


ROMA
Amor



A NOVEL OF CALIGULA'S ROME

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HOSTAGE

At first the girl was less trouble than I expected. A glance back along the column showed me her coppery hair flashing now and then amid the mouse-colored cloaks of her warriors. At night she vanished silently into a tent with her women. Of course I posted a watch, even amid the placid fields and vineyards of Umbria, but she seemed resigned to captivity. The most bother I had was obtaining fresh meat every day for her and her little band of carnivores.

It was something of a letdown. After spitting murder on the battlefield, to have grown so tame! But such is the nature of barbarians: quick to violent emotion, lacking the self-control in which we Romans are trained.

“You look pleased with yourself, Tribune,” said the centurion riding beside me. “A triumphal return, eh? Hostage and all.”

He had put on his medals today, seven of them gleaming on the harness strapped across his chain mail. The legionaries had taken the covers off their wing-blazoned shields, and the cavalry horses sported amulets, ribbons, and gaudy tufts of wool on their manes and bridles. I wore my crested helmet and embossed breastplate, polished mirror-bright.

“Ready to parade before Caligula himself,” I agreed.

“Gods grant him long life.” The centurion slapped at a mosquito.

After days of rain the sun shone wanly, a luminous coin in a hazy sky. Crows jeered at the troops striding by, trailed by pack mules and baggage wagons. Muddy-legged slaves looked up from hoeing a field. Boys chased along, shrilling for a view of the soldiers’ swords. The October air smelled of wet pines and trampled leaves, turned earth and wood smoke.

My horse broke into a trot, sensing the journey’s end. It was little more than a mile now to the Villa Publica, where I would relinquish my hostage and

escort, hand in the dispatches I carried, strip off arms and armor, and reenter the sacred precinct of Rome as a private citizen.

I turned, splashing through puddles in the wheel-worn slabs of stone, and rode back past soldiers and troopers to the Germanic ponies. As usual, the six Marcomanni warriors gathered protectively around their young priestess. As usual, I tried to ignore her immodesty. Although her long skirts were decorous enough, seeing a girl astride a horse was still unsettling.

“We will reach the Field of Mars soon,” I told her uncle Maelo, head of the tribespeople escorting her. He was a big hard-muscled man, with a thornbush of a beard and long tangled hair that a topknot kept out of his eyes. “Someone from the Palace will take charge of you there.”

He was glowering at tombs under the trees. “In little houses of stone, how can spirits go to the gods?”

The girl spoke up. “That is why Romans keep them there,” she said in more fluent Latin. “To scare away enemies like us.” She stared haughtily at me.

“Aurima.” Maelo switched into their own language, which sounds like a dog growling. My own knowledge of Germanic was too scanty to be sure, but I guessed he was telling her to stay quiet.

I said, “We Romans honor the spirits of our dead, priestess, and pray they will watch over the family.”

Her uncle translated for the others. They shifted in their saddles, averting their eyes from the sepulchers on either side of the road.

I looked down at her from the back of my roan stallion, which stood a good two hands taller than her pony. Aurima wore her best for our arrival in Rome: silver banded her brow and swirled up her wrist. Her eyes were the pale green of *aminea* grapes, her sunburned nose as straight as a blade, her mouth wide but wintry. With her chin raised, the strong cheekbones and bold jaw betrayed her savage breeding. It was far too willful a face to ever be thought comely.

She turned away, her braid brushing the fallen hood of her blue cloak. I imagined for a moment that thick plait undone, her hair cascading in gleaming copper ripples down her bare shoulders. . . .

Forget it, Carinna; she is not for you. In an hour—possibly two, allowing for administrative delays—I would be riding up to the doors of my family’s house. No, I would stop first at the Spartan Baths for a sweat and a good

scraping. And a girl, some agreeable wench who did not smell like a wet horse.

I was turning back toward the head of the column when Maelo said, “What is it?”

Aurima sat up stiffly on her pony, her eyes fixed on a pilastered rotunda half hidden in a grove of cypress. She drew an amber pendant from under her tunic and called out a long phrase in a loud strained voice: an incantation against wayward spirits.

Dead leaves plastered the bronze doors of the tomb behind the cypresses, doors so black with age that they seemed to stand open on darkness. I had shut and locked them myself three years earlier, after a last prayer in front of a shiny new urn. Among the epitaphs of our distinguished ancestors, the inscription above its alcove had been pitifully short: *Publius Licinius Carinna, son of Titus, grandson of Titus, whose life fell short of the honors to which his valor would have entitled him. Died at the age of twenty-two years.* The same age I was now.

The girl could not possibly know that. Until now, she had never been more than a few days’ ride from the Danube. So the reason for her nervousness must be simpler: something in my demeanor, a gesture or glance of which I was unaware, had drawn her attention to my family’s mausoleum on the Hill of Small Gardens.

A crow screeched from the tomb’s conical roof. And a voice in my ear whispered: *Your turn, little brother.*

I whipped my head around so quickly that my helmet crest tugged at its lashings. No one was near enough to have spoken so softly to me.

Little brother . . . ?

By Mithras’s Dog! What made me imagine ghostly whispers from a dead man? The Lord of Light had long since judged whether the good my brother had done in life outweighed the evil. His spirit was in paradise or hell, not here.

The Marcomanni rode past. Aurima turned and eyed me, clutching her amber talisman. “Mithras guard me,” I muttered, and leaning over my horse’s shoulder spat on the ground.

As I moved along the ranks, soldiers who had never seen any place larger than a legion camp yelled out, half joking: Would there really be black-skinned Pygmies? Camelopards as tall as a house? Sea battles in a giant pool? Hermaphrodites?

I laughed. They would find it all, I assured them, everything they could imagine, in Rome.



The Field of Mars had changed.

The firetrap tenements and ramshackle hovels were gone that had infested this great expanse, clasped in the looping Tiber. The pigs and dogs and fowl scratching in scabby patches of grass, the rags of women's and babies' wash drooping over dusty rows of turnip and cabbage, the scutter and clamor and stink of an impoverished, flea-bitten rabble: all vanished. Now graveled promenades bordered with surprisingly large new trees linked monuments that had once been all but hidden. Beyond the tall Egyptian obelisk that shows the time on sunny days, the gilded statue of Augustus atop his huge round mausoleum pointed to temples and theaters and shopping arcades nearer the city walls. A hedge of dark glossy laurels ringed the massive altar where his successor Tiberius would have been cremated in April.

In spite of my feelings about Caligula, I was impressed. In just six months, he had done more to ennoble Rome than Tiberius had in twenty years. There was new construction, too; near the arcade of the Saepta Julia I could see the boom of a crane and the arc of its circular treadmill. My heart lifted with excitement, and the memory of the whisper I might have heard slipped away.

We topped a rise. And before us, at last, was the great city.

The centurion drew in his breath. "So this is Rome," he said.

Though he tried to sound unmoved, his mouth went slack as he stared at the hillocky jumble of brown-tiled roofs and treetops that sprawled into the far distance. Threads of smoke meandered upward from all over the city, mingling in a dun smudge. Behind the tall arches of the Aqua Virgo that bestrode the highway, the red columns of the Temple of Jupiter loomed over the city wall.

I could barely keep my smile from broadening into a grin. The stallion caught my mood and pranced a few paces.

Then the rhythm of the moving column changed. Not the cavalry, who were still in formation with tassels tossing, nor the legionaries, craning for

a sight of the metropolis. The cursed Marcomanni had stopped dead in the road.

The centurion's whistle shrilled over the rumble of wheels, hooves, and nailed boots. The cavalry commander raised his hand. Wagon drivers hooted to their mules and hauled on the reins.

"Bowels of Tiwaz," Maelo exploded. "There my sister's daughter must live?"

Spittle streaked his russet beard, reminding me unpleasantly of slugs in bracken. "Keep going," I said. "We are nearly there."

Maelo's half-grown son gabbled something in Germanic. His voice broke into a boyish squeak, and soldiers snickered. Maelo interrupted the youth's rant: "She must live far away." He pointed north. "With many trees."

"Impossible," I said. "Hostages may not leave the sacred boundary of Rome."

The other Marcomanni grumbled when he relayed this. Hands went to knife hilts. From behind me came an answering rustle of hooves and clink of troopers' sword belts. Blast it! In a few more minutes I would have brought in an orderly, smart-looking vexillation to the Villa Publica.

I lifted a hand for calm. "Caesar will give Aurima a pleasant place to live." Since she was officially his ward, this was probably true.

The girl blurted out, "I refuse."

"You have no choice," I snapped. Coming from a land of dangerous beasts, trackless forests, and impassable bogs aswarm with biting insects, how could she object to living in a civilized place?

I tried for more tact. "Once you learn our ways, you and your people will appreciate the peace Rome offers." It sounded pompous, but I believed it.

Her eyes flared. She shook her head so vehemently that her braid twitched like a cat's tail.

Could this be the same girl who had dared to charge a Roman cohort with an ax? Possibly it was the time of the month when a woman's uterus wanders. Hysteria, the quacks call it.

In any case, if this journey was to finish with credit to me, I had to put an end to her balking. I reached for her reins. "You promised to obey. Come along."

Aurima wrenched her pony's head around. But there was no escape the way we had come; the wagons and their dismounted occupants blocked the width of the Via Flaminia.

Maelo's son jumped his mount over the roadside ditch toward the gardens of Sallustius, yelling to her to follow. Mithras knew where he meant to go, but in the event he went nowhere. His pony's forefeet sank into rain-softened earth and it pitched rump over nose. Hurling free, the boy floundered in the mud. Too bad he had not broken his fool neck.

Aurima swung her mount the other way, onto the Field of Mars. After a moment of shock Maelo and the four other warriors kicked their own ponies and scrambled off the road on her heels, yipping wildly.

I shouted to the cavalry commander. His squadron thundered after the fugitives, ribbons and banners flying.

Why had I thought a barbarian would keep her word? Treachery was in her blood. If her god-cursed father had had any honor to begin with, he would not have had to secure a truce with his daughter's life.

Spray billowed from the sodden turf as Aurima and her band raced toward the tree-edged Tiber behind Augustus's grand mausoleum. Finding no bridge, they would be caught and forced to surrender . . . if Fortuna was kind.

The Marcomanni women shrieked like Harpies. Legionaries bellowed madly, as if watching teams race in the Circus. They would be betting on the outcome. Betting on or against my disgrace.

My fingers tightened on the reins as I sat watching from the road embankment, but I tried to look unperturbed. Tribunes do not chase after runaways.

The fugitives galloped past the southern curve of the mausoleum and disappeared behind it. Gulls flurried up, squealing, over the statue on the dome.

With horror I watched Scapula's troopers veer around the north side of the tomb to intercept them. "No," I said under my breath. Fishermen commonly spread out their nets to dry on the shrubs between river and mausoleum. The treacherous meshes would be as impassable as quicksand. I pushed myself up in the saddle for a better view.

Serpent take it! Back came the cavalry in a spatter of wet grass and gravel, forced to circle the long way around Augustus's tomb.

The nets had also barred the fugitives' escape northward. They burst out from behind the mausoleum, dashing south along the Tiber. If they followed the riverbank all the way to the Agrippan Bridge and escaped across the Tiber into the countryside, it would take a vast and humiliating effort to catch them.

I unlaced the chinstrap of my helmet and slung it to a mule driver. My eager stallion hardly needed a signal to bound off the causeway. Mud geysered up as he stretched into a gallop.

There was no hope of dignity; I strove only to keep from falling off. My bronze breastplate rubbed up and down with the horse's strides, digging into my armpits, gouging my throat. Jolting in the four-horned saddle, I cursed the Marcomanni, then Scapula, then my own thoughtlessness. Parade armor is designed for formal displays, not cross-country chases.

Birds racketed out of the trees. Home-going workmen yelped and leaped aside. Paths became pavement; groves gave way to colonnades and shrines and the partly rebuilt arches of the Theater of Pompeius. Blinking away wind-tears, I reined in by the flooded foundation pit of a construction site. My shortcut should have put me ahead of the fugitives, but instead of hoofbeats I heard the growl of the Tiber, swollen with rain, rushing down to Ostia and the sea.

I had to stop them before they arrived at the bridgehead. Or else . . .

The consequences swarmed around me. Bringing more shame on our already disgraced family. Betraying the man I had made of myself during three years on the frontier. And once more justifying my father's contempt.

I halted again at the Agrippan Bridge. Empty carts rattled over the span, bound for the Vatican fields. Hucksters touted nearby food shops. A wine-seller joked with grimy laborers, swilling hot water into their drinks from a rickety grill. They turned and stared at the horse huffing clouds of vapor, at me wild-haired and red-faced, sweating in the padded waistcoat beneath my armor.

Daylight was fading. The arcades, warehouses, and stables lining the street looked as flat as frescoes. Above the long wall of the Circus Flaminius, the crimson pillars of Jupiter's temple on the Capitoline had faded to the color of old brick.

The whisper I thought I had heard drifted back to me: *Your turn, little brother.* A warning? Was it my turn to dishonor our family?

A litter jinked past, flanked by bodyguards and trailing the expensive scent of cassia. I heard something else then, hardly louder than the grumble of fast-moving water: the pelting of many hooves.

I turned my horse crosswise on the bridge ramp and drew my sword, straining to see past the bronze foliage of an oak. My heart thudded in my throat.

The six riders burst into sight. Dogs barked. People scattered. Steadying the horse, I lifted my sword and shouted, "Halt, in Caesar's name!"

The Marcomanni ponies collided with each other, neighing in fright. A rider tumbled to the pavement. Over the commotion I heard the cavalry squadron pounding down the street. "Drop your weapons," I bellowed.

Aurima let out a defiant yell and kicked her pony into a passage leading back to Pompeius's theater. Did the cursed wildcat not know when to give up?

I chased her through muck and runnels of rainwater, past scarred walls, stable gates and shop fronts, under vine-clad balconies that darkened the passage. Boys playing ball scrambled out of the way. A shrieking woman snatched up a child. Filth spat into my horse's face, into my own eyes and hair.

But I had two advantages: long-legged Spider, my roan, was faster than her undersized nag, and I knew this neighborhood. When the theater loomed up over heaps of construction rubble, I swerved the stallion into her pony's side. The runty beast tumbled onto its haunch, hooves scrabbling on the pavement. I turned back to see it lurch up again with the girl still clinging to its back. She booted it into the nearest alley, her cloak hood bellying behind her in the wind of her haste.

When she tried to turn onto the Via Tarentina, I crowded her with my sword raised. Her only escape was through an archway flanked by smiling sea nymphs, which took her into the main courtyard of the Spartan Baths.

A dead end.

By now most of the bathers had departed for their dinner, and only a few litters and sedan chairs remained there. But scores of slaves still waited: bearers and bodyguards, messengers and linkboys. Some who were warming themselves at a brazier turned to gape; others rose from the curbing of the Neptune basin.

Aurima came to a halt. She looked around at the pillars of the arcade, the statues of Tritons and Nereids, the broad steps to the entrance hall of the baths. Her hands fell from the reins.

The cavalry crowded in behind us. Scapula said, "We have all the others, Tribune."

I sheathed my sword. "Good," I said. I dismounted and went over to the basin to wash my face and arms.

Maelo shouted something in Germanic. Aurima gave no sign that she heard. She sat straight, bright-cheeked and breathless, staring at nothing.

"Get down," I said.

She seemed not to hear that, either. Her mount was still blowing. It had no heart for further resistance, even if she did.

"Get down," I said again, between my teeth this time.

She swung a leg slowly over the pony's rump. When she slid to the ground, I put my foot next to the toe of her boot. She tripped over it and I pulled her against me. She was outlandishly tall for a woman, nearly my own height. The thick mass of her hair, frayed out of its plait, smothered my face. My hands found the dampness of sweat beneath her breasts.

The girl struggled to free herself. I turned her around, meaning to mock her for trying to escape, but the rage and desperation in her eyes silenced me.

Then her gaze flickered for a moment, and I saw through to her spirit. Or perhaps even further, for I saw the home she had lost, the forest and marshes and rivers, and felt the anguish of her captivity. I do not believe in magic, but there was no other explanation for this blaze of insight; for I considered the Mark to be a harsh and unlovely wasteland, and would not have guessed it meant more to her than life.

But it was too late for pity. Her fate was to seal an alliance with a foreign king or lord. Mine was to carry out whatever duty my father would ask of me. I reached under her cloak and took the curved silver knife from her belt. "Bind her wrists," I said to Scapula. "The others', too. They will walk the rest of the way." The Villa Publica was scarcely a bowshot distant, so this was no great ordeal. The real punishment would be the humiliation of being brought in like prisoners instead of free men.

As the order was carried out, I looked down at the small knife I held. Had she used it to cut healing herbs? Or Romans' throats?

The silver crescent caught the ruddy light of the sky, and its shine seemed to dull with a skim of blood. In its place I saw, all of a sudden, the longer and straighter blade that had fallen from my brother's hand.

I thrust the knife into my sash, immaculately tied that morning, now mud-stained and half undone. "So, priestess," I said, and wrenched the sash knot tight, "welcome to Rome."