

# ROME, AD 79

Suburra  
(Lucius's new home)

Flavian Amphitheatre  
(the Colosseum)

Gladiator  
school

Forum Romanum

Palatine Hill

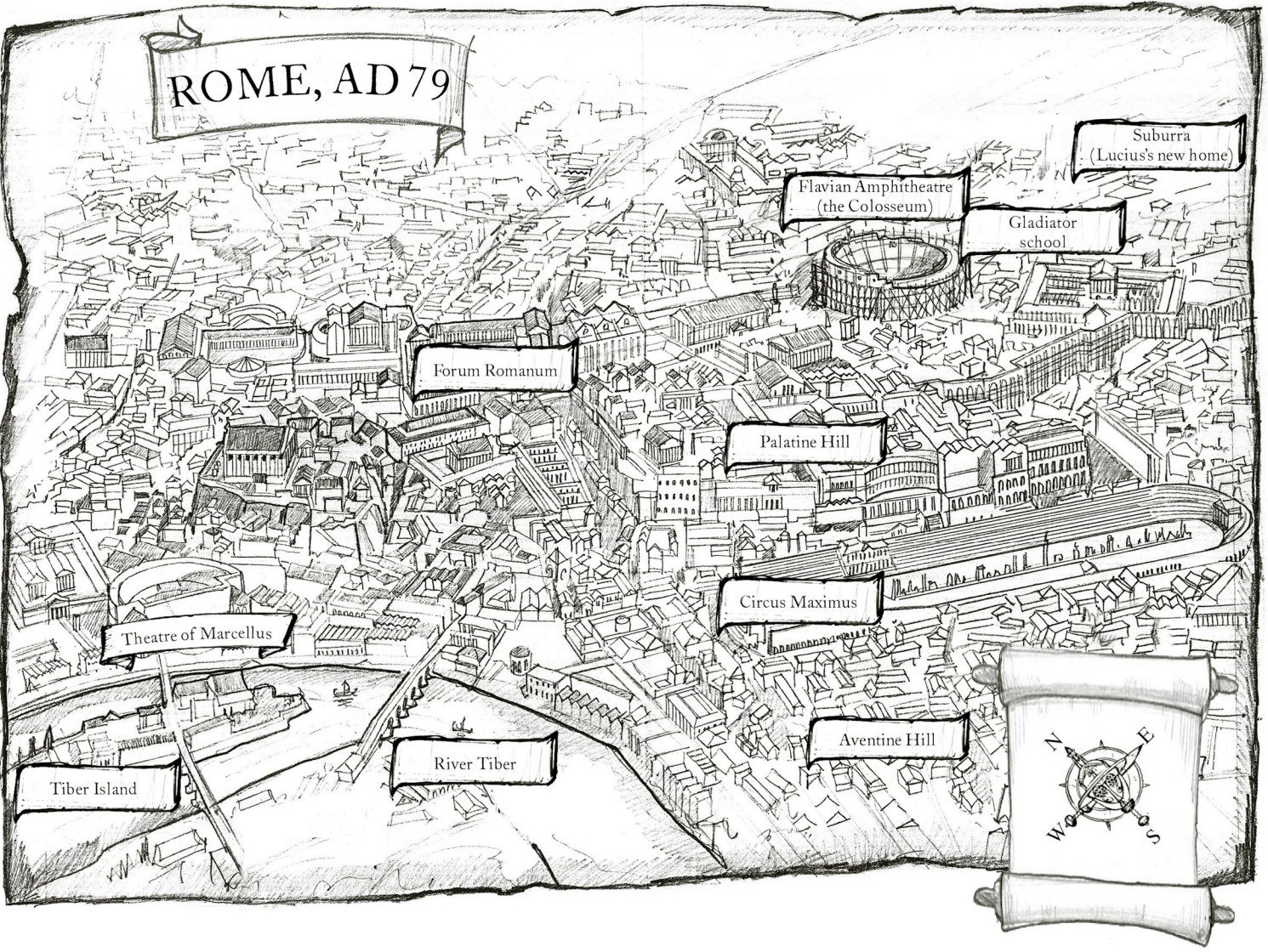
Theatre of Marcellus

Circus Maximus

Tiber Island

River Tiber

Aventine Hill





## THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Lucius, a Roman boy

Quintus, his older brother

Aquila, their father

Ravilla, their uncle

Caecilia, their mother

Valeria, their sister

Isidora, Lucius's friend, a slave

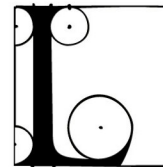
Rufus, a slave

Crassus, a trainer of gladiators

## PROLOGUE

# TRAITOR!

ROME  
JULY AD 79



Lucius stared at the household gods. Everyone else seemed able to shout and cry and wail and rage, but Lucius couldn't even open his mouth. From the moment the soldiers had burst in to arrest his father and found him missing, Lucius's eyes had been glued to the little wooden statues.

The soldiers had stormed through the villa, overturning furniture, rattling their swords and yelling, 'We arrest you, Quintus Valerius Aquila; in the name of the Emperor, show yourself!'

His mother had collapsed, trembling, onto the couch in the atrium,\* clasping Lucius's sister Valeria

\* *atrium: the entrance hall of a Roman villa.*



close to her. Valeria, who was made of sterner stuff, had wriggled free and stared at the soldiers in round-eyed wonder.

Lucius's older brother had found plenty to say. Quintus, named after his father, was never lost for words. He had followed the soldiers through the villa as they searched for his father, warning them of the dire punishments that would fall on their heads when his father returned, threatening them with curses and finally invoking the household gods to protect the family against the intruders.

But, throughout it all, Lucius had stayed in the atrium, his back pressed against the cool marble walls. The statues were still wearing their crowns of flowers and leaves. Less than a day had passed since they had celebrated their mother's birthday. And now his world was crumbling around his ears.

'Where is he, boy?'

A soldier was standing in front of him, demanding an answer.

'The Senate?' snapped Quintus from the doorway to the atrium. 'The Forum?\*' Where else would you expect one of Rome's most respected senators to be at this time of day?'

'He's not there,' Lucius said.

His voice sounded croaky and unfamiliar.

'What are you talking about?' asked Quin.

\* *Forum: the marketplace of ancient Rome, which was also the place for business meetings and political discussions.*

He sounded irritable and indignant. *How funny,* thought Lucius. *Quin always knows everything. How come he doesn't know this?*

'Explain yourself,' rapped out the soldier, who was evidently losing patience fast.

'Look,' said Lucius.

Finally, Quin followed the direction of his brother's gaze and his eyes fell on the altar. Lucius saw Quin's posture change. His shoulders sagged, his face registered confusion and disbelief.

'The dog's gone,' he said.

Of the three statues that represented their household gods, the wooden dog had always been their father's favourite. It had stood on the hearth altar for as long as Lucius could remember. Aquila had said that it represented the faithfulness of true friends. He would never take the statue on a normal working day. But it would always travel with him when he made a journey.

'He's taken the statue?' demanded the soldier.

Lucius nodded.

The soldier's mouth set into a grim line. 'Right,' he said.

He called his men and ordered them to his side.

'You're going?' Quin asked.

'Yes,' said the soldier. 'We'll leave you to your shame.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Quin had recovered from his initial shock and was truculent again.

be many weeks – perhaps months – of this ahead of him.

Quin had always seemed strong and powerful. But now, standing barefoot in the middle of the arena, wearing nothing but a loincloth, he looked like a child. Blood and sweat were smeared across his back and shoulders.

Other novicii gladiators were watching from the side steps, and Lucius had ventured out of the back rooms of the school to see how Quin was getting on. Now he wished that he hadn't bothered.

'No sword, no shield, no armour,' he muttered. 'It's not fair.'

'They have to learn to fight with no kit at first,' said a voice behind him. 'The weapons come later.'

Lucius spun around and saw a slave girl standing there. Her thick, black hair hung in two heavy plaits around her oval face. Lucius didn't know what to say. A month ago he would have smiled and thanked her. He would have known his own status. Now, working in the gladiator school, he didn't even feel like himself any more. He certainly didn't feel like talking. He turned back to the arena, where Quin was on his back again.

One of the watching gladiators turned to Lucius. His lips parted in a black-toothed grin.

'Your brother's not even out of his swaddling clothes,' he said, spitting onto the sand. 'We eat his sort for breakfast.'

\* *novicius* (plural: *novicii*): a trainee gladiator.

Clearly this gladiator was already trained and fighting for money. Lucius didn't answer but, as he heard another cry of pain from Quin, his throat burned. He would be sick if he kept on watching. He had to get out. Luckily, he had an excuse to leave: his uncle had asked him to deliver a message to someone in the Forum.



The sweltering streets of Rome seemed less busy than usual. Lucius wove his way towards the Forum, the cries of street sellers ringing in his ears as he darted through the throng of carts and chariots. The acid smell of urine and excrement stung his throat. He stumbled over a litter of piglets trotting across his path and the owner yelled at him: 'Out of the way, boy!'

'Sorry,' Lucius murmured, scooting to the side of the street, where a meat vendor who was selling piles of fresh red lungs was splattering everyone in the vicinity with blood.

He hadn't been paying much attention to his route until now. He knew the streets so well that his feet would carry him to the marketplace while his mind was still in the arena with his brother. But now he realised that he was standing on the street where their old home was. The shops set into the villa walls were selling the same cloths and clay pots of olive oil as always. Everything looked just as it had been in the old days.