

The Man from Pomegranate Street

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Extract

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SCROLL I

*F*ifteen-year-old Flavia Gemina trembled as her stepmother advanced steadily towards her, a spear pointed at her head.

‘Are you sure it’s supposed to be so sharp?’ whimpered Flavia.

‘This is the same one they used on me three years ago,’ said her stepmother with a smile. ‘And so far the gods have blessed my marriage to your father.’

‘But couldn’t you just use a very dull spearhead?’ pleaded Flavia. ‘Instead of the whole thing on its shaft?’

‘No. We have to part your hair seven times with the point of a sharp spear. That’s the way it’s done.’

A lovely blond girl stepped forward. Pulchra was almost a year older than Flavia. ‘When I got married last spring,’ said Pulchra, ‘three women held the spear. Nubia, come help me.’

Flavia’s dark-skinned friend Nubia came forward. She and Pulchra grasped the shaft behind the spearhead while Flavia’s young stepmother shifted her grip slightly. Then the three of them carefully used the point of the spear to part Flavia’s light brown hair, first in the middle, then three times on either side. Flavia tried hard not to tremble and it only pricked once.

‘There,’ said Pulchra. ‘That wasn’t so bad, was it?’

‘I suppose not,’ said Flavia, but she kept her head perfectly still in case she lost the partings. ‘Are you going to plait in the blue ribbons and pearls you brought me, Pulchra?’

‘Me? Do the job of an ornatrix? Certainly not! Leda will do

your hair. Now sit in this chair by the balcony. We can use the last of the daylight.'

Flavia glanced at Pulchra's slave-girl Leda and smiled. Although she and Pulchra had been writing to each other regularly for the past few years, Flavia had forgotten how imperious her friend could be.

'However,' said Pulchra, 'I will do your make-up, because that requires the skill of a true artist.' As Leda and Nubia moved behind Flavia to do her hair, Pulchra went to get the make-up tray.

'Don't listen to her,' laughed Flavia's stepmother over her shoulder. She had draped the gauzy, saffron-yellow wedding veil over the balcony so that she could sprinkle it with rose water. 'You've become a lovely young woman.'

Pulchra sat on a small stool in front of Flavia and rested the tray on her lap. 'All I meant,' she said, 'was that tonight is the most important night of her life. We don't want the bridegroom having second thoughts.'

'He won't have second thoughts,' said Flavia's stepmother. 'He's besotted with Flavia.'

'Humph,' said Pulchra, and to Flavia: 'Are you nervous?'

'Of course not.'

'You're not nervous that in a very short time your bridegroom is going to burst in here and snatch you from our arms and carry you off to his bed while boys in the procession sing lewd songs and pelt you with nuts?'

'No,' said Flavia. 'I'm euphoric. It's my dream come true.'

'I do wish you'd tell me more about this man you're marrying.' Pulchra unscrewed a little tin pot and sniffed the contents with satisfaction. 'You're so secretive about him in your letters.'

'You'll meet him soon.'

'So you keep telling me.' She dipped her finger in the face

cream and started to apply it to Flavia's forehead. 'Speaking of mysteries, I have a little mystery I'd like you to solve.'

'I'm sorry, Pulchra, but I gave up being a detectrix three years ago.'

'Really?' Pulchra sighed. 'That's too bad.' She smoothed some of the lemon-scented face cream onto Flavia's cheek. 'Are you sure you're not nervous?'

'Yes.'

'Then why are you still trembling?'

'I'm a little nervous.'

Pulchra laughed. 'Well, why don't you take your mind off things for a while? Tell me about one of your adventures?'

'All right,' said Flavia with a sigh. 'I'll tell you about our last case. The one that made me give up being a detectrix. The one that showed me how dangerous it can be to search for the Truth.'

It was a hot afternoon in Ostia, the Ides of September in the third year of the Emperor Titus. Three merchant ships were standing out to sea, waiting for the afternoon breeze to rise and carry them into port. The local sailors called this wind Venus' Breath, because it was cool and fragrant. It finally rose at about the second hour after noon and filled the ships' sails. Two of the ships headed towards Portus, Ostia's big new port, but one turned towards a smaller harbour.

Beneath the shady reed awning of the customs booth of the Marina Harbour, a young official was dozing. He had tipped his wicker chair onto its two back legs and was resting his sandaled feet on the wooden table. The cicadas chirred soporifically in the umbrella pines and the heat was like a drug, but Rufus was only skimming beneath the surface of sleep. Now the distant crack of canvas and the feel of the cool breeze on his face brought him instantly

awake. He squinted at the approaching ship and its sail. His eyesight was good and he could easily make out the image of a leaping dolphin there, painted in black on the pale linen sail. Rufus let his chair fall forward with a thump. It was the *Delphina*. The ship they had all been waiting for.

This was his chance for recognition and maybe promotion. He had to alert Glabrio, his superior.

Rufus stood up and stepped out from the striped shade of the awning and into the brilliant sunshine. Ostia had three harbours: the new harbour up at Portus, the river mouth harbour and this small marina harbour, mainly used in the sailing season by fishermen and local craft. This was the slow time of day. Most men had gone home for a siesta, or to the baths. There were only five or six old fishermen on the docks, mending their nets and chatting. Further down the beach three boys stood knee deep in the water, skipping stones.

‘Pueri!’ shouted Rufus, clapping his hands. ‘Boys! Come here!’

The boys looked at each other, dropped their stones and ran to him. When they stood before him, panting and wet, he said, ‘Do any of you know who Manius Acilius Glabrio is?’

The two older boys frowned at each other but the youngest nodded enthusiastically. ‘I do,’ he said. ‘He has black hair and a big belly.’

‘Well done,’ said Rufus. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Threptus,’ said the boy. He was about seven years old and naked apart from a sun-bleached loincloth. His tawny hair was damp and his brown skin still beaded with drops of water.

Rufus fished in his coin purse. ‘Threptus,’ he said. ‘I want you and your friends to run to the Marina Baths

and find Glabrio. Tell him to come here at once. He's probably dozing in the solarium about now.' He flipped each boy a tiny quadran. 'There's another coin for each of you if he's here within half an hour. Tell him,' he called after the running boys, 'Tell him the *Delphina* is coming into port. The ship of Marcus Flavius Geminus.' Rufus cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted: 'Tell him that enemies of the emperor Titus may be on board!'

Threptus the beggar boy felt terrible.

He and his friends had brought big-bellied, hairy-backed Glabrio to the Marina Harbour in time for their reward. Now they stood on the shore pretending to skip stones as before. The harbour looked deserted, but Threptus knew there were two magistrates and a dozen soldiers hiding behind the arch of the Marina Gate. They were waiting to arrest the emperor's enemies, who were certain to be aboard the *Delphina*.

Threptus couldn't read, but like everyone else in the port of Ostia, he knew about the decree that had gone up in the forum six weeks earlier.

The notice informed the public that the Emperor Titus was offering a huge reward for the capture of four of his enemies. These four enemies were children: two boys and two girls. Their names were Flavia Gemina, Jonathan ben Mordecai, Nubia and Lupus. All four were residents of Ostia. And all four were known to Threptus, especially the last-named: ten-year-old Lupus.

Threptus and his friends often told each other stories about Lupus, who had once been a beggar boy like them. They told how Lupus could swing from branch to branch like a monkey. They told how Lupus once fought off a pack of rabid dogs, single-handed. It was well known that

Lupus had faced a lion in Rome's great arena and driven a quadriga of the Greens to victory in the Circus Maximus. Lupus had climbed to the very top of the Colossus of Rhodes – it was a mile high – and there he had battled three armed warriors, tossing each one to his death. Lupus had wrestled a giant octopus guarding sunken treasure. He had killed an evil slave-dealer, too, and won for his reward the slave-ship *Vespa*. The ex-beggar-boy had renamed the ship *Delphina*, and he himself had painted that leaping dolphin on her sail.

And now he, Threptus, had betrayed his hero for two tiny coins. He felt sick as he watched the *Delphina* ease up beside the wooden dock.

Should he warn Lupus? Or was it already too late?

He and his friends watched the lanky red-haired customs official and his big-bellied superior move forward. The two men strolled casually, but Threptus guessed their hearts were pounding as hard as his. They would receive a huge reward and an imperial pat-on-the-back if the four young criminals were on board.

After a few moments of activity, the gangplank thudded down and a figure appeared: a short man in a toga. He had thinning hair and pale brown eyes. Threptus recognised him; he was one of Ostia's junior magistrates.

The man paused at the top of the gangplank, where everyone could see him. A black dog appeared on one side of him and a golden dog on the other. Threptus could see their panting pink tongues.

'Salvete!' cried the magistrate in a loud voice.

'Marcus Artorius Bato!' cried Glabrio.

Threptus could hear the surprise in the official's voice.

'Are there any children on board that ship?' called Glabrio.

‘There are indeed!’ cried Bato, spreading both arms triumphantly. ‘I have ten freeborn children who were cruelly snatched from their parents’ arms some time ago. Today,’ he proclaimed. ‘I am restoring these poor lost lambs to their families!’ Bato was using his orator’s skills and Threptus could hear him perfectly.

‘Is there a Captain Geminus on board?’ cried Glabrio.

‘Up here!’ cried a voice from the rigging. Threptus saw Marcus Flavius Geminus, a good-looking man in his mid-thirties. His face was also familiar around the docks of Ostia.

‘Is your daughter Flavia with you?’ bellowed Glabrio. ‘And her friends?’

‘No,’ said Captain Geminus, and hung his head in grief.

‘The captain’s daughter and her friends,’ cried Bato, ‘are dead.’ He paused for a moment, looking suitably grave, and then proclaimed: ‘They died bravely, saving the lives of these wretched children.’

The two dogs wagged their tails and panted happily as the first of the kidnapped children appeared at the top of the gangplank and began to descend.

Down on the docks, the old fishermen rose to their feet and ran towards the *Delphina*.

‘Have you any proof that your daughter and her friends are dead?’ called Glabrio, but he was drowned out by the cheers of townspeople. Men and women were pouring out from the Marina Gate to embrace the children they thought they might never see again. The two magistrates were rushing forward to congratulate Bato and some of the soldiers had shown themselves – against orders – and were cheering, too.

Threptus swallowed hard. The missing children of Ostia were home. But Lupus and his friends were dead. They

had given their lives to help the children. He would never see his hero again. Tears filled Threptus's eyes and he turned away from the joyful scene on the docks. He did not want the older boys to taunt him for his soft heart.

Through the heat haze, a movement further down the beach caught his eye. Just beyond the synagogue a fishing boat was coming ashore.

Threptus blinked away the tears and frowned. It was old Robur's boat. He was based a few miles south, in Laurentum, and he hardly ever brought his boat up this far.

A figure jumped down into the shallow water. Threptus stifled a gasp. A young man with curly hair was helping three children out of the boat.

Threptus glanced at his friends, but they had run off towards the *Delphina* to take part in the celebrations.

Threptus turned back. The curly-haired youth and the three children were wading ashore. In a few moments they would disappear behind the synagogue. Threptus shaded his eyes and squinted through the shimmering waves of heat. From this distance he could only see their silhouettes. The children all wore wide-brimmed sun hats and boys' tunics, but two of them *could* have been girls. And the smallest one – he was sure of it – the smallest one might have been Lupus.