

SWORD OF THE GLADIATRIX

FAITH L. JUSTICE



RAGGEDY MOON BOOKS

SWORD OF THE GLADIATRIX

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*To Hope and Robyn
who continue to fight the good fight.*

BY FAITH L. JUSTICE

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I CONSULTED A HUNDRED OR MORE BOOKS, dozens of people, a couple of top flight museums; personally tramped the streets of Rome and Pompeii; sat in Roman amphitheaters; and gazed at the ancient graffiti advertising gladiator games during the course of writing this book. Among the books I found most helpful were: *The Kingdom of Kush* by Derek A. Welsby, *Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen* by Richard Hingley and Christina Unwin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* by Miriam T. Griffin, *Pompeii: A Guide to the Ancient City* by Salvatore Nappo, *Roman Sports and Spectacles: A Sourcebook* by Anne Mahoney, *Invisible Romans* by Robert Knapp, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* by Donald G. Kyle, *Isis in the Ancient World* by R. E. Witt, and *The Gods of the Celts* by Miranda Green. You can find a much more comprehensive bibliography on my website.

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*But who has never seen a woman behind her defiant shield
repeatedly striking at the exercise pole with her sword?
A helmeted woman like that thinks she can do anything.*
—Satyricon by Juvenal

CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Afra—Roman name meaning “Woman of Africa,” Kushite name Amanirenas—huntress from Kingdom of Kush, gladiatrix, fights as *myrmilla*

Cinnia—young British woman of the Icenii tribe, gladiatrix, fights as Thracian

Decimus Cornial Asina—Roman general sent to Kush

Kashta—chief advisor to the Kushite King and Pye’s father

Piye—Kasta’s son, Asata’s husband, Afra’s brother-in-law

Amanitenmemide—*Qore* (king) of Kush

Amanikhatahan—*Kandake* (queen) of Kush

Suetonius Paulinus—Roman Governor of the province of Britannia

Lucius Marcius—Roman trader

Asata—Afra’s step-sister, married to Piye

Oriana—Dumnor’s wife, Cinnia’s sister-in-law

Melva—Oriana’s younger sister

Dumnor—Cinnia’s brother

Boudica—Icenii Queen

Prasutagus—Icenii King

Brianna—Boudica’s older daughter (actual name unknown)

Maeve—Boudica’s younger daughter (actual name unknown)

Catus Decianus—Procurator of Rome, Province of Britannia

Quintus Petilius Cerialis Caesius Rufus—general in charge of the IXth Legion

Mesbat—Asata’s mother, Afra’s step-mother

Clio—snake handler/dancer, Lucius Marcius’ wife

Rufus—a friend of Lucius Marcius

Paetus—*doctore*, gladiator trainer

Varro—brothel owner

Caecus—brothel doorkeeper

Bassa—Roman matron, prisoner

Corva—old woman herbalist, prisoner

Celer—lame boy, prisoner

Priscus—poet, prisoner

Sextus Licinius Murena—Pompeii magistrate

Calvus—gladiator recruiter

Silo—*lanista*, gladiator school owner

Julia—Roman gladiatrix, fights as *retiaria*

Gerta—German gladiatrix, fights as *secutor*

Portia—Roman gladiatrix, fights as *myrmilla*

Barba—*doctore*, gladiator trainer

Fullo—*ludus* slave in charge of supplies

Naso—beast handler

Capeio—*doctore*, gladiator trainer

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus—Emperor of Rome

AD 54-68

Poppaea Sabina—Augusta, Nero's second wife



PROLOGUE

A FRA! AFRA!" THE CROWD IN THE AMPHITHEATER CHANTS MY NAME, calling me forward to kill or be killed for their amusement. The Romans call me Afra—"woman of Africa"—because they don't care to wrap their tongues around my real name. Or perhaps the fact that I am named after Amanirenas the one-eyed warrior queen, who wiped out the Roman garrison at Aswan two generations ago, gives them pause. It matters little now.

A slave wraps my lower legs with felted wool and straps a gilded greave to my left shin, because I fight as *myrmilla*. He smells of sour sweat, as do I. I've already fought once today, tested fate, and won. The gold sand that Nero favors in the arena still crusts my hair and rasps the skin under my sweat-soaked breast band. I will go again before the ravenous crowds to satisfy their bloodlust. For what? An emperor's whim? The crowd's passing fancy? A sacrifice to their gods?

I swallow the bitter gall that surges into my mouth.

Across the room, another slave straps armor on Cinnia, my beloved. She looks at me with pride in her eyes and a brief smile on her lips. We said our goodbyes last night, clasped breast to breast, thigh to thigh, a stolen moment before being sent to our lonely cells. My heart beats an irregular rhythm.

My love. Light to my dark. Fire to my ice.

Cinnia is goddess-given to me; from a land of mists and forests, so different from my country of desert and blistering sun. Without her, I would be dead. Without me, so would she. We have suffered, struggled, lived, and loved. Now we go out upon the sands of the great arena to die. One by her lover's hands, the other by her own.

It is not the life or death I chose for myself, but it is the one the gods gave me.



CHAPTER ONE

Kingdom of Kush, in the sixth year of Nero's reign (60 CE)

AFRA WATCHED WITH HER FELLOW KUSHITES, as the small contingent of Roman soldiers escorted General Decimus Cornial Asina through the streets and plazas of the Kush capital of Meroe. The setting sun washed the city in bloody light—an ill omen. As their guide from the Egyptian border, she should have tried to delay the Romans till morning, a more auspicious time for new beginnings.

She shook her head. *Leave the auguring to the priests. Only they can determine the will of the gods, what is auspicious, what is ill-omened. Besides, the General had been most insistent on setting the pace. Any ill-luck is his own.*

The blare of curved horns—what the Romans call *buccinae*—announced the Roman presence at the palace. Bright limestone steps led up to a colonnade sheltering a massive wooden door, flanked by monumental stone carvings of the king on one side and the queen on the other; both smiting their enemies with flails and spears. The red sun reflected off the soldiers' burnished breastplates and sharp spears.

Kashta, the king's chief advisor, and his own entourage of aides and guards, met the delegation with their own fine show of trumpets and drums. Among them, Afra spotted Piye, Kashta's son and her

step-sister's husband, dressed in shimmering striped robes. His hooked nose curved over a cruel mouth.

Her stomach roiled and her lips unconsciously curled into a snarl.

Gods curse him!

A final flourish of trumpets called her attention back to the ceremony. The chief advisor raised his hands for silence. "My Lord Amanitenmemide, *Qore* of the Kushites, born of the gods, and his wife *Kandake* Amanikhatahan, Mother of the next *Qore*, bids the representative of Nero, Emperor of the Romans, welcome to their lands."

General Asina gave the briefest of bows. Afra knew he would take the King's absence as a slight on his honor. Her people knew the absence of the queen was just as great an insult. Perhaps it was meant to be. If so, it was a dangerous game to bait these Romans.

Asina intoned in his stentorian voice, "Imperator Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, *Pontifex Maximus*, *Pater Patriae* and four times Consul of the People of Rome sends his greetings."

Kashta did not bend his neck. "My *Qore* has had accommodations prepared for you, but asks your pardon for his absence. He has duties in the temple of Amun and will greet you properly at a feast in your honor after you have rested and refreshed yourselves." Asina gave him a stiff nod and ordered his men to camp outside the walls. An honor guard accompanied him to his more comfortable accommodations.

The Romans marched off and the crowd dispersed, muttering. One young man spat in the street as the Romans left it. Three women with kohl-rimmed eyes watched the soldiers retreat; speculative smiles on their faces. Afra shrugged as the women drifted down the street in the Roman's wake. Everyone had to eat. If not for her hunting skills, it might be she following the Romans to their beds. The thought made her shudder.

Thank you Mother Isis, Queen of all Gods, Goddesses, and Women for saving me from that fate.

Afra walked across the plaza fronting the palace and the brightly painted Temple of Amun, wondering if she dared visit her step-sister

before retiring for the night. She lived for Asata's smiles and loving embraces, but it was dangerous meeting too often. Her rumbling stomach and a whiff of rancid odor decided for her. Dinner, then a wash.

She didn't make it to her room.

One of the queen's servants caught up to her, panting. "Huntress, the *Kandake* wishes to talk to you."

Afra indicated her sweat-stained linen clothes, worn sandals, and dusty hair. "Now? It's been a long journey escorting the Romans from Hierasykaminos. I don't wish to offend the *Kandake* with my stink."

The slave sniffed and raised the corner of his mouth. "She says at once."

AFRA ENTERED *KANDAKE* AMANIKHATASHAN's private receiving chamber through a small back entrance used for servants and others with more clandestine charges. Afra had used that entrance more than once doing the queen's bidding. The room opened on an interior courtyard which, during the day, provided bright light and cooling breezes. Now the room glowed in the soft light of oil lamps hung from the ceiling. Coals in a brass brazier chased off the night chill and gave flickering life to the frescos of Nile plants and animals on the wall. The queen entered and Afra abased herself on the soft wool carpet.

"Rise and be seated. Take some refreshment." In the tradition of Kushite queens, Amanikhatahan was an immense woman—shorter than Afra by a head, but three times her girth. Her dusky skin glistened with oil; her ears, hands, and arms glittered with gold ornaments. A gold pectoral decorated with blue faience rested on the substantial bosom of her white linen gown. She had not finished her preparations for the Roman banquet. The queen's shaved head awaited the elaborate wig and headdress reminiscent of the ancient Egyptians her ancestors had once ruled.

Afra perched on a chair decorated with blue-green cushions made of a smooth material that felt like water gliding over her fingers—silk it was called, from lands beyond the east sea. She reached for a blue glass goblet filled with cool wine but left the plate of sliced melon untouched.

The queen settled on a more substantial couch and clasped her hands in her lap. Afra lowered her eyes and awaited the queen's pleasure.

Finally the queen nodded. "My daughter, you have been a good and faithful servant since you came to me two years ago. Your hunting skills are renowned and you have completed every...delicate...task set to you with diligence and discretion."

Afra bowed her head in acknowledgment. She had seen but eighteen summers when her step-mother drove her from home, calling her abomination. These last two years, serving her queen, allowed her hope of a future with Asata.

The queen sampled the wine and looked at Afra over the rim of her goblet. "What did you learn on the trek?"

"A little, *Kandake*. I'm still learning their language." She smiled. "The General's name, Asina, means female ass. For some reason the Romans delight in having insulting names."

"Now I will have difficulty speaking to the man without seeing a braying donkey." The queen's eyes sparkled then sharpened. "But I need to know more than their penchant for silly names. Why this expedition? Why now? Relations are good with Rome. Trade is profitable."

"The soldiers are sharp-eyed; the traders anxious. Asina talks of a journey to discover the origins of the Mother Nile. All seem curious about the source of our gold and ivory."

"Rome expands like a desert storm, gobbling up all the lands on their borders. They fill our northern horizon and menace us with destruction." The queen leaned back into her cushions, frowning. "If they see any benefit to adding our land to theirs, they will crush us."

"Can we not defend ourselves? Frighten them with a show of strength? The Romans in the garrisons on the border are few. I heard of rebellion on their other frontiers."

"Kashta and others would like to think so, but..." The queen shook her head and sipped her wine. "What the Romans want, the Romans get—eventually. Even your namesake struck only a temporary blow. She destroyed a garrison and took the bronze head of Augustus as a trophy, but the Romans returned in force and destroyed her capital Napata. We

must offer neither defiance nor thought of treasure.”

They sat in silence for a few moments until the queen lifted her head and said with a bitter smile, “We must convince them Kush has nothing that cannot be gotten easier elsewhere.”

Afra saw the sense in the queen’s instincts. She had seen the discipline of the soldiers on the border and listened carefully to the stories of conquest they boasted of. It rankled her soul to offer no resistance, but she trusted the queen understood the extent of the Roman threat. Afra was a hunter. She recognized the predator in the Roman attitude, but had no way to gauge the larger danger to her country. That task lay with the *Qore* and *Kandake*, who had other spies among the Romans and traders.

“The Romans wish to continue south. You are right. They seek the source of our riches under the guise of this quest to find the source of our Mother River.” The queen handed Afra a leather bag filled with clinking coins. “You know the lands to the south best. Take the Romans through the most desolate wastes to the Great Swamp. Your task is not only to guide the men, but also guide their thoughts away from conquest. This is a subtle task. Do you think you can do it?”

“I will do my utmost.”

“That is all I ask.” The queen smiled. “I will plant one or two others in the expedition with the same message. If you succeed, there will be a greater reward.”

“Thank you, *Kandake*.” Afra bowed deeply.

On her way out of the palace she hefted the bag of coins. Yes, she would soon have enough to pay back her step-sister’s bride price and take her away from Piye. *Asata, my gentle love....sister with the voice of a song bird*. She winced at the memory of the last time they had met: Asata sobbing in her arms, eye swollen shut, lips bruised. *When I return*.



CHAPTER TWO

Roman Province of Britannia, 60 CE

CINNIA KEPT A FIRELESS VIGIL on a ridge above the Roman army camped on the shore across from the Sacred Isle of the Druids—what the Romans called Mona. She breathed into her cupped hands to warm them. Why were they here? She thought the new Roman Governor Paulinus fought the rebel Silures in the hills to the southwest. Besides, it was late fall, time for warriors to retire to their winter quarters. Her people, the Iceni, were allies of Rome. She should be able to walk up to the camp and ask questions, but something told her to hide. If the Romans were on the march, no one was safe, much less a young native woman. She had heard stories...

Her empty stomach distracted her thoughts. Cinnia was nearly out of journey bread. She'd eaten the last of the dried meat two days ago. She had planned to be on the Sacred Isle by now, feasting with her father. Her brother's wife had given birth to a healthy son—her father's first grandchild and she brought the news. But that was just an excuse for her to visit her father after a long absence.

Father. She could almost feel his strong arms lifting her up, see his crooked smile and green eyes sparkling with humor, smell the wood

smoke in his hair. She shook off the dream state and concentrated on the Romans. She couldn't afford to be stumbled over, but sometimes the waking dreams were hard to disperse. She did not want to wander in that other world too long. Her brother showed no aptitude—in spite of springing from a long line of druids and bards—for other world walking. But perhaps his son would...in time.

Since her mother had died of a fever seven years ago, her father had taken Cinnia on most of his wanderings. She learned the songs, folk lore, and minor rituals at his knee. Her heart rejoiced in the roaming bardic life, but she knew her fate was to be married. Her tall form and curly blond hair attracted attention when they travelled. When Cinnia turned sixteen last year, her father left her with her brother and his wife and came to Mona to complete his Druidic training.

Burrowing under a pile of oak leaves, and wrapped in her faded green and brown checked cloak, Cinnia watched the Romans patrolling the shore; no craft was in sight except their heavily guarded flat-bottomed boats. The currents were treacherous in the strait even when the tide was out, providing further protection to the Druid sanctuary. She could see campfires across the narrow stretch of water. Druids? Bards? Warriors? She debated trying to make her way across the water and joining her people. She was strong and, like most Icenii, perfectly capable of defending herself. But she was not of the warrior class. She carried but a single weapon, a knife with a carved bone hilt—a gift from her father—used for cutting meat and other camp tasks. Cinnia could do nothing but watch and wait. Maybe the Romans would move on. Surely if they *did* attack, her gods would protect their most holy site.

By dusk, Cinnia had tired of watching the Romans. They scurried like ants around the tidy camp, hiding behind a protective ditch and palisade. Inside were neat rows of tents and fires providing hot food. Her stomach growled. Cinnia pulled out the last of her journey bread and moistened it with water. She drank sparingly, not wanting to leave her vantage point to relieve herself. She burrowed further under the leaves for warmth, plumped her pack and fell into a fitful sleep.

CINNIA WOKE TO A GREAT DIN from across the straits and crawled to her observation point. Clouds rolled across the skies; dark and threatening rain. Wind whipped white caps on the water as the tide receded. The harsh sound of the *carnyx*, the tribal war horn, drifted across the water. She couldn't hear the shouts of individual warriors as they clashed their swords against their shields, but they came to her as a dull roar. The white forms of naked women danced among the warriors, shrieking and brandishing torches, spurring the men to greater frenzy. Behind them she saw a rank of white-robed druids raising their hands and casting curses on the Romans.

Fear squeezed Cinnia's chest; her heart shuddered and her breath came in gasps. Surely her gods would protect the sacred isle. She squinted, trying desperately to spy her father, but the distance was too great. She looked at the lowering skies and prayed. "May Andrasta honor our sacrifices and give strength and victory to our people." She cut her thumb with the knife and allowed a few drops to fall to the roots of the sacred oak. "Keep Father safe, please?"

The Romans seemed to ignore the people on the island and concentrate on their tasks. When the tide ebbed, the infantry marched to the boats, filled them in an orderly fashion and cast off. A huge flotilla rowed toward the island. The cavalry mounted their horses and urged them into the surf to wade and swim the brief distance.

Cinnia stifled a cheer when a boat capsized and the heavily armored Romans sank like stones. Another, then another boat overturned in the currents. The treacherous water swept away some horses and their riders.

The Roman losses seemed to spur the warriors on the island. Several two-wheeled war chariots careened across the open field between the water and the massed tribes. Warriors ran along the poles between two ponies brandishing their spears at the approaching enemy, while others drove the wicker fighting platforms.

Cinnia rose to sprint down to the shore, as the last of the Romans shoved off and the first made landing on the Sacred Isle.

The shouting charioteers surged toward the first Roman boats. Cinnia heard a sharp twang and whistling sound as Roman archers loosed a cloud of arrows from the incoming boats. Immediately the cries of the chariot warriors turned into sounds of pain and fear. Several teams went down, entangling others. The Romans formed up and threw a flight of deadly spears at the surge of warriors following the chariots. The *pila* caught in the warriors' shields, bent and entangled them making the shields difficult to maneuver, if not useless.

The tribes milled in confusion, then charged again, but it was too late. The Romans locked their large shields together, pushing the struggling warriors back and stabbing with their short swords. They moved on, leaving the dead for the ravens that already began to flock to the killing field.

"Father," Cinnia whimpered, tears flowing down her face.

TWO DAYS LATER, Cinnia crept out of her hiding place and walked slowly to a fen north of the abandoned Roman camp. She had watched as the fires died down on the island and the Romans returned to the mainland with their booty. No captives. No slaves. Her heart and body chilled, Cinnia pulled a round leather coracle from a reed blind. Cold water seeped into her leather boots and soaked her wool trousers. Long before she reached the other shore, smoke from burning trees and the sickly sweet stench of roasting human flesh stung her nose. She beached her coracle and walked through the carnage.

Desolation and death.

Cinnia couldn't take in the enormity of it all.

Everyone dead. Men, women, children, animals. All dead.

She staggered through the sacred oak grove. Every tree lay toppled to the ground, killed by Roman axes. Burned bodies, with arms outstretched, as if to protect the trees, dotted the grove like grisly flowers.

Feeling like she walked in a dream, Cinnia approached the druid village. Smoking piles of naked bodies guarded the gate. Cinnia held her cloak over her nose and tried to breathe through her mouth, the smell

of shit from voided bowels, vied with the stench of decay. She had seen people die of sickness and wounds, but never in such numbers. She doubled over and retched until her throat burned and her stomach ached with its emptiness. She sat, head in hands, not wanting to find her father among the dead, unable to erase the visions of butchery from her mind.

She heard others on the path and panicked. Had the Romans returned? She ducked behind a tumbled stone wall and peered out. A small group of men, with the same shocked look on their faces as on hers, stared gape-mouthed at the destruction. A tall man, with the sunburned look of a farmer led them. Cinnia dried her tears, wiped the snot from her face, and stepped onto the path.

The farmer looked her over. "We came over from the mainland. You have kin here?"

She nodded.

"So do I." He looked around at the devastation, jaw set; anger smoldering in his eyes. "May Taranis eat the bloody Romans' balls and crows peck out their eyes."

Cinnia barely heard the curses.

Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow she would be angry. Today she just felt empty.

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