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# The Fugitive From Corinth

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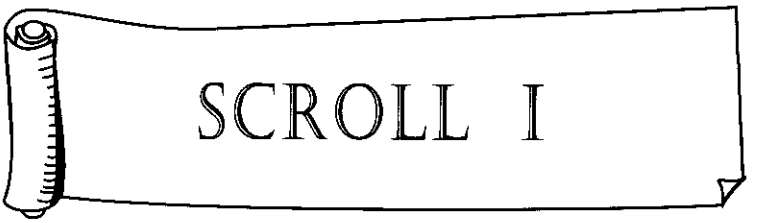
## Caroline Lawrence

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# SCROLL I

'I first met him in Corinth,' said the Roman sea captain, Marcus Flavius Geminus, 'when he saved my life.'

'He saved your life?' A dark-skinned African girl in a yellow tunic sat up straight on her banqueting couch. It was a warm evening in early May. Nubia the ex-slave-girl and her three friends were dining with the captain in the garden triclinium of Helen's Hospitium, a luxury hotel near Cenchrea, the eastern port of Corinth. Although Marcus Flavius Geminus did not usually allow the children in his household to recline at dinner, this was a special occasion. It was their last day in Greece after their recent adventures in the Greek islands. They were to sail home to Ostia in the morning.

Captain Geminus smiled and nodded. 'That's right, Nubia. He saved my life.'

'I never knew that, pater!' The fair-haired girl next to Nubia dipped her hard-boiled egg into a mixture of salt and cumin and took a bite. 'Tell us how he saved you.' Ten-year-old Flavia Gemina was Nubia's former mistress and Captain Geminus's daughter. She loved stories and mysteries.

Captain Geminus smiled. 'When I say Corinth, I

mean the other port – Lechaeum – rather than the town itself. I was drinking hot sage in a caupona down by the waterfront. I remember it was evening, and raining. I was waiting for the harbourmaster. Suddenly four men got up from a nearby table and came over to me.'

Flavia's father paused for a moment as a slave-girl with dark red hair came through an ivy-covered arch, carrying a light table with various salads on it. She was followed by a big Syrian slave with a candle. The slave-girl set the salad table before the central couch while the male slave began to light the garden torches. Nubia could smell vinegar and pine pitch.

'It was only when one of them grabbed my arms and another cut the cord of my money pouch,' continued Flavia's father, 'that I realised what they were after and started to fight back. But there were four of them and only one of me. They beat me to the ground and then they began to kick me!'

'Oh Pater!' cried Flavia, putting down her egg. 'How terrible!'

He nodded. 'I can still remember the taste of sawdust in my mouth. Then I heard what the Greeks call a *paean*, a battle cry. I felt the kicking stop and I looked up to see a young man of about seventeen. He was dripping wet from the rain, and he wielded a broken chair like a club. I've rarely seen anyone so angry. He knocked the leader to the ground and started swinging at the other three.' Captain Geminus took a slice of cucumber from his salad. 'That's when the other people in the caupona ran to help, but it was his quick action that saved me.'

Two dark-haired boys were reclining on a couch opposite the girls. 'I've seen him get irritated,' said

Jonathan, the older of the two, 'but I don't think I've ever seen him really angry. Have you, Lupus?'

The younger boy was intent on peeling an egg. Without looking up he grunted yes. Nine-year-old Lupus had no tongue and could not speak.

Flavia grinned. 'If you've seen him lose his temper, Lupus, it's probably because you're the one who made him lose it!'

Lupus looked up at them and nodded proudly, and they all laughed.

'No, wait!' cried Flavia. 'We *have* seen him lose his temper. Remember the stuffed mushrooms last December?'

'Don't remind me,' said Jonathan with a groan. 'I ate some, too.'

Nubia giggled behind her hand.

'What's this?' said Flavia's father with a puzzled smile. 'Why would mushrooms make him angry?'

'They were stuffed with love potion made from gladiator scrapings,' said Flavia, trying not to laugh. 'You know, the stuff gladiators scrape off after a really good workout: dead skin, oil, sweat, dust . . .'

'He was *so* angry,' added Jonathan, 'that he said . . . he said . . .' But Jonathan was laughing too hard to finish.

'No, wait!' Flavia held up her hand for silence. 'He said—' but then she also dissolved into helpless giggles.

Lupus's shoulders were shaking, too, but he had managed to write something on his wax tablet. Now he held it up:

BY APOLLO I SWEAR I'M GOING TO MURDER HER

At this they all burst out laughing, even Nubia and the captain.

'What's the subject of conversation?'

Everyone turned to see a handsome young man framed in the leafy arched entrance of the garden.

'You!' they all cried, and called out their greetings. Next to the ornamental pool, Jonathan's dog Tigris lifted his head from a marrowbone and thumped his tail.

Nubia watched the young man step into the golden torchlight. Had he grown? He seemed taller and more muscular. He wore red leather sandals, and a red woollen cloak over a white tunic. With his smooth tanned skin and curly hair the colour of bronze, she thought her tutor Aristo looked just like a Greek god.

'Did I seem angry that evening?' said Aristo a short time later, taking a handful of currants from a green glass bowl. 'I only remember feeling vexed.'

'Then I sincerely hope I never vex you,' laughed Flavia's father, accepting the bowl from Aristo and sprinkling some currants onto his honey-drizzled yogurt. Both men were barefoot and wearing short-sleeved white tunics. Although her father was ten years older than Aristo, it occurred to Flavia that they might almost be brothers.

'You know, I've always wondered,' said her father, 'why you risked your life to help a stranger. For all you know, I might have been a thief and those four men concerned citizens.'

Aristo shrugged. 'I'd just had an argument with my brother,' he said. 'I stormed down to the port with the idea of boarding the first ship out of Corinth. I was so angry that when I came into the inn and saw those

bullies kicking a man on the ground . . . the next thing I knew I was holding a chair leg and the men were running away.'

'Hey!' said Flavia. 'That sounds like Hercules after the goddess Juno gave him a potion to drive him mad. When he came to his senses he saw the dead bodies of his wife and children lying on the ground and he realised . . .' Her voice trailed off as she saw the look of reproach in Nubia's golden-brown eyes. 'No,' she said quickly. 'It's nothing like Hercules . . .' She tried to think of a way to change the subject. 'Music!' she cried. 'We haven't seen you in weeks, Aristo. Let's play some music together. Look! I've brought a tambourine! Lupus can drum on a bowl and Nubia's wearing her flute around her neck as usual.'

'I'm afraid I don't have my lyre with me.'

'Then ask one of the slaves to fetch it from your room. You're in the Orpheus room, aren't you? Nubia and I asked Helen to put you there, in the room next to pater's. Nubia thought you'd like the room with the fresco of Orpheus on the wall.'

'The landlady showed me the Orpheus room,' said Aristo quietly, 'and the fresco is very fine. But I don't have my lyre with me tonight.'

'But Aristo,' said Flavia, 'didn't you pack it with the rest of your things?'

'My belongings are all at my parents' house in Corinth.'

'But Aristo,' said Captain Geminus, pushing himself higher on his elbow, 'one of Helen's slaves is going to take us directly to Lechaeum tomorrow at dawn. It will delay us if we have to go into Corinth to get your things.'

'I'm sorry, Marcus,' said Aristo, 'but I'm not going with you tomorrow. I know we had an agreement that I work for you until Flavia reached a marriageable age, but my parents are getting old and infirm – my father's blind, you know – and so I've decided to stay here.'

Flavia exchanged a horrified glance with Nubia. 'You're not sailing home with us?' she cried.

'No,' said Aristo. 'I'm staying here in Corinth.'

Flavia's father swung his bare feet onto the platform of their dining couch.

'I don't understand, Aristo. What are you saying?'

'Is there any way . . . Will you release me from my contract?'

Captain Geminus stared down at the liquid reflection of the torches in the rectangular pool at his feet. 'I don't know. This is so sudden.' He looked up. 'It's not just that Flavia and her friends will be losing a tutor, but you've been my secretary and accountant for three years and I don't know where I'll find . . . Aristo, is it more money you want? Because we've done very well financially on this trip and soon I'll be in a position to—' He stopped and looked around at them. The evening breeze was making the torches flutter; in their flickering light it was hard to read the expression on his face.

'Let's discuss this privately, up in my room.'

Aristo nodded. The two men bent to lace their sandals, then rose from the couch.

'Aristo!' cried Flavia. 'You won't leave without saying goodbye, will you?'

'Of course not.' He smiled at them. 'I'll spend the night here and go across to the ship with you tomorrow.'

He turned and followed Captain Geminus through

the ivy arch and out of the flickering circle of torchlight into the darkness of the garden.

'Oh no!' said Flavia, after they'd gone. 'What will we do without Aristo? Why won't he come back to Ostia with us?'

'He said something about staying here because of his parents,' said Jonathan. 'Parents can be a big responsibility.'

Suddenly Lupus hissed and put his finger to his lips. At the same moment Tigris lifted his head from his bone and growled.

They all stopped to listen, but apart from the sound of the breeze in the treetops and the tinkle of wind-chimes in the courtyard, there was no sound.

'What is it, Tigris?' asked Nubia.

'What is it, Lupus?' asked Jonathan.

Lupus pointed behind Flavia. She and Nubia both twisted on their couch, but all they could see behind them was a circle of leaves glowing bright green in the light of the flickering torch.

Tigris growled again.

'What?' Flavia turned back to Lupus to find him scribbling on his wax tablet. When he held it up a moment later, she gasped.

SOMETHING IN THE BUSHES BEHIND YOU, Lupus had written. SOMETHING BIG!



# SCROLL II

Thinking quickly, Lupus grasped a handful of currants from the green glass bowl and hurled them at the shrubs behind Flavia.

Instantly, something exploded from the leaves with a staccato warning cry. Lupus yelled, Tigris barked and Flavia leapt off her dining couch.

A blackbird flew up into the dark blue sky.

Lupus watched the bird disappear and then looked down at Flavia, who stood up to her knees in the ornamental pool. She slowly raised her head and glared at Lupus.

'It was only a blackbird,' she growled.

Lupus felt a grin spread across his face and he gave her an exaggerated shrug of apology.

But Tigris was on all four feet now, barking steadily at the bushes.

'What is it, boy?' Jonathan slipped off the couch and circled around to the rhododendron bushes behind the girls' couch. Tigris followed, wagging his tail. 'Do you smell something else hiding in there?' Jonathan parted the leaves of the bushes. 'Something apart from that terrifying bird?' He disappeared among the shrubs.

'Be careful, Jonathan!' Flavia stepped out of the pool

and bent to wring the water from the sodden hem of her best blue tunic.

For a moment there was no sound but the wind. Then:

'Dear gods, it's horrible . . .' came Jonathan's muffled voice from the bushes and they all looked up.

'It's Medusa!' he yelled and pushed his contorted face out from between two branches. He had stuck out his tongue and ruffled his curly hair and flipped his eyelids back to give himself a terrible staring grin. 'Blahhhh!' he cried.

Flavia and Nubia both screamed and Lupus burst out laughing; this time both girls stood knee deep in the ornamental pool.

'Flavia, are you awake?'

Flavia sighed and rolled over in her bed to face Nubia in hers. Both their beds were as high as dining couches, and as narrow, but they were comfortable. A tiny oil-lamp filled the room with a soft apricot glow. Outside, the evening breeze had become a blustery wind which was rattling shutters, slamming doors and exciting the wind chimes.

'Who can sleep with all that noise?' said Flavia with a sigh.

'I will miss Aristo. Will you?'

'Of course. I'll miss him terribly. I can't imagine who'll teach us now.'

'Aristo is a not a freedman, is he?'

'No. He was never a slave.' Flavia yawned. 'He's a free man rather than a freedman.'

'Flavia, what is contract?'

'It's a written agreement between two people. Are you thinking of Aristo's contract with pater?'

'Yes.'

'I think Aristo agreed to be my tutor for five years and pater promised to pay him a certain amount and also to allow him to visit his parents for a few weeks each year. He's served us for three years so according to the contract he should stay at least two more.'

'What if persons disagree the contract?'

'If either of the two people breaks the contract, then one of them has to give the other some money. I think it's called compensation.'

'What if Aristo does not have money to pay your father?' asked Nubia.

'I don't know,' murmured Flavia, rolling onto her back. 'But Aristo is very clever. He'll think of something . . .'

Nubia was silent after that, and Flavia must have drifted off, for she had no idea how much time had passed when a loud bang woke her. The noise came again. One of the bronze shutters outside their window had come free of its latch and was striking the wall. Flavia slid down from her bed and went to the window. She opened the lattice-work screen and leaned out. The warm wind whipped her hair and brought the smell of the sea. As she began to fasten the shutter to its outside wall, she thought she heard a man's cry from somewhere within the hospitium.

She pulled her head back into the room and listened. Next door Tigris had begun to bark. She heard the cry come again.

'Pater?' whispered Flavia.

'What's happening?' asked Nubia, pushing back her covers.

'I'm not sure.' Flavia took the bronze night-lamp from its table and moved to the door. 'That sounded like pater . . .'

Her heart was thumping as she pulled back the heavy curtain of their doorway and went out into the dark corridor with Nubia close behind her. The wall torches had been burning when they had gone to bed, but a slave must have put them out. It was black as pitch out there with only a small globe of light from her oil-lamp.

As Flavia was raising the lamp to light one of the torches, a running figure jostled her against Nubia.

'Oof!' cried Flavia. The bronze oil-lamp clattered to the floor and darkness swallowed them.

Flavia groped for her lamp on the oily wooden floor. She could hear Tigris barking, the shutter still banging and more footsteps running. A dim light flared, illuminating the dark corridor to their left. Flavia saw Jonathan holding his oil-lamp to a torch in its angled wall-bracket. As the flames took hold, the golden light in the corridor grew brighter. Tigris ran towards the girls. He wagged his tail at them and began lapping the pooled olive oil from Flavia's lamp.

'What's happening?' asked Jonathan, coming up with his lamp. Lupus was behind him. He had taken the flaming torch from its bracket.

A man's cry made all four of them turn. Tigris skittered down the corridor in the direction of the cry and Lupus hurried after him, his torch crackling. Flavia and her two friends followed.

Rounding a corner, Flavia found Lupus and Tigris standing in the doorway of her father's two-roomed

suite. Lupus had pulled aside the heavy curtain, and the flickering light from his torch illuminated a little reception room with cream and red frescoed walls. Against the right-hand wall was a small table with a tiny night-lamp burning. In the left-hand wall was a dark doorway leading to her father's inner bedroom. In the centre of this reception room was a dining couch made up as a bed. Aristo stood behind this couch, bent over the figure stretched out on it.

'What?' cried Flavia, pushing past Lupus. 'What is it, Aristo – ?'

Then she saw the figure on the bed and the words died on her lips.

It was a sight Flavia would never forget, one which would haunt her dreams for many years to come.

Her father lay on his back, asleep. He was pale as ivory and perfectly still. Then Aristo raised his head and she saw a look of horrified disbelief twist his handsome features as he looked at her, and then down at the bloody knife in his hand.

Flavia suddenly knew with a terrible certainty that her father was not asleep.