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Opening Extract from...

Mistress of Rome

Written by Kate Quinn

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MISTRESS OF ROME

Kate Quinn

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'I undertake to be burnt by fire, to be bound in chains, to be beaten by rods, and to die by the sword.'

– Gladiator oath

Prologue

September AD 81, Rome

THEA

I opened my wrist with one firm stroke of the knife, watching with interest as the blood leaped out of the vein. My wrists were latticed with knife scars, but I still found the sight of my own blood fascinating. There was always the element of danger: after so many years, would I finally get careless and cut too deep? Would this be the day I watched my young life stream away into the blue pottery bowl with the nice frieze of nymphs on the side? The thought much brightened a life of minimum excitement.

But this time it was not to be. The first leap of blood slowed to a trickle, and I settled back against the mosaic pillar in the atrium, blue bowl in my lap. Soon a pleasant haze would descend over my eyes and the world would take on an agreeably distant hue. I needed that haze today. I would be accompanying my new mistress to the Colosseum, to see the gladiatorial games for the accession of the new emperor. And from what I'd heard about the games . . .

'Thea!'

My mistress's voice. I muttered something rude in a combination of Greek, Hebrew and gutter Latin, none of which she understood.

The blue bowl held a shallow cup of my blood. I wrapped my wrist in a strip of linen, tying off the knot with my teeth, then emptied the bowl into the atrium fountain. I took care not to drip on my brown wool tunic. My mistress's eagle eyes would spot a bloodstain in half a second, and I would not care to explain to her exactly why, once or twice a month, I took a blue bowl with a nice frieze of nymphs on the side and filled it with my own blood. However, fairly speaking, there was very little that I would care to tell my mistress at all. She hadn't owned me long, but I already knew that.

'Thea!'

I turned too quickly, and had to lean against one of the pillars of the atrium. Maybe I'd overdone it. Drain too much blood, and nausea set in. Surely not good on a day when I would have to watch thousands of animals and men get slaughtered.

'Thea, stop dawdling.' My mistress poked her pretty head out of the bedroom door, her annoyed features agreeably hazy to my eyes. 'Father's waiting, and you still have to dress me.'

I drifted obediently after her, my feet seeming to float several inches above the floor. A tasteless floor with a mosaic scene of gladiators fighting it out with tridents, blood splashing copiously in square red tiles. Tasteless but appropriate: my mistress's father, Quintus Pollio, was one of several organizers of the imperial gladiatorial games.

'The blue gown, Thea. With the pearl pins at the shoulders.'

'Yes, my lady.'

Lady Lepida Pollia. I had been purchased for her several months ago when she turned fourteen: a maid of her own age to do her hair and carry her fan now that she was so nearly a woman. As a gift I didn't rank as high as the pearl necklace and the silver bangles and the half-dozen silk gowns she'd

also received from her doting father, but she certainly liked having her own personal shadow.

'Cut yourself at dinner again, Thea?' She caught sight of my bandaged wrist at once. 'You really are a fumble-fingers. Just don't drop my jewel box, or I'll be very cross. Now, I want the gold bands in my hair, in the Greek style. I'll be a Greek for the day . . . just like you, Thea.'

She knew I was no Greek, despite the name bestowed on me by the Athenian merchant who was my first owner. 'Yes, my lady,' I murmured in my purest Greek. A frown flickered between her fine black brows. I was better educated than my mistress, and it annoyed her no end. I tried to remind her at least once a week.

'Don't go giving yourself airs, Thea. Even if you can speak Greek, you're just another little Jew slave. Remember that.'

'Yes, my lady.' Meekly I coiled and pinned her curls. She was already chattering on.

'. . . Father says that Belleraphon will fight this afternoon. Really, I know he's our best gladiator, but that flat face! He may dress like a dandy, but all the perfume in the world won't turn him into an Apollo. Of course he is wonderfully graceful, even when he's sticking someone right through the throat – ouch! You pricked me!'

'Sorry, my lady.'

'You certainly look green. There's no reason to get sick over the games, you know. Gladiators and slaves and prisoners – they'd all die anyway. At least this way we get some fun out of it.'

'Maybe it's my Jewish blood,' I suggested. 'We don't usually find death amusing.'

'Maybe that's it.' Lepida examined her varnished nails. 'At least the games are bound to be thrilling today. What with the emperor getting sick and dying in the middle of the season, we haven't had a good show for months.'

'Inconsiderate of him,' I agreed.

'At least the new emperor is supposed to love the games. Emperor Domitian. Titus Flavius Domitianus . . . I wonder what he'll be like? Father went to no end of trouble arranging the best bouts for him. Pearl earrings, Thea.'

'Yes, my lady.'

'And the musk perfume. There.' Lepida surveyed herself in the polished steel mirror. She was very young – fourteen, same as me – and too young, really, for the rich silk gown, the pearls, the rouge. But she had no mother and Quintus Pollio, so shrewd in dealing with slave merchants and lanistae, was clay in the hands of his only child. Besides, there was no doubt that she cut a dash. Her beauty was not in the peacock-blue eyes or even the yard of silky black hair that was her pride and joy. It was in her Olympian poise. On the basis of that, poise, Lady Lepida Pollia aimed to catch a distinguished husband, a patrician who would raise the family Pollii at last into the highest ranks of Roman society.

She beckoned me closer, peacock fan languidly stirring her sculpted curls. In the mirror behind her I was a dark brown shadow: lanky where she was luscious, sunburned where she was white-skinned, drab where she was brilliant. Very flattering, at least for her.

'Most effective,' she announced, mirroring my thoughts. 'But you really do need a new dress, Thea. You look like a tall dead tree. Come along, Father's waiting.'

Father was indeed waiting. But his impatience softened as Lepida dimpled at him and pirouetted girlishly. 'Yes, you look very pretty. Be sure to smile at Aemilius Graccus today; that's a very important family, and he's got an eye for pretty girls.'

I could have told him that it wasn't pretty *girls* Aemilius Graccus had an eye for, but he didn't ask me. Maybe he should have. Slaves hear everything.

Most Romans had to get up at daybreak to get a good seat

in the Colosseum. But the Pollio seats were reserved, so we tripped out just fashionably late enough to nod at all the great families. Lepida sparkled at Aemilius Graccus, at a party of patrician officers lounging on the street corner, at anyone with a purple-bordered toga and an old name. Her father self-importantly exchanged gossip with any patrician who favoured him with an obligatory smile.

'. . . I heard Emperor Domitian's planning a campaign in Germania next season. Wants to pick up where his brother left off, eh? No doubting Emperor Titus cut those barbarians down to size; we'll see if Domitian can do any better . . .'

'Quintus Pollio,' I overheard a patrician voice drawl. 'Really, his perfume alone . . . !'

'But he does his job so well. What's a smile now and then if it keeps him working hard?'

So Quintus Pollio went on bowing and smirking. He would have sold thirty years of his life for the honour of carrying the family name of the Julii, the Gracchi or the Sulpicii. So would my mistress, for that matter.

I amused myself by peering into the vendors' stalls that crowded the streets. Souvenirs of dead gladiators, the blood of this or that great fighter preserved in sand, little wooden medallions painted with the face of the famous Belleraphon. These last weren't selling very well, since not even the artists could give Belleraphon a pretty face. Portraits of a handsome Thracian trident fighter did much better.

'He's so beautiful!' Out of the corner of my eye I saw a cluster of girls mooning over a medallion. 'I sleep with his picture under my pillow every night . . .'

I smiled. We Jewish girls, we liked our men to be fighters too – but we liked them real and we liked them long-lived. The kind who takes the head off a legionnaire in the morning and comes home at night to preside over the Sabbath table. Only Roman girls sighed over crude garish portraits of men

they'd never met, men who would probably be dead before the year was out. On the other hand, perhaps a short-lived man was better for daydreaming about. He'd never be old, he'd never lose his looks, and if you tired of him he'd soon be gone.

The crowds grew thicker around the Colosseum. I'd walked often enough in its vast marble shadow as I ran errands for my mistress, but this was my first time inside and I struggled not to gape. So huge, so many marble arches, so many statues staring arrogantly from their plinths, so many seats. Fifty thousand eager spectators could cram inside, so they said. An arena fit for the gods, begun by the late Emperor Vespasian, finished by his son the late Emperor Titus, opened today in celebration of Titus's younger brother who had just donned the imperial purple as Emperor Domitian.

So much marble for a charnel house. I'd have preferred a theatre, but then I would rather hear music than watch men die. I imagined singing for a crowd as large as this one, a real audience instead of the frogs in the conservatorium when I scrubbed the tiles . . .

'Keep that fan moving, Thea.' Lepida settled into her velvet cushions, waving like an empress at the crowds, who had a small cheer for her father. Men and women usually sat separately to watch the games, but Quintus Pollio as organizer of the games could sit with his daughter if he liked. 'Faster than that, Thea. It's going to be gruesomely hot. Really, why won't it cool down? It's supposed to be *autumn*.'

Obediently I waved the fan back and forth. The games would last all day, which meant that I had a good six hours of feather-waving in front of me. Oh, my arms were going to ache.

Trumpets blared brassily. Even my heart skipped a beat at that thrilling fanfare. The new emperor stepped out into the imperial box, raising his hand to the crowd, and I stretched

on my toes for a look at him. Domitian, third emperor of the Flavian dynasty: tall, ruddy-cheeked, dazzling the eye in his purple cloak and golden circlet.

'Father.' Lepida tugged on her father's sleeve. 'Is the emperor *really* a man of secret vices? At the bathhouse yesterday, I heard . . .'

I could have told her that all emperors were rumoured to be men of secret vices. Emperor Tiberius and his little slave boys, Emperor Caligula who slept with his sisters, Emperor Titus and his mistresses – what was the point of having an emperor if you couldn't cook up spicy rumours about him?

Domitian's empress, now, was less gossipworthy. Tall, statuesque, lovely as she stepped forward beside her husband to wave at the roaring crowds – disappointed reports had it that the empress was an impeccable wife. Still, her green silk stola and emeralds caused a certain buzz of feminine admiration. Green, no doubt, would become *the* colour of the season.

'Father.' Lepida tugged at her father's arm again. 'You know I'm always so admired in green. An emerald necklace like the empress's . . .'

Various other imperial cousins filed after the emperor – there was a niece, Emperor Titus's younger daughter Lady Julia, who had supposedly petitioned to join the Vestal Virgins but had been refused. Otherwise, a dull lot. I was disappointed. My first sight of the imperial family, and they looked like any other clutch of languid patricians.

The emperor came forward, raising his arm, and shouted the introduction of the games. Secret vices or not, he had a fine reverberating voice.

The other slaves had explained the games to me many times, incredulous at my ignorance. Duels between wild beasts always opened the morning festivities; first on the list today was a battle between an elephant and a rhinoceros. The rhinoceros put out the elephant's eye with its tusk. I could have happily

lived my entire life without knowing what an elephant's scream sounded like.

'Marvellous!' Pollio threw a few coins into the arena. Lepida picked through a plate of honeyed dates. I concentrated on the peacock fan. Swish, swish, swish.

A bull and a bear battled next, then a lion and a leopard. Titbits to whet the appetite, as it were. The bear was sullen, and three handlers with sharp rods had to goad its flanks bloody before it attacked the bull, but the lion and the leopard screamed and flew at each other the moment the chains were released. The crowd cheered and chattered, sighed and settled back. Pomp and spectacle came next, dazzling the eye after the crowd's attention was honed: tame cheetahs in silver harnesses padding round the arena, white bulls with little golden boys capering on their backs, jewelled and tasselled elephants lumbering in stately dance steps accompanied by Nubian flute players . . .

'Father, can't I have a Nubian slave?' Lepida plucked at her father's arm for a third time. 'Two, even. A matched pair to carry my packages when I go shopping . . .'

Comic acts next. A tame tiger was released into the arena after a dozen sprinting hares, bounding in a flash of stripes to collect them one by one in his jaws and return them unharmed to the trainer. Rather nice, really. I enjoyed it, but there were scattered boos through the stands. Fans of the Colosseum didn't come for games; they came for blood.

'The emperor,' Quintus Pollio was droning, 'is especially fond of the goddess Minerva. He has built a new shrine to her in his palace. Perhaps we should make a few large public offerings . . .'

The tame tiger and his handler padded out, replaced by a hundred white deer and a hundred long-necked ostriches who were released galloping into the arena and shot down one by one by archers on high. Lepida saw some acquaintance in a

neighbouring box and cooed greetings through most of the blood.

More animal fights. Spearmen against lions, against buffaloes, against bulls. The buffaloes went down bewildered and mooing, the bulls ran maddened on to the spears that gouged their chests open, but the lions snarled and stalked and took a spearman with them before they were chased down and gutted. Such wonderful fun. Swish, swish, swish.

'Oh, the gladiators.' Lepida cast the plate of dates aside and sat up. 'Fine specimens, Father.'

'Nothing but the best for the emperor.' He chucked his daughter's chin. 'And for my little one who loves the games! The emperor wanted a battle today, not just the usual duels. Something big and special before the midday executions . . .'

In purple cloaks the gladiators filed out of the gates, making a slow circle of the arena as the fans cheered. Some strutted proudly, some stalked ahead without looking right or left. The handsome Thracian trident fighter blew kisses to the crowd and was showered with roses by adoring women. Fifty gladiators, paired off to fight to the death. Twenty-five would exit in triumph through the arena's Gate of Life. Twenty-five would be dragged out through the Gate of Death on iron hooks.

'Hail, Emperor!' As one they roared out towards the imperial box. 'We salute you from death's shadow!'

The clank of sharpened weapons. The scrape of plated armour. The crunch of many feet on sand as they spread out in their pairs. A few mock combats first with wooden weapons, and then the emperor dropped his hand.

The blades crashed. The audience surged forward, straining against the marble barriers, shouting encouragement to the favourites, cursing the clumsy. Waving, wagering, shrieking.

Don't look. Swish, swish, went the fan. *Don't look*.

'Thea,' Lepida said sweetly, 'what do you think of that German?'

I looked. 'Unlucky,' I said as the man died howling on his opponent's trident. In the next box, a senator threw down a handful of coins in disgust.

The arena was a raging sea of fighters. Already the sand was patched with blood.

'The Gaul over there wants mercy.' Pollio peered out, sipping at his wine cup. 'Poor show, he dropped his shield. *Iugula!*'

Iugula – kill him. There was also *Mitte* – spare him – but you didn't hear that nearly so often. As I was to find out, it took an extraordinary show of courage to move the Colosseum to mercy. They wanted heroism, they wanted blood, they wanted death. Not scared men. Not mercy.

It was over quite quickly. The victors strutted before the imperial box, where the emperor tossed coins to those who had fought well. The losers lay crumpled and silent on the sand, waiting to be raked away by the arena attendants. One or two men still writhed in their death throes, shrieking as they tried to stuff the guts back into their own bellies. Laughing tribunes and giggling girls laid bets on how long it would take them to die.

Swish, swish, swish. My arms ached.

'Fruit, dominus?' A slave came to Pollio's elbow with a tray of grapes and figs. Lepida gestured for more wine, and all through the patrician boxes I saw people sitting back to chatter. In the tiers above, plebs fanned themselves and looked for the hawkers who darted with bread and beer for sale. In his box the emperor leaned back on one elbow, rolling dice with his guards. The morning had flown. For some, dragged.

During the midday break, business was attended to inside the arena. The dead gladiators had all been carted away, the patches of blood raked over, and now the arena guards led out a shuffling line of shackled figures. Slaves, criminals, prisoners; all sentenced for execution.

'Father, can't I have more wine? It's a special occasion.'

Down in the arena, the man at the head of the shackled line blinked as a blunt sword was shoved into his hands. He stared at it, dull-eyed and bent-backed, and the arena guard prodded him. He turned wearily and hacked at the chained man behind him. A dull blade, because it took a great deal of hacking. I could hardly hear the man's screams over the chatter in the stands. No one seemed to be paying attention to the arena at all.

The arena guards disarmed the first slave roughly, passing the sword to the next in line. A woman. She killed the man, roughly cutting his throat; was disarmed, killed in turn by the next, who tried vainly to stab her through the heart. It took a dozen strokes of the dull sword.

I looked down the chained line. Perhaps twenty prisoners. Old and young, men and women, identical in their bent shoulders and shuffling feet. Only one stood straight, a big man gazing around him with blank eyes. Even from the stands I could see the whip marks latticing his bare back.

'Father, when does Belleraphon's bout come up? I'm dying to see what he can do against that Thracian . . .'

The guards gave the blunt sword to the man with the scars. He hefted it a moment in his shackled hands, gave it a swing. No hacking for him; he killed the man who had gone before him in one efficient thrust. I winced.

The arena guard reached for the sword and the big scarred man fell a step back, holding the blade up between them. The guard gestured, holding out an impatient hand, and then it all went to hell.

'Hand it over,' the guard said.

He stood straddle-legged on the hot sand, heaving air into his parched lungs. The sun scorched down on his naked shoulders and he could feel every separate grain beneath his bare, hardened feet. Sweat stung his wrists and ankles under the

rusty cuffs of his chains. His hands had welded around the sword hilt.

'Hand over that sword,' the guard ordered. 'You're holding up the show.'

He stared back glassy-eyed.

'Hand – over – that – sword.' Extending an imperious hand.

He cut it off.

The guard screamed. The slick of blood gleamed bright in the midday sun. The other guards rushed.

He had not held a sword in over ten years. Much too long, he would have said, to remember anything. But it came back. Fuelled by rage it came back fast – the sweet weight of the hilt in his hand, the bite of blade into bone, the black demon's fury that filmed the eyes and whispered in the ear.

Kill them, it said. *Kill them all.*

He met the first guard in a savage joyful rush, swords meeting with a dull screech. He bore down with every muscle, feeling his body arch like a good bow, and saw the sudden leap of fear in the guard's eyes as he felt the strength on the other end of the blade. These Romans with their pride and plumes and shiny breastplates, they didn't think a slave could be strong. In two more thrusts he reduced the guard to a heap of twitching meat on the sand.

More Romans, bright blurs in their feathered crests. A guard fell writhing as dull iron chewed through his hamstrings. A liquid scream.

He savoured it. Lunged for another bronze breastplate. The blade slid neatly through the armhole. Another shield falling, another scream.

Not enough, the demon voice whispered. *Not enough.*

He felt distant pain along his back as a blade cut deep and smiled, turning to chop down savagely. A slave's toughest flesh was on his back, but they didn't know that – these men whose vineyards were tended by captive warriors from Gaul and beds

warmed by sullen Thracian slave girls. They didn't know anything. He cut the guard down, tasting blood in his rough beard.

Not enough.

The sky whirled and turned white as something struck the back of his head. He staggered, turned, raised his blade, felt his entire arm go numb as a guard smashed an iron shield boss against his elbow. Distantly he watched the sword drop from his fingers, falling to hands and knees as a sword hilt crashed against his skull. Sweat trickled into his eyes, acid, bitter. He sighed as the armoured boots buffeted his sides, as the black demon in his head turned back in on itself like a snake devouring its own tail. A familiar road. One he had trodden all his years under whips and chains. With a sword in his hand, everything had been so simple.

Not enough. Never enough.

Over the sound of his own cracking bones, he heard a roar. A vast, impersonal roar like the crashing of the sea. For the first time he turned his eyes outwards and saw them: spectators, packed tier upon tier in their thousands. Senators in purple-bordered togas. Matrons in bright silk stolas. Priests in white robes. So many . . . did the world hold so many people? He saw a boy's face leap out at him from the front tier, crazily distinct, a boy in a fine toga shouting through a mouthful of figs – and clapping.

They were all clapping. The great arena resounded with applause.

Through dimming eyes, he made out the imperial balcony. He was close enough to see a fair-haired girl with a white appalled face, one of the imperial nieces . . . close enough to see the emperor, his ruddy cheeks, his purple cloak, his amused gaze . . . close enough to see the imperial hand rise carelessly.

Holding out a hand in the sign of mercy.

Why? he thought. *Why?*

Then the world disappeared.

THEA

Lepida chattered on as I undressed her for bed that night – not about the games, of course; all that death and blood was old news. Her father had mentioned a certain senator, a man who might be a possible husband for her, and that was all she could talk about. 'Senator Marcus Norbanus, his name is, and he's *terribly* old . . .' I hardly heard a word.

The slave with the scarred back. A Briton, a Gaul? He had fought so savagely, swinging his sword like Goliath, ignoring his own wounds. He'd been snarling even when they brought him down, not caring if he lived or died as long as he took a few with him.

'Thea, be careful with those pearls. They're worth three of you.'

I'd seen a hundred slaves like him, served beside them and avoided them. They drank too much, they scowled at their masters and were flogged as troublemakers and did as little work as they could get away with. Men to avoid in quiet corners of the house, if no one was near enough to hear you struggling. Thugs.

So why did I weep suddenly when they brought him down in the arena? I hadn't wept when I was sold to Lepida. I hadn't even wept when I watched the gladiators and the poor bewildered animals slaughtered before my eyes. Why had I wept for a thug?

I didn't even know his name.

'Well, I don't think Emperor Domitian is terribly handsome, but it's hard to tell from a distance, isn't it?' Lepida frowned at a chipped nail. 'I do wish we could have some handsome dashing emperor instead of these stolid middle-aged men.'

The emperor. Why had he bothered to save a half-dead

slave? The crowd had clapped for his death as much as for the show he put on. Why save him?

'Go away, Thea. I don't want you any more. You're quite stupid tonight.'

'As you wish,' I said in Greek, blowing out her lamp. 'You cheap, snide little shrew.'

I weaved my way down the hall, leaning against the shadowed pillars for balance, trying not to think of my blue bowl. Not good to bleed myself twice in one day, but oh, I wanted to.

'Ah, Thea. Just what I need.'

I stared blurrily at the two Quintus Pollios who beckoned me into the bedchamber and on to the silver sleeping couch. I closed my eyes, stifling a yawn and hoping I wouldn't fall asleep in the middle of his huffing and puffing. Slave girls aren't expected to be enthusiastic, but they are expected to be cheerful. I patted his shoulder as he laboured over me. His lips peeled back from his teeth like a mule's during the act of . . . well, whatever you want to call it.

'What a good girl you are, Thea.' Sleepily patting my flank. 'Run along, now.'

I shook down my tunic and slipped out of the door. Likely tomorrow he'd slip me a copper.