouble there is far worse, isn’t it, since Corbulo died?’ Victoria asked innocently. Nero had ordered General Corbulo to commit suicide; she knew how much they had respected him. ‘Finest general in the empire, I heard! A cursed shame!’ They growled agreement. ‘But the Emperor is jealous of noble, popular people, especially generals. And scared. He thinks they’re a threat, could rebel. Might be right! Nobody’s safe nowadays!’ This last comment could be taken more ways than one. Some laughed; others scowled; good.

Don’t lose sight of the main point. ‘But General Vespasian seems to be doing well. His troops think he’s the best since Romulus. We’re off to Ephesus next, and then to Moesia, up on the Danube north of Greece. You’re heading that way soon,

aren't you? We'll maybe travel up with you. So you can see more of Africa here!' She grinned down at the tall black girl, gorgeous, exotic and always popular, chuckled at the soldiers' enthusiastic whistles and comments, and moved on.

To the next group – 'Yes, the Domus Aurea is finished. Tinsel Towers, they call it, or ruder things that I'm too ladylike to mention in polite company!' They roared with laughter, and added some of the other names for the palace. 'Yes, you've heard about it. You'd not believe how enormous! Covers half of Rome. Most of what he burnt – sorry, what those Jews burnt!' Everybody thought that Nero himself had set the blaze to clear space for his new home. She knew he hadn't started it – not the first day, anyway. But the belief was very useful.

'He's levied hefty fire taxes to pay for the rebuilding – doesn't make him popular! Emptied the treasury, desperate for money. Tells his judges, "You know what I want!" So everybody's found guilty, and fines are crippling. Did you hear, he sent out a freedman to sell some of his royal purple dye in the market – you know, the one only *he's* allowed to use? And when a stupid woman bought and used it, he prosecuted her, guilty of course, confiscated everything she had, left her family flat-broke and had her stripped there and then, left her naked in the court.' Her audience laughed, but sourly. 'He even spent on his new little cottage all the money that should have bought the grain for the free rations for the city; the Praetorians have been busy as bees in a beanfield putting down food riots. Nero

says, "Now at last I can live like a human being!" What does he think the rest of us are, eh?" The laughter was even sourer.

'Oh – and I hear Rome's to be renamed. Guess what? Neropolis.' Shrugging, smiling, she left disgusted snarls behind her and moved on.

At her next stop – 'He's just gone home, after his jaunt through Greece to take part in all their little games.' This group sneered. Actors and public entertainers were almost as despised as gladiators; for an emperor to perform in public was disgusting, degraded all Romans. She looked snootily at them, imitating the Emperor – risky, but worth it. ' "The Greeks alone are worthy of my efforts!" ' Romans looked down on Greeks; their faces stiffened. 'He took five thousand paid applauders with him. And had all the dates moved to fit his trip, even the Olympics. Won every wreath for singing and poetry. Two thousand, I hear. Well, who'd dare vote against him?'

'And all the prizes for chariot driving.' The *primus pilus*, second in authority only to the legate himself, sniffed in contempt. 'Even for the Olympic ten-horse race, though he fell out and never finished.' Someone actually spat.

Further round, the legate of the Twelfth was discussing the rebellion in Judaea. 'Need to sort out these revolting people!' Everybody laughed, rather to his surprise. 'Eh? Oh – a joke, yes . . . But the new governor, General Vespasian, seems competent.'

Handy that he brought it up himself. 'My father fought under Vespasian, said he was exceptionally good. You know why he was sent here?' Victoria asked. 'The real story?'

The officers looked intrigued. 'Useful reputation, but a provincial nobody, no famous ancestors, no political clout. No threat,' the legate suggested.

'Not like Corbulo, no. Right. But Nero took Vespasian among his courtiers on his tour of Greece. Now, you know anybody caught leaving one of Nero's performances can be executed.'

'People pretend to be ill, or even to die, to get away,' someone commented.

'Or have babies! Yes, one woman actually did! Bad timing – or good, eh? Well, Vespasian fell asleep during a performance. Tactless! Had to run for his life!' The soldiers guffawed. Victoria chortled with them. 'So I think Nero sent him here to punish him, hoping he'd fail. Never mind what happens to the poor soldiers, eh? But maybe I'm wrong, or maybe the Emperor is. Maybe he sent the right man. Vespasian isn't the failing kind.'

The senior tribune pursed his lips. 'Have you heard? An ox ploughing in a field near Vespasian's house broke away and fell to its knees before him!'

Though she knew the story, Victoria gasped as if awed. 'That's an omen of imperial power, isn't it? Whoo! I've heard of others, too, but he keeps them quiet, it's dangerous to talk about them. And last month, lightning wrecked the statues of

the Emperors in the Temple of the Caesars. Not a good sign for Nero, eh?’ Someone whistled in wonder. Superstitious lot, these Romans! She put a finger to her lips. ‘Ssh!’ Another seed for thought . . .

Most of the tribunes, sons of senators or equites who had heard political talk all their lives, appreciated her scandalous backstairs stories about the greedy, incompetent palace hangers-on; no those who actually ran the Empire while Nero was swanning round enjoying himself. ‘Who else could do it, then?’ she asked casually after a while. ‘Governor Mucianus in Syria here? Couldn’t run a booze-up in a brewery? Oh, Mars! Who, then? An army man, trained and experienced?’

They dismissed several governors, ex-consuls and generals with slanderous tales of their ineptitude or corruption, till someone eventually mentioned Vespasian. ‘Now there’s a real possibility,’ she observed. ‘My father served under him in the invasion of Britain, said he was honest, hard-working, efficient – the best officer he ever knew. His older brother Sabinus is Rome’s Urban Prefect, running the place so well they won’t let him retire. His older son Titus is in Judaea with him, and did well in Germania and Britain, I’m told. The younger one, Domitian, is about seventeen. At least there would be an heir. After Nero, who is there? He’s murdered all – oops, can’t say that! I mean there’s none of the imperial family left. Even his stepson, Poppaea’s boy – you know, the empress he kicked to death – oh, can’t say that either, even if I was there when he

did it. The Empress who died. The lad was playing emperor with his pals in the garden. Treason! Off to the strangler! Nine years old.' The officers looked disgusted, not surprised.

'The last of the Caesar family was Antonia, the sister of Nero's first wife, Octavia – you remember, the one he accused of treason and had executed?' They remembered; it had been a shocking scandal. 'He wanted Antonia to marry him – after killing her sister! She refused, so he accused her of treason too. Goodbye, Antonia!' Someone spat. Victoria shrugged. 'He's married someone else now – can't remember her name, she keeps out of sight as far as she can, sensible woman. But no children. Scarcely surprising, considering the Emperor's Greek habits. You've heard he's mad about a pretty slave boy? Sporus, the image of Poppaea, I'm told. Nero had him made a eunuch and dresses him like her; they say he's even gone through a marriage ceremony with the lad.' Jaws dropped and lips tightened. Enough spice in that pudding . . . 'So the Senate would have to pick somebody – or more likely the army, like when the Praetorians killed Caligula and made old Claudius Emperor.' Another seed . . .

Then an interruption. A man came running. 'Victrix, imperial messenger just arrived. Letter for you from the Emperor!'

The Twelfth's officers were all agog, ears flapping. A personal letter from Nero!

Victoria controlled the hippopotamuses suddenly