



SCROLL II

Flavia's knees began to tremble uncontrollably. She held onto the tree so tightly her knuckles went white. She must be calm. She must think. Glancing down at the wild dogs again she decided there was only one rational thing to do.

Flavia Gemina screamed.

Although her hands were shaking, she managed to pull herself back up onto a branch. Below her the dogs whined and growled.

'HELP!' she yelled. 'Help me, someone!'

The only response was the rhythmic chirring of cicadas in the afternoon heat.

'Help me!' she shouted, and then, in case someone heard her but didn't think to look up, 'I'm in a tree!'

Most of the dogs were now sitting at the base of the trunk, panting and gazing up at her. They seemed to be smiling at her predicament. There were seven of them, most of them mangy and thin and yellow. The leader was a huge black hound – a mastiff – with evil red eyes and saliva dripping down his hairy chin.

'Stupid dogs!' Flavia muttered under her breath. The leader growled, almost as if he had understood her thoughts.

Suddenly, one of the yellow dogs yelped and leapt to his feet, as if stung by a bee. Then the leader snarled and writhed in pain. A stone had struck him! Flavia saw the next stone fly through the air, and then another, striking with amazing accuracy. The dogs whimpered and yelped and slunk off into the woods.

'Quickly!' a voice called from below. 'Come down quickly before they come back!'

Flavia didn't think twice. She closed her eyes and jumped out of the tree.

'Ouch! My ankle!' Flavia started to run, but a stab of pain shot through her leg and almost made her sick. A boy about her own age ran out from behind a tree. He put his arm awkwardly around her waist and pulled her forward.

'Come on!' he urged, and she could see that his dark eyes were full of fear. 'Quickly!'

With each step the pain eased a bit, but they were not moving quickly. They had almost reached the umbrella pine when the boy looked back, stopped, and reached towards his belt.

'Hang on to the tree!' he commanded, pushing Flavia forward. He pulled out his sling, and reached into a leather pouch which hung from his

belt. Fitting a sharp stone into the sling he moved a few feet away and swung it quickly round his head. Flavia gripped the tree and closed her eyes. She heard the sling buzz like an angry wasp. Then a dog's yelp and a satisfied 'Got him!' from the boy.

'Come on!' he urged. 'The leader's down but I don't think I killed him. They'll probably be after us in a minute!'

Flavia took a deep breath and moved as quickly as she could. Dry thistles scratched her legs and the boy's strong grip hurt her as he half lifted, half pulled her forward.

Suddenly the boy cried out in a language Flavia had never heard before.

They were nearly at her back door. But the boy was leading her away from it, to the right.

'No! My house is there!' she protested.

The boy ignored her and called out again in his harsh language. He was pulling her to the back door of the house next to hers. He glanced back and muttered something in Latin which Flavia understood perfectly. It was not a polite word.

She heard the dogs barking behind her. The boy pulled her more urgently and she could hear him gasping for breath. The door was closer; now she could see its rough surface beneath the peeling green paint. But by the sound of it, the pack was

nearly upon them. At any moment she expected to feel sharp teeth sink into her calf.

Suddenly, the green door swung open. A tall, black-robed figure emerged, pointed at the dogs and bellowed something in an unknown language.

For an instant the dogs stopped dead in their tracks. That instant was enough for the tall figure to grab them both, pull them through the open door and slam it in the dogs' startled faces.

Flavia sobbed with relief. Strong arms held her tight and the rough cloth against her nose smelled spicy and comforting.

Abruptly a dog's cold nose pressed into her armpit. Flavia screamed again and jumped back. A pretty white dog with brown eyes grinned up at her, its entire rear end wagging with delight.

'Bobas! Down! Go away! *Bad* dog!' said the man in black sternly. Bobas took no notice and gave Flavia a long, slobbery kiss.

At this Flavia began to giggle through her tears. This was the dog she had heard barking for the past week, since the mysterious family had moved in to old Festus's house. She sniffed and wiped her runny nose with her arm. Then she stepped back to have a good look at her rescuer.

'Allow me to introduce myself,' said the man in a pleasantly accented voice. 'My name is Mordecai

ben Ezra and this is my son Jonathan.' He gave a very slight bow. 'Peace be with you.'

Flavia looked at the boy who had saved her life.

Jonathan was bent over, resting his hands on his knees and breathing hard. He had a rather square face and masses of curly hair. He looked up at her, grinned and also nodded, but seemed unable to speak.

'Miriam!' the boy's father called. 'Bring the oil of marjoram quickly!' And almost apologetically to Flavia: 'My son is somewhat asthmatic.'

Jonathan's father had a sharp nose and a short grizzled beard. Two long grey ringlets of hair emerged from a black turban wound around his head. He looked very exotic and even odd, but his heavy-lidded eyes were kind.

A beautiful girl of about thirteen ran up with a tiny clay jar. She uncorked it and held it under Jonathan's nose.

'This is my daughter Miriam,' said Mordecai proudly. 'Miriam, this is . . .'

They all looked at her.

'Flavia. Flavia Gemina, daughter of Marcus Flavius Geminus, sea captain,' she said, and added 'Your next door neighbour.'

'Flavia Gemina, will you come into the garden and have a drink and tell us how you came to be pursued by a pack of angry dogs?'

'Yes,' said Flavia, but as she stepped forward, she gasped with pain.

'Your ankle.' Mordecai bent and probed Flavia's swollen right ankle. She winced again, though his fingers were cool and gentle.

'Come. I'm a doctor.' And before she could protest, he had lifted her off her feet and was carrying her in his arms. Jonathan followed, breathing easier now but still holding the oil of marjoram under his nose.

The doctor carried Flavia through a leafy inner garden towards the study. Although the house was laid out exactly like hers, it was a different world. Every surface was covered with multi-coloured carpets and cushions. In the study, instead of a desk and chair, there was a long striped divan going right round the walls. Mordecai set her on this long couch against several embroidered cushions which smelled faintly of some exotic spice: cinnamon, perhaps.

'Miriam, please bring some water, some clean strips of linen and some balm – the Syrian, not the Greek . . .'

'Yes, father,' the girl replied, and then said something in the strange language.

'Please speak Latin in front of our guest,' Mordecai chided gently.

'Yes, father,' she said again, and went out of the room.

'Jonathan,' said the doctor, 'would you prepare some mint tea?'

'Yes, father,' said the boy, breathing easier.

Flavia continued to look round in wonder. There were only three or four shelves of scrolls in her father's study. Here the walls above the divan were covered with them. Nearby, on a carved wooden stand, was the most beautiful open scroll Flavia had ever seen. It was made of creamy, thick parchment and covered with strange black and red letters. Beneath it lay a richly embroidered silk cover of scarlet, blue, gold and black.

Mordecai followed her gaze, then moved over to the scroll.

'We are Jews and this is our holy book,' he said softly. He kissed his fingertips and almost touched the scroll. 'The Torah. I was reading it when I heard my son call.' He rolled it up and reverently slipped it into its silk cover.

Miriam reappeared with a bowl and pitcher and to Flavia's surprise she began to wash her feet. Jonathan's sister had dark curls like her brother, but her skin was pale and her violet eyes were grave.

While Miriam was drying Flavia's feet, Jonathan came in with four steaming cups on a tray. He handed one to Flavia, who sniffed its minty aroma and gratefully sipped the strong, sweet brew.

Meanwhile, Mordecai applied ointment to her

inflamed ankle and began to bind it securely with strips of linen.

'Tell us your story, please,' he said as he worked.

'Well, I was up in the tree when the dogs came and I knew I could never get past them but your son scared them away and . . . and I think he saved my life.' Flavia felt as if she were going to cry again so she took a large gulp of mint tea.

'And may I ask what a Roman girl of good birth was doing up a tree in the middle of a graveyard?' asked Mordecai as he tied off the last strip of linen and patted Flavia's ankle.

'I was looking for the magpie's nest. And I found treasure! I found two gold earrings, and three silver bangles, and got my chain back, and of course my father's . . . ' Flavia stopped short. 'Oh no! My father will be worried sick! He has probably sent Caudex out to look for me by now! Oh, I must go home straight away!' She set her cup on a low table.

'Of course,' smiled Mordecai. 'Your ankle was only twisted. It should be fine in a day or two. Jonathan, have you recovered sufficiently to escort this young lady next door?'

'Yes, father,' replied Jonathan.

Together they eased Flavia off the couch and helped her hobble through the atrium. Miriam followed behind. At the front door Flavia turned.

'Goodbye! And thank you! I'm sorry I didn't finish the tea. It was delicious!'

'Peace be with you,' said Mordecai and Miriam together. Each gave a little bow as Jonathan helped Flavia out of the door and along the pavement to her house.

Lifting the familiar bronze knocker of Castor and Pollux, Flavia rapped sharply several times. From deep within she heard Scuto barking and after what seemed like ages the peephole opened and she saw Caudex's bleary eyes staring out. It was a full minute before the sleepy doorkeeper managed to slide the bolt back and pull the door open.

'Pater! Pater!' Flavia cried. Jonathan followed curiously as she pushed past Caudex and her bouncing dog. 'Where are you, pater!' she called.

'Here in the study, my dear.' Her father did not sound very worried.

'Pater! I'm here! I've found the ring and I'm safe! She limped through the folding door, coming up to her father from behind.

Marcus sat bent over the desk, carefully dripping wax on a document.

'And why shouldn't you be safe?' he asked absently, pressing a ring into the hot wax.

'PATER!'

Her father turned round and then jumped to his feet.

'Great Neptune's beard!' he cried. 'What's happened to you? Look at yourself! Your arms are scratched, your hair full of twigs, your tunic torn

and dirty, and – and your ankle is bandaged! Whatever happened?'

He peered past her suspiciously.

'And who, may I ask, is this?'