



## SCROLL III

Ostia, the port of Rome and the town where Flavia lived, was occasionally foggy in the early mornings. And so it was on the morning of Flavia's birthday, three days after she had found the magpie's nest. As a birthday treat, her father had agreed to take her to the goldsmith, to see how much she could get for her little treasure trove.

They left the house shortly after dawn and the mist swirled around them as they walked up Bakers Street towards the river.

'Pater, why can't we go to the town forum? There's a man who buys jewellery there . . .'

'I told you before. You will get a better deal from Aurarius the goldsmith. He is a friend of mine and he will not cheat you, as that perfumed Phoenician in the forum will certainly do. Have you got everything?'

Flavia touched the soft leather coin purse tied to her belt. It contained the objects she had found in the magpie's nest. She was hoping to sell them and buy a set of all twelve scrolls of the *Aeneid*, a book she had always wanted. She had recently seen a set

in the forum at the bookseller's stall. It was a beautiful parchment version with illustrations. But the bookseller was asking a vast sum: one hundred sesterces. Flavia hardly dared hope the jewellery in her purse would fetch that amount.

They crossed the Decumanus Maximus carefully. Because it was the town's main street as well as the road to Rome, it was usually covered with horse and donkey dung. There were no handy stepping stones, as in some other Roman towns, but Flavia and her father crossed without mishap. They passed the theatre and the forum of the corporations on their left and stopped to press themselves against the wall of a tavern as a mule-drawn cart rattled down the narrow street.

As they approached the river, the fog grew thicker and damper. The tops of the tall brick warehouses were not even visible as they passed beneath them. Flavia shivered and pulled her woollen cloak closer around her shoulders. Ostia had three harbours: a little marina for Ostia's fishing boats, pleasure craft and smaller merchantmen, a large harbour for the massive grain ships from Egypt, and the river harbour between the two. Here vessels could unload and either have their cargoes towed by barge up to Rome or stored in warehouses. Flavia and her father turned left at the river and walked past these warehouses as they made for Aurarius's workshop.

Above her, unseen gulls wheeled and cried peevishly in the fog, and she heard the creak of timber and clink of ships' tackle to her right. The wooden quay was damp beneath her leather boots.

Figures loomed up out of the mist, terrifying men with broken noses, mangled ears and meaty arms. Some had lost arms or hands or legs. But their ugly faces always broke into grins when they saw her father, and they invariably greeted him politely.

Suddenly, Flavia heard a sound which chilled her blood: the crack of a whip and clink of chains. Out of the mist emerged a pitiful sight: a line of women, naked and chained at the neck. Most of them seemed to be Egyptian or Syrian, but one or two were dark-skinned Africans. Their heads had been shaved and they were terribly thin. Some had open sores.

Flavia could hear their teeth chattering, but otherwise they were totally silent. Apart from their iron collars and chains, they wore nothing but crude wooden tags with prices scrawled on them.

The whip cracked again and out of the mist came the person Flavia feared most in the world: Venalicius, the slave-dealer. There were many rumours about Venalicius, the most recent that he had kidnapped a nine-year-old girl named Sapphira and sold her to a Syrian merchant. This was illegal, but once a child had fallen into Venalicius' hands and his

ship had sailed, there was virtually no way of ever finding the child again, or of proving the slave-dealer's guilt.

Venalicius had one blind eye: a horrible, milky orb that sat in its socket like a peeled egg. His teeth were rotten and his nose sprouted tufts of mouldy hair. Worst of all, one ear was missing, bitten off by a slave he had afterwards crucified, if the rumour was true. The wound still seeped a horrible yellow pus. Once, Venalicius had whispered to Flavia when her father wasn't looking: 'I'll make a slave of you, too, my dear, if I ever catch you!'

Flavia shivered again and averted her eyes. But just as she did, she noticed a figure at the end of the line. It was a dark-skinned girl about her own age. She was not weeping, but her beautiful amber eyes looked blank with despair. Her hands hung limp by her side, not bothering to cover her nakedness. Around her neck – beneath the iron collar – hung a wooden plaque with six C's scrawled crudely upon it.

'Six hundred,' whispered Flavia to herself.

In a moment the girl had disappeared along with the others into the mist, as Venalicius drove them into town.

Flavia and her father moved silently on, both subdued by the sight of the slaves.

'Pater, what will happen to them?' Flavia asked presently.

'You know what happens to slaves,' her father replied quietly. 'Those women don't look terribly healthy and unless they speak Latin they'll end up doing menial work: cleaning, sewing . . . Perhaps some of them will become cooks, if they're lucky.'

'Like Alma?'

'Yes, like your nurse Alma.'

'Pater . . .' Flavia took a deep breath: 'Pater, what will happen to the girl?'

There was such a long pause she thought he would not answer her. Her father guided her carefully around a mound of silver fish spilling from a yellow net. Then:

'She may become a lady's maid. Or a cook's assistant. Or perhaps someone will buy her for a wife,' he said quietly.

'A wife!' cried Flavia in horror. 'But she's my age!'

'Perhaps a bit older. You know that eleven or twelve is not too old for slaves to marry.'

Flavia said nothing more until they reached Aurarius's shop. It was at the end of a row of brick workshops built against one of the large warehouses along the waterfront. Tatters of fog swirled around the shop and the roof of the warehouse above it was swallowed in the mist.

The goldsmith Aurarius – a wizened, slightly cross-eyed man – looked up from his charcoal

brazier and greeted them cheerfully. A big watchdog dozed at his feet.

The smith examined the contents of Flavia's pouch with interest.

'Hmmm. The bangles are nice but not worth more than two or three sesterces. This earring is lovely. It's made of electrum. Mixture of gold and silver which can be melted down. I'll give you a hundred and fifty sesterces for it . . .'

He emptied the last object from the purse into his palm and his eyes widened. He glanced up at Flavia's father and then brought the earring almost to the tip of his nose.

'This one with the emerald is really special,' he said. 'Pure gold, maybe Greek manufacture, and one of the finest stones I've ever seen. Too bad you don't have its mate. The pair would be worth eight or nine hundred sesterces. But on its own I could only offer you four hundred . . .'

He looked gravely at Flavia.

'Your father's done me many favours, so tell you what: I'll give you six hundred sesterces for all four pieces. It's a fair price. You won't get better.'

'I'll take it,' said Flavia immediately, and held out a trembling hand to receive six gold coins, each worth a hundred sesterces. It was an enormous sum.

Flavia's heart was pounding as she slipped the coins into her pouch. She turned to her father.

'Pater, may we go to the forum right away? I know what I want to buy for my birthday.'

The mist cleared as they made their way to the central town forum and the soft blue sky promised a perfect day. Flavia walked quickly through the fish market, past fishmongers boasting loudly about their red mullet, sole and squid. She hurried past the fruit-sellers who were hawking their pomegranates, melons and peaches; past the jewellery stall, the toy stall, the pottery stall and the clothes stall. She did not even glance at the book stall as she passed. As they entered the forum, she walked so fast that her father had to hurry to keep up with her.

By the time Flavia Gemina approached the slave stall she was almost running. She looked around anxiously and then let out her breath.

'Thank goodness, she's still there!'

Wedge between a banker's stall and a public scribe's, in the shadow of the temple of Rome and Augustus, was a slightly raised wooden stage. The slave women she had seen earlier stood on this platform while Venalicius strutted up and down before them, shouting out their virtues. Already a crowd was gathering to look and prod and poke the slaves, who were still completely naked.

'How can they treat them like that? Like animals,' murmured Flavia. Untying her coin purse, she began to move forward.

Her father's firm hand on her shoulder stopped her short.

'Let me handle this,' he warned. 'Venalicius might try to take advantage of you. He can smell a serious buyer from half a mile away. He might raise his price or even double it.'

'He can't *do* that! Can he?'

'He can do whatever he likes until she is sold,' replied her father gravely. 'Keep back. Out of sight.'

Flavia handed the leather purse to her father and stepped back behind one of the marble pillars of the colonnade. Captain Geminus pushed through the crowd and began to walk casually up and down the line. Flavia noticed that the price for the girl was double the price of most of the other women, and she shivered in the morning sunshine.

'Ah, the young sea captain: Marcus Flavius Geminus! Are you a serious buyer, or just looking?' sneered Venalicius. Flavia saw her father's back stiffen, but he moved on quietly.

'How much is this one?' she heard him ask as he stopped in front of a red-eyed young woman in her late teens.

'Three hundred sesterces. Can't you read?' snapped the slave-dealer.

Another man, a soldier, had stopped in front of the girl. Flavia held her breath. She saw the soldier reach out and open the girl's mouth to examine her

teeth. Then he bent and peered at the price round her neck. He stood again and looked at the girl, who stared straight ahead. Flavia's fingernails dug into her palm.

Abruptly, the soldier shook his head and moved on. Flavia slowly let out her breath in a huge sigh of relief. 'Hurry, pater!' she whispered to herself.

As the soldier walked off, her father indicated the girl and said calmly to Venalicius, 'I'll take this one please.'

'Just a moment,' smirked the slave-dealer, 'I'm dealing with another customer.' He made a great pretence of helping a fat merchant in a grubby toga who was examining another woman.

That slave-dealer is torturing me on purpose! thought Flavia to herself. And then: oh please, Castor and Pollux, let me be able to buy her.

After what seemed like ages the fat merchant turned away, making a joke to a friend. The two of them went off laughing. Venalicius turned at last to her father.

'Yes, Captain Geminus?'

'I'd like to buy this girl,' repeated her father.

The slave-dealer raised his ugly head and seemed to look around the crowded marketplace with his horrible blind eye. Flavia ducked back behind the marble column and pressed her cheek against its reassuring solidness.

Then she heard Venalicius say very clearly to her father, 'The African girl costs seven hundred sesterces.'