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VITA
AND THE
GLADIATOR



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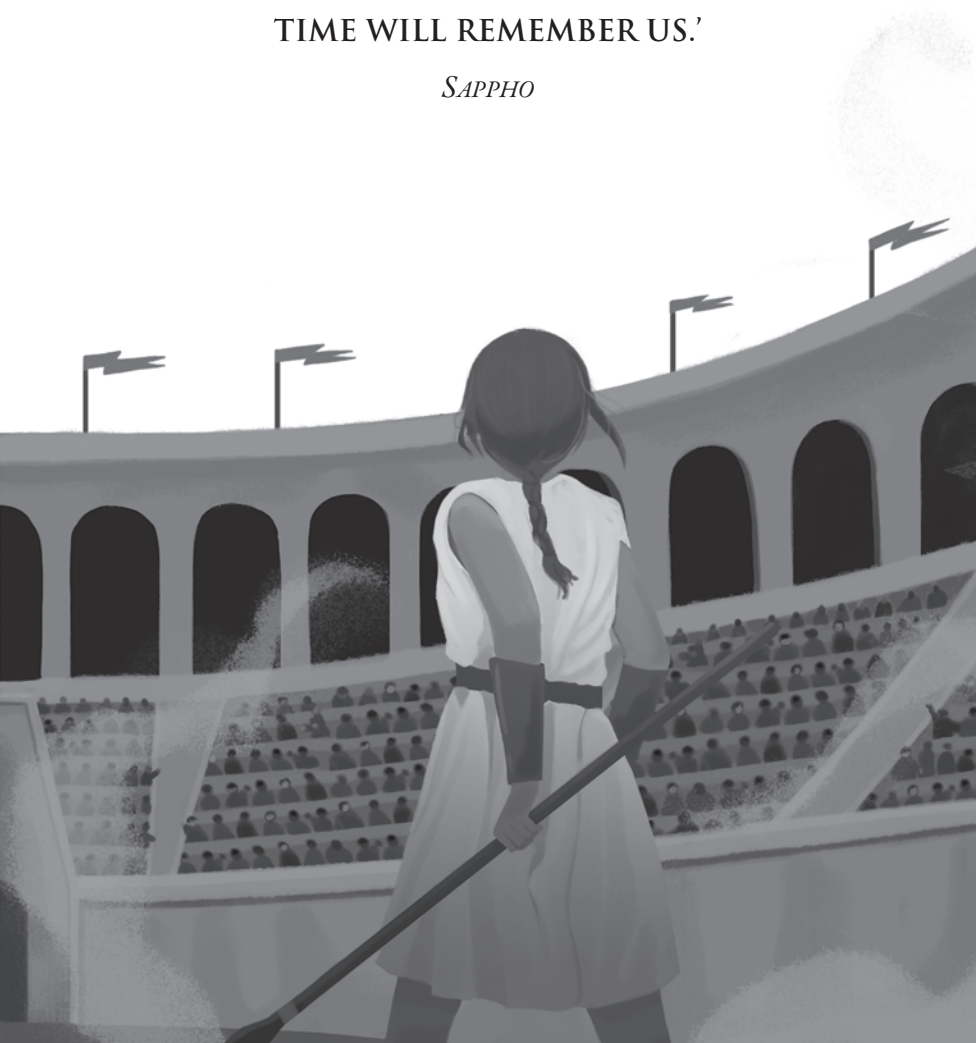
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For Brendan and Kieran
Kia kaha, Kia māia, Kia manawanui



‘SOMEONE, I TELL YOU, IN ANOTHER
TIME WILL REMEMBER US.’

SAPPHO





Londinium, Roman Province of Britannia, 125 CE

Vita stood proud in her battle chariot as it thundered towards the Roman lines. She and her army of blue-faced warriors were seriously outnumbered, but she wouldn't yield – not without a fight. She raised her spear and prepared to lead the charge . . .

BANG!

She started and looked up from her desk. The front door – which meant Mother and Lucius had gone at last! A flutter of excitement rippled through her. It was nearly time.

But first, she couldn't resist one final read-through of her poem. As she scanned the neat lines of verse that sloped across the papyrus's creamy-yellow surface, her chest filled

with a warm glow of pride. She drew in a breath and read the title out loud:

‘The defeat of Boudicca, the fearsome ruler of the Iceni who burnt Londinium to the ground.’

It sounded good. Queen Boudicca had been the arch-enemy of the Empire, but still, Vita couldn’t help admiring her courage – standing up to the might of the Roman army like that. Taking charge of her own destiny. And Father had said she fought bravely too . . .

She felt a sudden rush of affection. Dear Father! He was the only one in the family who really understood her – her love for reading and telling stories.

A thought flashed into her head. Why not slip into his study and leave her poem as a surprise for when he got back from his meeting at the Forum? Then, if he liked it, she could read it out loud at her feast-day meal tonight. She rolled up the scroll and tied it with her favourite red hair ribbon, then poked her head out into the passageway. The only movement came from the shadows cast by a pair of flickering candles at the shrine of the household gods in the alcove opposite. The gods would approve of her actions, she was certain. She tiptoed past it and up to the study door.

She knocked once and waited, but there was no reply. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open and stepped inside. Her nose pricked at the familiar smell of

dried papyrus and old leather. She loved this place. It was where Father worked when he wasn't at his office at the basilica in town. His books on law and justice were here, written on neatly rolled scrolls stored on the specially built shelves. Most precious of all was his collection of poetry and plays, which he let Vita borrow from if her tutor gave good reports of her studies.

She was so busy pondering what she might read next, she didn't hear the approach of limping footsteps until it was too late.

'Vita?'

She spun round, cheeks flushing.

'What are you doing in here?' Her father stood frowning in the doorway.

'I-I'm sorry, Father. I just wanted to leave this for you. It's a poem.' Vita held out the scroll. 'I was hoping to read it to you at my birthday feast.'

He took it from her, his mouth forced into a tired-looking smile. Vita's heart squeezed. Father had seemed restless and ill at ease these past few days. He worked too hard. That's what Mother said; though of course she never complained about the fine jewels and clothes that came with being a senior magistrate's wife.

'So this is what you have been spending your morning doing? Your mother won't be pleased, you know. You were meant to be doing your needlework.'

Vita's stomach clutched. He was talking about her wedding gown. Mother had been on at her for days to finish it. She was fourteen now, but it was still hard to believe that in a few short weeks, she'd be the wife of Father's old army comrade, Gaius Cassius Agrippa. The thought of spending the rest of her life a Roman matron like Mother, stitching robes, designing menus and making sure the slaves carried out their chores, filled her with dread.

At least she had her writing – provided Agrippa would let her carry on with it. She prayed to the gods he would. It was what she wanted most in the world. To write poems and plays and have them performed across the Empire.

Her father's sigh brought her back to the room with a jolt. 'I'm sorry, Little Owl. I did not mean to speak harshly.' He touched a hand to Vita's hair.

Her heart fluttered at his use of her special pet name. The owl was sacred to her favourite goddess, Minerva – the goddess of wisdom, poetry and justice.

A rat-tat sounded on the study door.

Her father tensed and dropped his hand to his side. 'Come!'

The door swung open to reveal the stocky, dark-haired figure of their house steward.

'Felix. You're back.' Her father's frown deepened. 'Did

you deliver the message as I asked?’

‘Yes, master.’ The slave pressed his hands together and gave a quick bow. As he raised them, Vita’s eye was drawn again to the purple scar that ripped like a lightning bolt from his right elbow to the base of his hand. A gift from his former master, or so their nursemaid, Festa, had told her.

Father was a just master and would never dream of doing such a thing. But there were others who didn’t think twice about it, Vita knew. She shivered and looked away.

Her father gave the steward a grim-faced nod. ‘Good, then you may go. I will call if I need you.’

‘Very good, master.’ Felix bowed and left them.

Her father stood there for a moment looking into the empty space, then, heaving another sigh, turned back to face her. ‘You must leave me now, Daughter. I have work to do.’ Giving her shoulder a quick squeeze, he limped past her towards the big oak desk.

‘But . . . my poem?’

‘What?’ He glanced at the scroll still clutched in his right hand. ‘Oh yes, I will try and look at it later.’ He dropped it on the desk-top and sank down into his high-backed chair. Then, picking up a sheet of papyrus from the pile in front of him, he raked a hand through his greying hair and began to read.

Fighting down her disappointment, Vita slipped out of the room. Something was wrong, she was convinced of it. Father had been so distracted he hadn't even wished her a happy feast-day. Perhaps there'd been trouble at the Council this morning? A disagreement with one of the other magistrates? Well, whatever it was, she didn't have time to worry about it now.

Thank goodness Mother had taken Lucius with her on the visit to her friend's. Vita felt a quick pang of pity for her little brother. He'd be bored silly having to sit there and listen to them complaining about how expensive olive oil was these days. But if he'd stayed behind, it would have made the job of sneaking out without being noticed a whole lot harder.

She darted into his room and felt beneath the low mattress Festa slept on for the maid's spare tunic and hooded cloak, then hurried back to her own room to change. A few moments later and the transformation was complete. Vita, daughter of brave legionary commander, councillor and magistrate Marcus Tullius Verus, had become Vita the slave-girl.

As she stepped into the light, the hubbub of street sounds swelled up around her – the cries of wandering pedlars, the rattle and bang of traders pulling down their shop counters and the clitter-clatter of hobnails as people hurried past.

An assortment of smells tickled her nose. The sweet, yeasty fragrance of fresh bread coming from the baker's a few doors down. A tongue-tingling waft of grilled sausage from the tray of a passing street-seller. And beneath it all, a faint whiff of mud and saltiness blowing uphill from the river. If she weren't in such a hurry, she'd have stopped to savour it all. Her new-found freedom too. But the sun was already high in the sky. Casting a quick glance about her, she tugged the hood down over her forehead and set off at a brisk walk along the dusty, gravel-covered road that led to the Forum.

At first she revelled in being out in the street on her own. But as she walked on, a niggle of irritation began to take hold. Normally, if she'd been with Mother, the more well-to-do citizens would have nodded their heads in recognition, while the freedmen and women and slaves would have given way to them. Now the common folk barged past her while the richer-looking ones didn't seem to notice her at all. Still, at least it meant the disguise was working.

She didn't see the man until it was too late.

'Ouf! Careful, girl!'

Her stomach clawed at the sound of his voice. Cassius Agrippa, her future husband! But as she ducked sideways to avoid him, a sudden breeze caught her hood, pulling it back from her head.

A hand shot out and gripped hold of her chin, turning her face into the light. Agrippa's grey eyes locked with hers, then widened in surprise. 'Vita?'

She gave a silent groan. She was done for now.