

**A Hexham Book Festival commission**

# **LUPA**

a story for young readers

**by GARRY LYONS**

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# LUPA

## - a story by Garry Lyons

"Way, find!"

Lupa knew the call. Ozzie had been drumming it into her these last two years. It was her signal to scamper ahead on her own across the moorland, nostrils in the chilly air, trying to catch a gust of human scent.

Off she went, leaving Ozzie and the rescue team behind her. Frosty clumps of knotted grass bit into the pads of her feet. A mist was descending and a long slope dropped away in front of her.

She turned back to check. Is this where Ozzie meant?

"Way, find! Get on!"

Ozzie waved her forward. In their bright red kagools, he and the rest of the team were like blurred hazard lights against the grey of the ruined Roman wall behind. Lupa plunged down the slope into a gorge, her orange hi-viz jacket velcroed round her black and white tummy. The cowbell round her neck made its dull clink.

Lupa swept in a broad arc back and forth across the width of the gorge, sniffing the ground or raising her head to test the air for skin or sweat. She was young for a border collie and still learning, but she understood the mission and was born with a tracker dog's nose. There was a body to find, dead or alive, and it was her job to find it. As this was a training exercise, the chances were the missing person would be all right.

She scurried towards the bottom of the dip, mouth open, tongue hanging, sending wafts of vapour into the cold air. A group of startled sheep bolted up the rocky outcrop above her. A crow flew past, an inky swipe of feathers through the flurrying snow.

Lupa ignored all this. Ozzie had schooled the herding instinct out of her. She could hear his voice in her head scolding her for getting over-excited or going round in a circle and ending back with Ozzie himself. As a puppy, she'd once got so lost chasing deer, she went on a giant loop that took her back to the car park where Ozzie had left his van.

But she still had a problem with smells. They could be overwhelming, even on a winter's day like this. The damp miasma of moss and rotting tree bark, the

ammonia tang of sheep's dung, the dank stench of stagnant ponds or liquefied peat.

In summer it was worse. The musk of heather, the sweet bouquet of gorse, the heady effusions of wild garlic mixed with bluebell. All this could blow a young dog's mind. And the town was impossible. Oils and petrols, smoke from chimneys, cooking fumes, the disgusting pong from bins and drains. Picking out one odour from the rest was always a challenge for Lupa, though she could tell the salty savour given off by human beings.

But she was curious. A whiff of anything new she'd not experienced, she wanted to know what it was. She couldn't help herself. She was youthful, adventurous. It was a smelly world, and it was there to be explored.

The bottom of the gulley was boggy and reeked of stale water. Lupa scuttled towards a narrow gap between two big rocks. She glanced back again. The mist was too thick now to make out Ozzie. This must be right or he'd have called her back.

She turned through the gap. She could barely see anything. Just billowing cloud over freezing grass and marsh. But she felt brave today, and she knew what was expected of her. She splashed on through muddy puddles, her paws sinking into spongy turf.

For a while she was puzzled. There was nothing unfamiliar, just the usual effusions of earth, decaying vegetation and animal life. Then she noticed it, faint at first but perceptible. A charcoal smell as if from a far-off fire. It wasn't like the acid smoke she remembered from peat-burning up on the grouse moors or the toasty smell from gamekeepers incinerating the gorse. There was a blast of ash in the air as if there was a bonfire, and the distinct aroma of grilled meat.

Lupa recognized this from Ozzie's barbecues. Tail wagging, she took off through the fog. Never mind the training. The promise of cooked flesh was much too tempting. That would be a proper treat. And who knows? Maybe the rescue victim had collected some firewood and was preparing their dinner. If Lupa could find them, perhaps she'd get a tasty reward. That would be better than the prize she usually got from Ozzie, a game of fetch with a chewed-up tennis ball.

She broke into a trot, ignoring the swirling damp around her and the sludge that splattered and matted her fur. All that mattered now was heading straight to the goodies. On she ran, deeper into the mist.

The smells grew stronger. Her nose was tingling. She felt saliva wetting her jaws. She was engulfed in whiteness, but the cindery fumes were so intense now. Surely she must be close, she thought.

Suddenly through the haze she saw a yellow light flickering. There were distant voices. She stopped and crept forward one foot at a time. The mist began to clear and a small fire was visible. Its flames revealed a hotch-potch of buildings behind.

Most were single-storey cottages, some stone, some made of timber. Lupa could see people scurrying about in alleyways in-between. Dusk was falling. Around the fire, a gaggle of men were laughing and talking. Their faces glowed amid the fading light.

One of them was roasting a small animal on a spit. Rabbit by the smell of it. Others seemed to be playing a game, throwing small objects onto the ground in front of them. There was a lot of shouting, drinking from beakers and the grainy smell of barley. Maybe they were supping a kind of beer.

Lupa inched closer, trying to stop her cowbell from rattling. At times like this, she wished she didn't have it on. One of the men looked up, clearly hearing something. He peered through the dying light towards her and yelled. She froze. Getting no response, the man returned to the dice game. This was not a place to be, Lupa thought. She didn't like the look of these people with their baggy tunics and rough-hewn leggings, and there was something mouldy about their smell.

She weighed up returning to Ozzie. But she couldn't find the track to guide her. After a minute or two's searching, she decided she better move on. She skirted round the village, doing her best to keep out of earshot. From what she could tell, it was a busy place. People were meeting, chatting, exchanging coins for goods. She saw a man lifting pots from the back of a cart. Women were calling out to their children. Someone was carrying a heavy bucket. Someone else threw slops out of a door.

Then, as she slipped round to the opposite side of the village, Lupa found herself faced by an astonishing vision of stone. It was a fort, looming above her on a hillside, block-shaped with battlements, turrets and towers. On a rampart, she made out a man in a helmet holding what looked like a long stick with a sharp point at the end.

There was a gap beneath a tower. It looked like a gateway. A rider on a horse was going through. Once again curiosity got the better of Lupa. She clambered up the slope towards the gate. The smells were different now. There was human shit, chicken shit, horse dung and leather, bread-baking, laundry steam, fish oil, and coal. It was a confusion of whiffs, a pot-pourri of pongs, a malodorous maelstrom unlike anything Lupa had encountered before.

She approached the gate. In a flash of teeth and muscle, three monsters flew out at her, snarling and yelping with rage. Lupa leapt back, only for the monsters to jerk abruptly upwards, throttled by the studded collars attached to

chains around their necks. Lupa cowered. She'd not seen dogs quite like this before. Pug-nosed, like interbreeds of mastiffs and bulldogs, but demonic and obviously sensing blood. They yanked at their nooses, straining their shackles to breaking point. Their eyes bulged and spittle dripped from their jowls.

A young man arrived from the other side of the gate, shouting at them with words Lupa had never heard. He held up a burning torch and caught her in the flamelight. The look on his face showed total surprise.

He stood motionless for a second. He wore a green and gold tunic. Over his shoulder was a belt, from which hung a short sword. But what struck Lupa about him most was this weird effluvium. A mixture of pig fat and rosewater cologne.

He thrust his torch at Lupa furiously. It was clear she wasn't welcome here. She sprang up and sprinted away into the wilderness with the dog-monsters baying ferociously in her wake.

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Over the next few days, rumours went around the village about a mysterious hound with a shiny coat the colour of the setting sun. Some said it was a fox. Some said it was a supernatural spirit. Others said it was a rare species only known in these wild, northern lands. People spoke of sightings and a metallic jangling sound around the cottages. There'd been thefts of bones and leftover scraps of meat.

Valeria first heard of these stories listening to her parents talking. They lived in one of the stone-built houses nearest the fort. Valeria's dad was a merchant from Leptis Magna in Libya, who supplied wine and olive oil to the soldiers stationed there. He'd arrived shortly after the Romans had built their Great Wall, which stretched away into the hills either side of the fort. Some years later he'd met Valeria's mum, a local girl, whose family had a farmstead an hour's walk from the village, where they kept cattle and a flock of hardy sheep.

Late one afternoon, Valeria was returning from the burn with water when she heard a commotion. She turned into a side alley to see a gang of lads prodding and hitting an animal with sticks. It was cornered and yowling, clearly terrified. As it tried to escape, one of the lads lunged at it. There was a brief scuffle of fur and flesh. Then the creature broke free and ran off, leaving an orange jacket behind it, ripped away from its body in the fight.

Valeria was upset at the boys. It was a defenceless dog they'd been baiting, though long-nosed and furry, not a type she recognized. Was this the mystery beast people were going on about? She wanted to say something. But she was twelve. She'd only be laughed at. She wished that people could be more kind.

News that the infamous scavenger was nearly caught became the talk of the village. The lads and their bravery became the stuff of local legend. The luminescent jacket was hung up in the tavern like a trophy. Those who could read tried to decipher the inscriptions on it. The alphabet was Latin but the words were in an unknown foreign language, 'Mountain Rescue' and 'Northumberland National Park'.

The women were especially intrigued. They were used to weaving from sheep's wool. They'd never seen a fluorescent Gore-Tex waterproof. Valeria kept her thoughts to herself. Everyone was treating the dog as entertainment. To her, it was just a poor stray.

One day, her mum sent her through the dank and drizzle to her grandparents' farm to get some eggs. Valeria wasn't happy. Her younger brothers were allowed to stay at home, playing centurions with their wooden swords. Her grandparents kept the hens in a round outhouse, where rain dripped in through a thatched roof. As Valeria picked the eggs out from a rickety coop, one slipped out of her hand and smashed on the wet, straw-covered ground.

In a flash, she felt a presence behind her. She turned and there in the doorway was the dog. It was looking straight at her, thin and bedraggled, with a sad, tearful, imploring face. She made a move towards it. It leapt back a few paces.

"Est bonum," she said, trying to reassure.

Wondering what to do, she scooped up the egg yolk and held out her hand. Slowly the dog came to her, then hungrily licked her palm. Its tongue was soft and sticky on her skin like jelly. When it was finished, it sniffed around her ankles looking for more.

She broke another egg and let it eat. She noticed wounds and cuts around its head and ears. She stroked its damp fur, which it seemed to like. It fed and fed. She carried on breaking eggs.

The poor thing was starving. It pushed its back into her ribcage, evidently craving warmth. She noticed the cowbell round its neck and, next to it, a metal tag. Engraved on it were some letters, L-U-P-A.

Lupa. She-wolf. She knew the word. Every child in the Empire did. It was a she-wolf who brought up Romulus and Remus, the two brothers who later founded Rome. But that was just a story. In all probability, Lupa was just this poor thing's name. Valeria wiped her hand on her tunic. There wouldn't be any eggs left at this rate.

She steeled herself and led Lupa by the collar out of the hut, across the yard and over to the farmstead gate. She pointed across the moor.

"Abi!"

Lupa looked up at her with soulful eyes.

“Abi! Cede!”

Lupa wouldn't budge. Valeria tried throwing a stick. All Lupa did was run and fetch it back. In the end, Valeria gave up and let her newfound companion follow her on her return home across the fields.

But Lupa wouldn't go all the way. As they approached the village, Valeria looked round to see she'd disappeared. Lupa knew the smell of the place now, and she didn't care for it.

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As the days went by, whenever Valeria was out in the open, Lupa would find her. It was the almond oil she rubbed into her olive skin. Down by the burn or near the turf rampart, Lupa would come bounding up, bushy-tailed and barking, bell clinking, and of course always wanting food. Valeria made sure she had a bone or some bread to give her. It didn't take long for Lupa's coat to glisten again. She liked to bring Valeria presents, a tree branch or a dead rodent. But the thing she loved most was herding animals.

The instinct hadn't left her completely. If she sensed some sheep or a wandering cow, she'd dash over and prowl around them, head down. Sometimes they ignored her, but usually they stood there, stock-still. Valeria realised there was a use for this. Whenever her granddad's cattle ambled off out of the enclosure, she discovered that if she gave certain calls Lupa would find them, round them up and bring them back. Valeria's granddad was very impressed.

When her dad heard, however, he was cross. He didn't like the idea of his daughter having a stray for a pet, let alone one that had caused a stir in the village. Her mum had a word with him. She said Valeria was clearly fond of Lupa, and having a dog got their daughter out into the fresh air while her brothers were charging around indoors. Eventually, when he saw Valeria and Lupa working together with the sheep, Valeria's dad changed his mind. He said he'd allow Valeria to play with Lupa, as long as Lupa didn't come near the house.

Valeria was fine with this. It meant she spent more time at her granddad's farmstead, where Lupa was welcome and out of harm's way. Meanwhile, the excitement about the mystery hound died down in the village, though there were reports of a feral dog in the company of a black-haired, dark-skinned girl.

On a crisp morning in February, or Februarius as the Romans called it, Valeria and Lupa were up on the escarpment near the Emperor's Wall. A pair of skylarks were chirping and swooping above them. Otherwise they were alone and everything was still.

Suddenly Lupa was agitated. Her nose started twitching. Valeria could read the signs by now. Then a tooting of horns echoed through the valley below them like bugles, together with a cacophony of canine howls. Valeria gazed down to see some lurchers followed by a pack of bulldogs lumbering through the undergrowth alongside horses carrying boisterous-spirited men. They had to be expert riders, she thought, but the pace they were going looked reckless. She could see they had bows and arrows and spears.

Her mum had warned her about this. It was the commander of the fort and his retinue. The commander was a very important man. When he and his friends were hunting for wild boar, it was best to keep a distance. Valeria was glad to see the whole cavalcade gallop off into a wood.

Lupa didn't flinch. It was like an everyday occurrence to her. She and Valeria spent the next couple of hours ranging along the line of the wall into the hills. At moments, Lupa would run off, find something interesting and lead Valeria to it. A sheep skull or an abandoned stone shrine.

It wasn't till they were on their way back that they came across the hunt again. On the slopes above the wood, the huntsmen had dismounted and were leading their horses and dogs on a wide phalanx over the undulating ground. They were scanning the moorland floor intently, beating the brushwood with their spears. Occasionally one would look up and call out.

On spotting the dogs, Lupa stopped in her tracks. Among them were the three brutes who'd tried to savage her at the fort gate. While Valeria was working out what the matter was, an imperious-looking man rode up, mounted on a handsome chestnut steed. In a lofty Germanic accent, he asked Valeria if she'd seen anyone on her travels. His son's horse had bolted off, only to return with an empty saddle. They'd been searching high and low since.

This must be the fort commander, thought Valeria, nervously. A lot of the soldiers garrisoned there had been brought by the Romans from Germany. But before she could reply, she noticed Lupa dashing sideways and back, sniffing. In less than a heartbeat, the nose went skywards and the tail started wagging. Valeria told the puzzled-looking commander to watch.

Lupa glanced back at her. Valeria pointed. Lupa took off across the heath. She'd caught the cocktail of pig fat and rosewater on her nose radar. Her brain was triggered. Her training told her to investigate.

It was in a ravine half a mile away she found the casualty. He was slumped half-conscious against a rock, blood dripping from a gash on his head. She scuttled down to him, bell jingling, and barked to say help was coming. She knew from the pong who he was.



The rest was routine. Lupa followed her own trail back to Valeria, yapped sharply to confirm she'd made a find, then led Valeria and the commander to the ravine in stages, running on ahead, returning, then on again several times. When they arrived, Lupa lay next to the commander's son till his father could clamber down to him. As the commander sounded his horn to raise the alarm, her reward was a cuddle from Valeria and a game of fetch with the commander's leather pouch.

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The commander was amazed. He thought Lupa was a miracle. This strange-looking beast had saved his son's life, something those stupid bulldogs couldn't have done. Then he heard about her sheep-herding. Well, the name on her collar-tag only proved it. Lupa was a goddess, he told his wife, or at least she'd been sent from the gods.

His wife wanted to meet this sacred creature's remarkable companion, the olive-skinned girl who talked to Lupa in signs and calls. So Valeria was summoned inside the fort with her parents to dine with the commander's family in their palatial house. Valeria had never dreamt of such luxury. A two-storey villa surrounding a pillared courtyard, it was bigger than the general headquarters or any other building in the fort. But while they lounged on couches, feasting on fish and oysters served by slaves, Lupa got distracted and slipped out.

It was that pig and rosewater combo again. Where was it coming from now? She followed the trail past some barracks to a windowless building spewing steam. Poking her nose through the door, she found herself in a sweltering room full of naked men with towels. Luckily, they weren't daunted by the presence of a goddess, and Lupa retreated from the bath house tail first. Now she knew why the commander's son smelt so odd. She got back to the villa to find no one had missed her. Incense was burning. Everyone was talking. Slaves were offering the guests wine.

Lupa was the centre of attention a few days later, however, when the commander's son had recovered from his wounds. There was a thanksgiving ceremony in the hall at the general headquarters. A priest gave a blessing. There was chanting, and the heady aura of tallow candles and aromatic oils. Lupa's hi-viz jacket, retrieved from the tavern, was placed around her in an obscure ritual that made her seem even more like a god. By now she was living in the house with Valeria's family. Valeria's dad had no choice.

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A wintry moon was rising over the Emperor's Wall one evening, when Lupa went with Valeria on her regular trip to collect water from the burn. While Valeria was busy with her bucket, Lupa's attention was caught by a yucky fungus smell coming from behind a grassy mound. She went to inspect and

came face to face with a swarthy stranger, tattoos covering his face and arms. She stopped dead and growled. This looked suspicious. The stranger put a finger to his lips.

Valeria let out a terrified scream. Lupa pivoted round to see her mistress being grabbed from behind by a man with a cloth masking his face. As she darted forward to defend Valeria, she felt her hind legs held and the tattooed man yanking her backwards by her tail. She swivelled to bite him. As they struggled, a third intruder rode up bareback on a pony. Lupa felt the tattooed man trying to hit her with a club. She sunk her teeth into his hand, but he was gripping her with his other one. By the time she broke free, Valeria, now barely conscious with hands lashed together, was being slung by the masked man over the pony's neck.

The pony galloped off. Lupa went to give chase but was intercepted by the masked man brandishing a blade. She went to attack him, but felt a blow land hard across her side, knocking her flying. The tattooed man went to grab her again. But she dodged away. At a safe distance, she stood her ground, snarling at these horrible people. Then after a few seconds, the one in the mask tugged the other's wrist and they ran off towards a wooded copse.

Lupa tried to follow but a sharp pain shot through her ribs. The only thing she could do was watch as the gang, all three of them now on ponies, and Valeria with them, headed away towards the ridge that traced the line of the Wall.

She limped back to the house. Her distressed whimpering made it clear that something had happened to Valeria. After a fruitless search, Valeria's dad scribbled a note to the commander. But an alert had already been raised.

A raiding party of tribesmen from the north had besieged a milecastle along the Wall, making enough of a disturbance for Valeria's captors to escape through the gates. One sentry had been killed and several others wounded. The commander and his officers were outraged.

Raids from the north were common. Many of the local British were angry and resentful that foreigners had built a barrier right through their land, stopping them trading or moving their cattle. But there'd been nothing as bad as this for a long time. The kidnappers might have come through the gates earlier in the day disguised as traders or been holed up south of the Wall for quite a while.

But why Valeria? It had to be to do with Lupa. Maybe they wanted to kidnap the goddess dog, but she fought them off, thought the commander. That would mean it was an inside job. There were plenty of locals in the village or even soldiers in the fort with family connections to the tribes. Someone who knew about Lupa, and *everyone* knew about Lupa, must have tipped the raiders off.

Maybe they'd demand a ransom. But that wasn't important. The urgent thing was finding Valeria. Where was she? Who had taken her? Several hostile families lived within a day's march north of the Wall, spread over a vast expanse of land.

Send Lupa, said Valeria's dad. The commander hesitated. Lupa was precious. Besides, she was hurt. Valeria's dad begged him. She'd find his daughter faster than squads of soldiers working their way slowly from farm to farm.

So in the early hours of the next morning, under the cover of darkness, a search party set off from the fort's north gate - two dozen cavalymen in breastplates and helmets, led by the commander, accompanied by Valeria's dad. And out in front was a border collie, bell clinking, hi-viz jacket, nose tight to the wet turf. There was only one thing in Lupa's mind. Find Valeria. She knew what she had to do.

They picked their way down the steep escarpment that fell from the Wall into the valley below. From there, they headed into wild country, skirting around lakes and marshes, watching out for surprise attacks. For over an hour, all Lupa could smell was moorland. Then by a cairn a wind blew into her face. Almond oil. Valeria. It was unmistakable. And that yucky smell of the tattooed man by the burn.

Now Lupa had the trail, the search party gathered pace, following her into uncharted territory. Then, as dawn broke, from the top of a rise a broad plain opened out in front of them, and in the distance a homestead surrounded by a timber stockade.

The commander called out. The cavalry halted. Lupa took this as her cue to stop. For the next few minutes, there was plenty of pointing and stern faces, as the commander and his officers discussed their next move.

Suddenly there was activity around the homestead. Tiny figures ran out from the stockade. There was an air of confusion and lots of arm-waving, though not in the direction of the cavalymen. It was time to act. The commander ordered his horsemen to check their swords and javelins, and line up ready to attack.

Lupa sat with Valeria's dad, who was watching all this from his saddle. She could sense his anxiety. Then a crosswind gusted over their faces. There was that almond smell again. But also hints of incense, candles, perfumed oils, all those fragrances she and Valeria had been smothered with. The wind was whistling from the side, through a gully that beetled down into a misty hollow. Lupa made a beeline. She didn't think twice.

She shot down through the gully, nostrils flaring. Caution didn't enter her mind. As she entered the cloud, the aromas only got stronger. Her bell rattled with excitement as she plunged on.

Then she heard a familiar voice.

“Lupa?”

It was weak but she knew who it was. She couldn't see a thing, but sound and smell got her to the target. She found Valeria, exhausted and shivering, sheltering beneath an overhanging rock.

Lupa barked. She'd never barked so joyfully. She nuzzled Valeria, licked her face and fell into her arms. Valeria held her tight. Lupa felt the fear and tension melt from Valeria's body. Valeria sobbed as her whole system flooded with relief.

A minute later, she heard her dad calling, and watched as he emerged out of the mist, dressed in armour walking a horse behind him, followed by the commander and two of the cavalymen. Hugging her dad, she said she'd been tied up and left in a hut by the kidnappers. But she'd worked herself free, jumped over the stockade fence and escaped. She didn't know what to do, where to go. She couldn't believe they'd found her. It was all down to Lupa, said her dad.

No wonder those Brits were panicking, said the commander. But as he conferred with his men about whether to go ahead with the attack, Lupa heard another well-known voice coming through the vapour.

“Lupa! Where are you?”

Ozzie. How did he get here?

She darted towards the voice, barking again. Her companions stared in bewilderment as a bearded man with red kagool and rucksack materialized out of the cloud.

“Lupa, what are you doing - ?”

Ozzie cut off, speechless. Who were these people dressed as Romans? Was he seeing things?

He beckoned Lupa towards him. Lupa looked back at Valeria. Who was she to go with? Who should she be loyal to?

Seeing tears welling in Valeria's eyes, Lupa went to her. Lupa rested her head in her young friend's lap. She let Valeria stroke her. But once a mission's done a rescue dog always returns to its owner.

“Lupa, come on!”

With a reluctant sigh, she pulled away.

Lupa ran to Ozzie. He was holding her tennis ball for her. She followed as he turned and strode off. When she glanced back, any trace of Valeria or the Romans had vanished in the swirling mist.

Hexham, June 8 2022