

THE ROMAN MYSTERIES



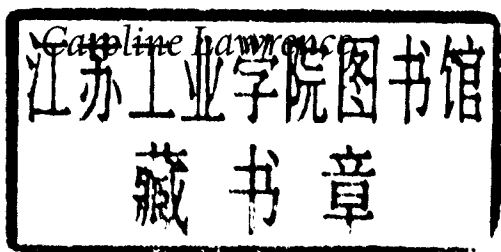
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THE GLADIATORS FROM CAPUA



— A Roman Mystery —

THE GLADIATORS FROM CAPUA



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SCROLL I

The young gladiator stands on the hot sand and presses the blade of his dagger against his opponent's throat. The secutor is kneeling. His left arm hangs uselessly by his side, broken. His right arm is red, coated with blood from the three-pronged puncture of a trident. The net that brought him down still entangles his feet and behind the small holes of the helmet his eyes roll on terror.

This will be the retiarius's first kill.

Severus the lanista stands nearby. He is watching carefully.

'My men were performing for Nero once,' he says, in a conversational tone. 'One of them, a murmillio, couldn't cut his opponent's throat, although the Emperor demanded it. It was his first kill and he couldn't do it. Nero was so angry that he threw my men to the beasts. All of them. Thirty-two trained gladiators, including Pulcher, only one fight away from winning the wooden sword and his freedom. That,' says Severus, 'is why I always make sure my men can kill before I send them into the arena.'

The retiarius nods, takes a deep breath and shifts the dagger, but he still does not pull it across. From behind the helmet comes a muffled sound. The secutor is whimpering like a wounded animal.

At this moment the retiarius remembers the first time he killed a living creature. The new bow and arrow had been a present for his eighth birthday. He had gone hunting with his

father and had shot a young badger. But it hadn't died immediately. It had run in circles – bleeding on the ground in front of him, whimpering pathetically. The retiarius recalls the horror he felt at having caused a living creature such pain and how he wanted to cradle it in his hands and nurse it back to health. 'Father, make it stop. Please make it stop.'

'Crybaby!' The slap had been enough to make his ears ring for hours. But from that day, his father let him tend the goats and never made him hunt again.

Not many years later the Romans came. Some members of his family were killed. Others were sold as slaves.

And he ended up here.

'Being a gladiator is your best chance at freedom,' Severus is saying. 'Freedom with fame and riches. You're good. You could do it. But you can't be a gladiator unless you can kill.'

The retiarius looks down at the knife in his hand. All he has to do is pull it across the throbbing neck. One swift motion.

'Kill him! Kill him!' chant his fellow-gladiators, some encouraging, some jeering.

Severus speaks again and his voice is no longer calm. 'For Jupiter's sake, just do it, man! I've left his helmet on. You don't even have to look him in the face. If you don't kill him, then I swear I'll sell you to the first person who bids for you.'

But the secutor is still whimpering like a wounded animal. The young retiarius shakes his head and tosses his dagger away. His knees crack as he stands up.

'Don't like killing things,' he says. 'Hate blood.'

The man on his knees sobs with relief.

'You idiot!' shouts Severus. 'You're throwing away a glorious future! By all the gods, you're an utter blockhead!'

'I'd rather be a blockhead than a killer,' says the retiarius slowly.

And he walks out of the arena.

Outside the town walls of Ostia, a dark-skinned girl named Nubia laid a wreath of spring wildflowers on the tomb of her friend Jonathan.

It was not a proper tomb because there was no body. Jonathan had died in the terrible fire in Rome a month before and his body was buried in a mass grave with hundreds of others.

Back home in Ostia, the port of Rome, Jonathan's father had paid a stonemason to inscribe Jonathan's name on the family tomb. But it was with other Jewish tombs on the Isola Sacra, almost three miles away.

Nubia and her friends wanted Jonathan's memorial to be closer.

That was why they had crept out one moonlit night to take a disused marble block from beside Ostia's synagogue. The sun was rising by the time they eased the heavy stone off the borrowed handcart.

Now – a week later – Nubia studied the inscription which Flavia had painted on the side of the cracked cube of marble:

D M
IONATANO B. MORDECAE
FLAVIA ET NVBIA ET LVPVS
AMICI AMICO BENE MERENTI
POSVERVNT

Although it was a bright March morning, Nubia shivered and pulled her lionskin cloak closer round her shoulders. She knew DM stood for *dis manibus*: 'to the spirits of the underworld'. The rest meant: 'To Jonathan, son of Mordecai. His friends Flavia, Nubia and Lupus set this up for him, their well-deserving friend.'

There was also a portrait on the tomb, painted by Lupus, who had disappeared shortly afterwards. It wasn't unusual for Lupus to go missing. What was unusual was that a week had passed and he still hadn't returned.

Nubia pushed away her worries about Lupus and focused on the portrait of Jonathan.

It showed a good-looking boy with a square face, olive skin and curly black hair. Lupus had dabbed a tiny dot of white paint on each of the dark eyes to make them really look alive. They really seemed to look straight back at Nubia.

'It's time to say the eulogy,' said Flavia Gemina, and she unrolled a piece of papyrus.

Nubia looked at her former mistress and waited. Flavia was almost eleven years old, with light brown hair and grey eyes. She was not beautiful, but her personality made people forget that. At her best, Flavia was brilliant, confident, and brave. At her worst she was bossy, impetuous and selfish. But she was also kind-hearted. She had bought Nubia to save her from a fate worse than death, then set her free within months.

'Jonathan ben Mordecai,' Flavia began to read in her clear voice, 'was our friend. He was funny and he liked honey. He had asthma and he knew all the psalms by heart. He was good at hunting and very brave and once

he saved me from a pack of wild dogs that had me trapped up a tree.' Flavia gestured dramatically with her left arm. 'It was that very oak at the edge of this grove.' She looked at Nubia and the three dogs who sat panting quietly at their feet. 'I thought it fitting that his tomb should lie within sight of that tree: one of his great heroic moments.'

Nubia nodded solemnly and Flavia's dog Scuto thumped his tail.

'On the one hand,' continued Flavia, returning to her scroll, 'Jonathan was a realist. He saw the dark side of life and sometimes it depressed him. But on the other hand, he was very positive. When he discovered that his mother might not have died in the siege of Jerusalem, and that she might be a slave in the Imperial Palace, he bravely went to Rome to search for her. And he succeeded. He found her and he saved her. But he never saw the fruits of his bravery ...'

There was a pause and Nubia saw tears welling in her friend's eyes.

'You never saw what you dreamed of,' Flavia whispered to the portrait on the marble block. 'You never knew the joy of seeing your father and your mother reunited. And, oh Jonathan! You should have seen it when Miriam and your mother fell into each other's arms and they wept and laughed and wept again and went into the garden and talked for hours and hours. And it would all be so perfect if only you hadn't died ...' Flavia's voice was caught by a sob.

Presently she mastered her emotions. 'Now,' she intoned, 'we have come to say goodbye to you, Jonathan. Your father and mother aren't here, because they don't

know about this tomb. And Miriam has gone back home. And Lupus disappeared last week; we don't know why. But Nubia and I have come to say farewell.'

'Also the dogs,' said Nubia.

'Also the dogs,' said Flavia, and added: 'Nubia will go first.'

Nubia shook her head. 'Tigris will go first. He has told me what to say ...'

Flavia's grey eyes opened in surprise, but she only nodded.

Nubia looked down at Tigris and put her hand lightly on his head. The big black puppy looked up at her, panting quietly, then looked back towards the little tomb.

Presently Nubia spoke.

'Where are you, master?' said Nubia quietly. 'You told me to stay and to be good dog and I have tried. I am not chewing your father's favourite boot any more. I am not stealing food from the kitchen any more. I am always doing latrine in the garden and not in the study now. So why do you not come?' Nubia took a deep breath and continued. 'Every day I am sitting in the atrium waiting for you with my head on my paws. Whenever I hear someone coming down the street I am putting my ears up to listen very much. But I do not do barking because it is never your footsteps. You are not coming and I miss you. And I am always wondering: Do you not come home because I was a bad dog?'

'Oh Tigris!' cried Flavia. She fell on her knees before the big puppy and threw her arms round his neck. 'It wasn't your fault, Tigris! Jonathan loved you more than anything in the world. You're a good dog.'

Tigris gave a tentative wag of his tail, then whined and

gazed at the tomb.

Presently Flavia stood up and wiped her cheeks with her hand. 'Your turn, now, Nubia,' she said at last.

'Dear Jonathan,' said Nubia to the tomb, 'it is me Nubia speaking to you. I hope you are happy in your paradise which you told me once is like the Land of Green. Thank you for being kind to me when I first came here to Ostia. Thank you for teaching me Latin by reading to me the *Aeneid*. Thank you for making me laugh. I will miss you every day of my life, Jonathon ben Mordecai. Farewell. She bowed her head for a moment and then nodded at Flavia.

Flavia looked down at her sheet of papyrus. For a moment she stared at the words there. Then she rolled it up and slid it into the cord belt of her tunic.

'Jonathan,' she whispered. 'I can't believe you're really dead. I wish we had never gone to Rome. It was my fault. I wanted to solve the Emperor's mystery. The prophecy: "When a Prometheus opens a Pandora's box, Rome will be devastated ..." I thought the prophecy was about the plague getting worse. I should have known it would be about a fire, because Prometheus brought fire down to mankind. And if I'd realised there was going to be a fire maybe you wouldn't have died in it. And maybe you bravely died trying to stop Prometheus but we'll never know because now you're gone and the last time I saw you we argued and I'm so, so sorry. It's my fault you're dead ... I'm sorry Jonathan ...' Flavia sank down before the tomb and laid her head on it. She was weeping. Nubia moved forward, crouched down and put an arm round her friend's shoulders. Her own cheeks were wet, too. All three dogs whined, and Scuto placed a comforting paw on Flavia's arm.

Presently Nubia stood again and took her flute out from beneath her tunic. It always hung on a cord round her neck, close to her heart. As she began to play, the three dogs stopped whining and settled down, resting their chins on their paws.

Each of the holes on Nubia's flute represented a member of her family: the family she had lost the night the slave-traders came.

There was no hole for Jonathan so she made the song his. It was a slow song, and sad. She played it softly with the deepest notes. In her mind she called it 'Lament for Jonathan'. She played the dark green woods on a summer's day, and Jonathan hunting for something he had lost. The notes dripped like warm honey from her flute and, like Flavia, she wept.

Suddenly Nipur barked and the spell was broken. Nubia turned and gasped.

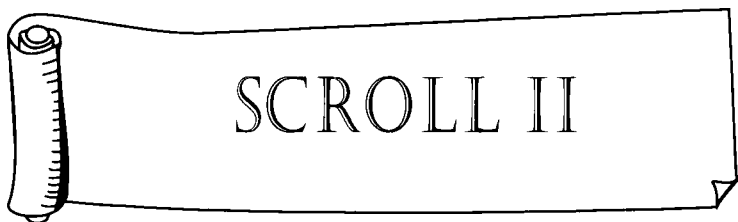
A dark-haired boy in a nutmeg-coloured tunic had emerged from the umbrella pines. He was jogging towards them, waving a wax tablet.

'Lupus!' Nubia cried. 'Where have you been?'

Scuto and Nipur bounded towards the boy – barking and wagging – and then romped back around him. A moment later Lupus stood before them, breathing hard.

Because Lupus had no tongue he relied heavily on his wax tablet. He was waving this triumphantly and it wasn't until Flavia caught his wrist and held it steady that Nubia was able to read the words etched in the wax:

JONATHAN IS NOT DEAD.
HE IS ALIVE!



‘Lupus!’ cried Flavia angrily. ‘If this is some kind of joke –’

Flavia felt Nubia’s fingers dig into her arm and glanced at her friend.

‘He is not joking,’ said Nubia. ‘Behold into his eyes.’

Flavia looked back at Lupus. A look of wild hope burned in his eyes.

‘Jonathan’s alive?’ said Flavia.

Lupus nodded. He was wearing one of Jonathan’s old brown tunics. Its size and colour made him look small and pale.

‘Are you sure?’

The boy’s sea-green eyes flickered and he looked away. Then he wrote on his tablet:

ALMOST POSITIVE

I HEARD SOLDIERS TALKING

‘Where?’ cried Flavia. ‘Have you been to Rome?’

Lupus pointed at the ground impatiently, as if to say: Here in Ostia. Then he continued writing, his bronze stylus making sticky noises as he urgently pushed it through the soft beeswax:

THEY SAY A BOY WITH DARK CURLY HAIR

STARTED THE FIRE IN ROME
AND THAT HE IS HIDING
ON POTSHERD MOUNTAIN

‘What is potsherd?’ asked Nubia.

‘Potsherds are broken bits of clay pots and amphoras,’ said Flavia, and frowned. ‘I’ve never heard of any Potsherd Mountain. Where is it, Lupus?’

Lupus shrugged and wrote:

SOMEWHERE IN ROME?

‘So you don’t really know that Jonathan’s alive,’ said Flavia carefully. ‘You’ve heard a rumour about a boy with dark, curly hair and you just hope it might be Jonathan, even though we saw the charred rings taken from his body.’

Lupus hung his head and nodded.

‘Lupus,’ said Nubia softly. ‘Where have you been? We have been most worried about you.’

Lupus shrugged and looked away.

‘Jonathan’s father and mother put up a wooden plaque in the forum,’ said Flavia, ‘asking if anyone had seen a nine-year-old mute boy with dark hair and green eyes. That’s you. And they even paid a signwriter to paint a big notice on the outside of their house.’

Lupus stared at her. For a moment interest flickered in his eyes. Then he shrugged.

THEY DON’T REALLY WANT ME he wrote

I’M NOT THEIR SON

‘You are maybe not being their son,’ said Nubia fiercely, ‘but you are like brother to me and Flavia. Do not ever run away again without telling us where you go! That is overweening!’

Lupus and Flavia stared at Nubia in amazement. She had her hands on her hips and her golden eyes were blazing.

Lupus nodded meekly and gave her a sheepish grin. Flavia laughed and Nubia hugged Lupus. He submitted for a brief moment, then squirmed away.

‘Come on,’ said Flavia, giving Lupus a quick pat on the back. ‘Let’s go back home. You have to tell Jonathan’s parents you’re safe. You can move in with us, if you really think they don’t want you, but you must apologise to them. It’s hard enough for them as it is, having lost their only son.’

Lupus nodded.

Flavia took a deep breath. ‘And let’s forget this nonsense about Jonathan still being alive,’ she said. ‘He’s dead, and nothing will ever bring him back.’

‘Lupus,’ said Jonathan’s father in his accented voice. ‘I know that now Jonathan is ... gone ... you believe that there is nothing to keep you here. But you are wrong. From the first evening you shared bread and salt with us, you have been under the protection of this household. Also, you have become very dear to me. I want you to stay here.’

Lupus lifted his gaze and studied Doctor Mordecai ben Ezra. Jonathan’s father was a tall man, with grey-streaked hair and a sharp nose. Although grief had etched new lines in his face, his dark eyes were warm.

‘I want you to stay very much,’ repeated Mordecai, ‘and so does Jonathan’s mother.’

Lupus glanced shyly at the beautiful woman sitting next to Mordecai on the striped divan. But Jonathan’s mother was not looking at either of them. She was gazing sadly out through the wide study doorway, into the inner garden.

Lupus felt an almost physical blow to his heart. She obviously didn’t care about him.

Mordecai must have seen the expression on his face, because he said sharply, ‘Susannah.’

‘Yes, my husband?’ She turned to Mordecai.

‘Tell Lupus what we discussed. That we both want him to stay. To live here with us.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Susannah. She focused on Lupus and smiled at him. ‘We want you to stay.’

She was very beautiful, and there was kindness in her gaze, but now Lupus was certain that she did not really want him. Anguish flooded his being. He didn’t matter to her. It took all his self-control to stop sobbing out loud.

Then the anger welled up in his chest.

He didn’t need her. He had a mother. A mother who loved him, who really loved him. And as soon as the sailing season began he would take his ship – HIS ship, not anyone else’s – and he would sail back to his own mother and he would never, ever come back to this place.

He lowered his head so that they would not see the emotion he knew must be visible in his eyes and he opened his wax tablet and began to write.

His hand was trembling. They must not know how he felt or they would make him stay and pretend to con-

vince him that they wanted him. And that would be unbearable. So in order to stop his hand shaking, he bit his lip hard.

THANK YOU

he wrote

BUT I THINK I WILL
STAY WITH FLAVIA
FOR A WHILE

He handed the tablet to Mordecai and tried to smile and stood and went into the inner garden and took the leash from its peg and jingled it to summon Tigris for his walk. Somehow he managed to open the back door with trembling hands and to follow Jonathan's dog out into the graveyard.

And when he was finally deep in Diana's grove, Lupus opened his tongueless mouth and howled.

Flavia couldn't sleep.

She stared up at the slanting roof beams and the shadows between them, cast by the steady flame of a tiny bronze oil lamp on her bedside table.

Lupus had come to them late in the afternoon, carrying his few belongings in Jonathan's old leather satchel. They had welcomed him with his favourite dinner of oysters and hardboiled quails' eggs, and later they had made up a bed for him in Aristo's room.

Flavia was worried about Lupus, but the main thing keeping her from sleep was the rumour he had passed on

earlier that day. The rumour that a boy with dark, curly hair had started the fire in Rome. And that he was still alive.

She had heard the rumour about the curly-haired boy before. Last month. From the Emperor's astrologer. It was ridiculous that Jonathan could have started the fire, but was there any chance at all that he could still be alive? She rolled onto her right side and considered the possibilities.

They had not seen his actual body, but they had seen his rings, taken from a badly charred corpse. But what if the rings had not come from Jonathan's body? What if he had given all his rings to someone else? Perhaps to get money to buy food? Or for the fare home to Ostia? And then that person had died in the fire?

But no. The man who had given Lupus the rings – a priest from the sanctuary – had said they were taken from a boy's body. It was very unlikely that a boy would have enough money to pay for the rings. An adult, yes. But not a boy of eleven or twelve.

Flavia rolled onto her left side and wormed her feet under Scuto's warm body.

And yet ...

They had never actually *seen* the body.

And what if the priest had been lying? What if Jonathan was still alive in Rome, hiding for some reason? Or being kept as a prisoner?

No, no, no. It was ridiculous.

There was no way Jonathan could still be alive. It was just wishful thinking.

Flavia turned to lie on her back again.

'Nubia?' she said very softly. 'Are you awake?'