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Slavegirl from Jerusalem

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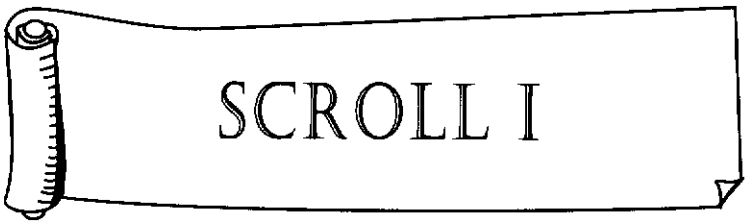
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SCROLL I

Someone was going to die; of that he was perfectly sure.

The only question was who.

Jonathan ben Mordecai had suffered from premonitions once before in his life. It had happened the previous year, when he was eleven. He and his father and sister Miriam had been staying with friends near a mountain called Vesuvius. He had dreamt of disaster, and disaster had come with the mountain's eruption.

Now, back in Rome's port of Ostia, another dream had begun to haunt him. In this dream, mourners carried a body on a bier through the foggy streets of the city.

Jonathan shivered and put up the hood of his nutmeg-coloured cloak. It was the first Sabbath of December, cold and foggy, just as it always was in his dream. He had been up since dawn, hunting outside the town walls with his dog Tigris. He stroked the soft rabbits that hung limply from his belt. He had been hoping for more than two, but it was unlikely that he would catch any this late in the morning, so he whistled for his dog, and set back through the dripping umbrella pines, heading for the Fountain Gate.

Tigris came up from behind, then forged ahead, a

dark shape weaving through the long damp grasses with his head down. Suddenly he stopped, tested the air with his nose, and turned in the direction of the sea. He whined.

'What is it, boy? Do you smell another rabbit?' Jonathan sniffed, too. The distinctive pork-sweet odour of burning human flesh raised the little hairs on his arms. 'A funeral pyre,' he muttered, and shivered again. 'Shall we go and investigate?'

They set off together in the direction of the sea, skirting a copse of dripping green acacia trees and then passing through umbrella pines, some so tall that their dark green canopies were swallowed by the mist.

Emerging into the fog-shrouded dunes, he saw the bright flames of a funeral pyre surrounded by forty or fifty mourners, dark shapes in the mist. As he drew closer, he saw that most of them were dressed in black, but a dozen or so wore the colourful, conical hats of freedmen.

'It must have been someone rich,' said Jonathan to Tigris. 'He probably freed some slaves in his will.'

A stout woman in a grey palla was standing a little apart from the other mourners. Jonathan walked over to her.

'Who was it?' he asked.

The woman turned a genial, weather-beaten face towards him. 'Gaius Artorius Dives,' she said, 'owned an estate down the road near Laurentum.' She jerked her thumb to the south.

'Dives? Was he rich?'

'Very.' She chuckled. 'Clever, too. He deceived all his captators.'

'Captators?'

'You know. Legacy-hunters. Men and women who hang around the sick and dying, hoping for a mention in the will.'

'Ah. So he didn't have a wife or children, then.'

'Nor brother, nor uncle, nor cousin.' She chuckled again and said, 'He kept the captators dangling like fishies on the rod. And then he left them nothing. Well, five sesterces each.'

'Five hundred sesterces each? That's not bad.'

'Not five hundred. Five.'

Jonathan's eyebrows went up. 'That sounds more like an insult than a legacy.'

'It was.' She winked. 'As the saying goes: *Romans tell the truth but once in their lives, when writing their wills.*'

'Did he leave *you* anything in his will?'

She nodded happily. 'He granted me my freedom and a few hundred sesterces. That's my new patron: Lucius Nonius Celer.' She pointed with her chin to a swarthy young man standing close to the pyre. 'Dives made him his heir. Left him the lot. Now he's the rich one.'

'This boy's not bothering you, is he, Restituta?' said a voice behind them. Jonathan turned to see a small, middle-aged man with a dark beard and a white skull-cap.

'Oh, no,' chuckled Restituta. 'We were just talking about poor old Dives.'

'Don't I know you?' said the man, with a smile. 'Didn't you used to attend the synagogue?'

'Yes,' said Jonathan.

'Oh, so you're one of us,' said the woman.

Jonathan nodded.

'Why don't I see you there anymore?' asked the man. 'At the synagogue, I mean.'

Jonathan considered telling them that his father – Mordecai ben Ezra – followed a new sect called The Way, and that because of this they had been banned from the synagogue and rejected by the Jewish community, even by his father's relatives. Before he could think how to phrase this, the woman came to his rescue.

'Not really any of your business, is it, Gaius?' she said cheerfully.

'No, I suppose not.' The man winked at Jonathan. 'My name's Staphylus,' he added. 'Gaius Artorius Staphylus.'

'You have the same first names as Gaius Artorius Dives,' said Jonathan, looking at the pyre, 'which means he freed you, too. Mazal tov!'

Staphylus chuckled. 'That's right. But I'm not one of the new batch like Artoria Restituta here. Old Dives freed me a few years ago when he made me his chief bailiff. It's a nice estate. I enjoy managing it. Cattle, vines, olives, and the best mulberry grove in Italia.' He jerked his chin at the swarthy young man who stood by the pyre. 'I just hope young Nonius over there gives me as much free reign in running the estate as Dives did.'

'And I hope he'll be as friendly to us Jews,' said the woman. 'Another thing I can tell you about Dives, now that I know you're one of us: he was a righteous gentile. He bought lots of Jewish slaves but I reckon he did it to treat us well. Never beat us or nothing.'

'Didn't stop him having his funeral on the Sabbath,' grumbled Staphylus.

'Don't suppose he had a choice about that,' chuckled the woman. 'Anyway, it was his heir's decision.'

Staphylus looked at the rabbits hanging from Jonathan's belt. 'Is that why you don't attend our services? To hunt non-kosher game on the Sabbath?'

'Um . . . I'd better be going,' said Jonathan, and whistled for Tigris.

'Now you've gone and frightened him off,' said the woman. 'Told you not to be nosey.'

'It was nice to meet you,' said Jonathan, as Tigris bounded up. 'Shalom, Staphylus. Shalom . . .'

'Restituta,' chuckled the woman. 'Shalom, yourself.'

Jonathan and Tigris started back towards the road which led up to the Fountain Gate. He glanced over his shoulder once to see Staphylus and Restituta watching him, their features already blurred by fog and by smoke from the funeral pyre. They gave him a cheerful wave. He waved back and quickened his pace.

Most of the tombs in Ostia lined the roads into town, but there were also grave markers and altars scattered behind the roads, among the pines.

He crossed the road to Laurentum and had just passed the tomb of fighting gladiators, when something made him stop dead.

It was a cube of stone at the base of an umbrella pine.

He turned back and frowned down at the red letters painted on the white marble. And for the third time that morning he shivered.

'Great Jupiter's eyebrows,' he muttered to Tigris, 'it's my grave.'

'Jonathan!' called a girl's voice.' Jonathan!'

'Here, Flavia!' he called back. 'I'm over here. Behind the tomb of fighting gladiators!'

'Oh! There you are!' A girl with light brown hair and

a sky-blue palla emerged from the mist-choked umbrella pines. Flavia Gemina was Jonathan's next-door neighbour and friend. Together with their friends Nubia and Lupus, they had solved several mysteries and had many adventures.

Flavia's dog Scuto emerged from the fog behind her. Tigris ran to meet his friend and the two dogs – one black, one gold – gave each other a quick sniff of greeting. Although Tigris was not yet a year and half old, he was already bigger than the fully-grown Scuto.

'We've been looking for you everywhere,' said Flavia breathlessly. 'Nubia went west and I went east, and Lupus is searching the baths.'

Jonathan did not reply. Instead he raised his eyebrows and pointed at the marble block.

Looking down, Flavia read the inscription: '*To the spirits of the underworld, for Jonathan ben Mordecai. His friends Flavia, Nubia and Lupus set this up for him, their well-deserving friend.*' She looked guiltily up at him. 'Oops!' she covered her mouth with her hand.

'Oops, indeed.'

'We were going to tell you, but then we forgot.'

'You forgot to tell me I died?'

'Jonathan! Don't say such a thing!' Flavia made the sign against evil and then spat onto the ground for good measure. 'We put it up last spring, when we thought you were dead. But you weren't dead. You were a gladiator. Remember?'

'If I try very hard,' said Jonathan, 'I *think* I can remember not being dead.'

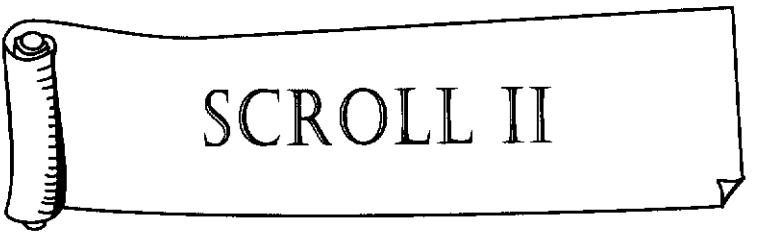
'You know what I mean.' Flavia's grey eyes were bright with excitement.

He raised an eyebrow at her. 'What's the mystery?'

'What? You – how did you know?'

'You get a certain gleam in your eye.'

She grinned. 'It's your sister Miriam. She's here. I don't mean here in the graveyard. I mean here in Ostia. At your house. And Jonathan, you're right: she has a mystery for us to solve!'



SCROLL II

Flavia thought Miriam was the most beautiful girl she had ever seen.

With her glossy dark curls, huge violet eyes and creamy skin, Jonathan's sister could stop a column of legionaries dead in their tracks. Last month she had actually caused a collision between two mule-carts just inside the Roman Gate; even at eight months pregnant, she was so breathtaking that the drivers had not been able to keep their eyes off her.

Flavia knew that Miriam hated such attention from men. That was why she usually pulled her palla over her head like a modest matron. But here in her father's house she went unveiled. Wearing a dark-blue stola and sitting on the red and orange striped divan, her beauty was ripe and luminous.

Flavia sighed. Miriam was not only beautiful, but she was kind and compassionate. She was also a skilled midwife. Even though she herself was heavily pregnant, she still attended the births of poor women and female slaves who could not afford a doctor.

A slave-girl stepped into the dining room doorway. As usual, Flavia tried not to stare: the girl had the name 'Delilah' branded on her forehead. Jonathan's mother, Susannah had brought her back from Rome.

'Excuse me,' said Delilah. 'Nubia is here.'

A dark-skinned girl in a lionskin cloak came into the tablinum, closely followed by a black dog.

'Nubia!' cried Flavia. 'And Nipur! Now that we're all here, Miriam can tell us her mystery.'

'Have a mint tea, Nubia,' said Jonathan, as the dogs greeted one another.

Beside him, a dark-haired boy in a sea-green tunic waved and pointed at a plate of almond-stuffed dates. Lupus was an ex-beggar boy who lived with Jonathan. He had no tongue and could not speak.

'Greetings!' said Nubia, handing her lionskin cloak to Delilah. She took a beaker of mint tea and a handful of dates and sat gracefully beside Flavia.

'Miriam was just telling us about her new friend, Hephzibah,' explained Flavia.

Nubia frowned. 'Hephzibah? That is a name I am never hearing before.' Nubia had been in Italia for a year and a half, but her Latin was not yet fluent.

'It's a Hebrew name,' explained Miriam. 'Hephzibah was born in Jerusalem, just like me. We used to be best friends when we were four years old. Then I met her last month when I was attending a pregnant slave at the estate where she lives. We've become good friends again.'

Flavia turned to Nubia and said through a mouthful of stuffed dates: 'Miriam wants Hephzibah to go live with her and Uncle Gaius. To help when the baby is born.'

On the divan beside Jonathan, Lupus made a slicing motion across his throat, crossed his eyes, and fell back onto the red cushions.

'What Lupus is trying to say,' explained Flavia, 'is that Hephzibah's master died yesterday.'

'Was someone cutting his throat?' asked Nubia.

Lupus shook his head. He shaped an imaginary fat belly and then played dead again.

Jonathan grinned. 'He was pregnant?'

Lupus laughed and grunted no, then puffed out his cheeks and tucked his chin down.

'He died of fatness?' said Nubia.

Lupus gave her a thumbs-up.

'At least that's what his slaves say,' explained Miriam. 'His name was Dives and he owned an estate near us.'

'Dives!' said Jonathan. 'I've just come from his funeral.'

They all stared at him and Jonathan explained, 'I was hunting and I saw them burning his body. The slaves were probably right about his dying of fatness. He made a blazing fire.'

Nubia shuddered but Flavia turned excitedly to Miriam. 'I'll bet I can guess what your mystery is: you suspect Dives was murdered, and you want us to find the killer!'

'Nothing as dramatic as that,' said Miriam. 'I'm sure Dives died a natural death. The mystery is that a few days before he died, Dives set Hephzibah free.'

Nubia looked up from stroking Nipur. 'The man who dies of fatness?' she said. 'He sets your friend free?'

'Yes. But he warned her not to tell anyone what he had done.'

'Why didn't he want her to tell anyone?' asked Flavia.

'I don't know. She doesn't know.'

'She told *you*,' said Jonathan, raising an eyebrow.

'I know.' Miriam's eyes suddenly filled with tears. 'And I wish she'd told more people. That's part of the problem. Dives died a few days after setting Hephzibah free. He left his entire estate to a man called Nonius, but—'

'That's right,' interrupted Jonathan. 'Nonius Celer. He was at the funeral.'

Miriam nodded. 'But Nonius says there's no record of Hephzibah's manumission.'

'What is man you mission?' asked Nubia.

'Manumission,' said Flavia, 'is the act of freeing a slave.'

Miriam continued. 'Nonius – the new owner of the estate – claims that Hephzibah is still his property. If only she'd told some of the other slaves or freedmen, they could confirm her claim. But apart from the man who witnessed the manumission, I was the only one who knew about it.'

'There was a witness?' asked Flavia.

'Apparently,' said Miriam.

'Then surely *he* can testify that your friend was set free?'

'That's the mystery,' said Miriam. 'We can't find the witness anywhere.'

'What's his name?' asked Jonathan.

Miriam shook her head. 'Hephzibah can't remember. She thinks he might be called something like Gaius Helvidius Pupienus. He's some kind of official. If it helps, she described him to me.'

'It helps.' Flavia took out her wax tablet and made a note of the name.

'According to Hephzibah, he has thinning hair, a long nose and a small butterfly-shaped birthmark over

his left eyebrow.' Miriam leaned forward: 'Flavia, we need to find him. Hephzibah has summoned her new master to court, and we need the witness to prove she's free.'

'Can she do that?' asked Jonathan. 'Can a slave summon a citizen to court?'

'She can't,' said Miriam. 'But another citizen can.'

'I'll bet it's Uncle Gaius,' said Flavia. 'Has Uncle Gaius agreed to be her protector and take on her case?'

'No,' said Miriam. 'Gaius is terribly busy with the farm. The olive harvest isn't quite in. Also, he doesn't know very much about legal matters.' She lowered her head and stroked her belly. 'So I've asked Gaius Plinius Secundus to help.'

'Pliny!' cried Flavia. 'You asked Pliny?'

'Yes.'

'And he agreed to help your friend?'

'Of course Pliny agreed,' said Jonathan drily. 'He's madly in love with Miriam.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Jonathan,' murmured Miriam, but her head was still down.

Flavia exchanged a knowing look with Nubia. 'It's not that ridiculous, Miriam,' she said. 'Pliny was passionately in love with you last summer.'

Miriam looked up at Flavia. 'But he's not in love with me now,' she replied firmly. 'He is studying rhetoric and said he would welcome a chance to plead a case.'

Jonathan snorted. 'If you say so.'

Delilah appeared in the doorway again. 'Excuse me, but a carriage has arrived. Driver says he goes to Laurentum.'

'That's me,' said Miriam, rising awkwardly to her feet. 'One of Pliny's slaves was running an errand here

in Ostia. He brought me in and now he's taking me back.'

Once again her eyes brimmed with tears as she looked at each of them in turn. 'Please. The four of you must find that witness. Hephzibah has no other proof that Dives set her free. Without that witness she can never come to live with us. And she must come to live with us. She must!'

The December sun had burned off the fog and was now high enough to throw a shadow on the new sundial in Flavia's inner garden.

'We have to find that witness,' said Flavia, pacing up and down the garden path, 'and we need to work fast. Miriam said Hephzibah thought he was an official. All the public buildings close at noon. According to this,' she gestured towards the sundial, 'that only gives us half an hour. Any ideas about where we should start looking?'

'How about the basilica?' said Jonathan. 'There's usually a list of officials posted there, and one of the clerks or scribes might know of one with a butterfly birthmark.'

'Excellent!' said Flavia. 'Any other ideas?'

Nubia nodded shyly. 'Aristo is visiting his friend Leander this morning,' she said. 'But he said he would return for lunch before he goes to the baths. I will wait here and ask him.'

'Good. And if pater should appear, you can ask him, too.'

'Where is your father?' asked Jonathan.

'He's gone to Sicily for his patron's wedding. Didn't I

tell you? Cordius is going to marry Avita's mother, Julia Firma!'

'Avita's mother?'

'Yes. You remember Avita. The little girl who died of a mad dog's bite.'

'Of course. I often pass her tomb.'

'And you remember that Avita's father died?'

'How could I forget that?'

'And do you remember how her mother – Julia Firma – was all alone in the world and how Cordius took her in as a seamstress, because she had no means to live? Well, Cupid must have fired an arrow because they're getting married at his estate in Sicily! Isn't it romantic?'

'I suppose,' said Jonathan.

'Anyway, pater was invited to attend the wedding and he told us not to expect him back before the Nones. Yes, Lupus?'

Lupus had been writing on his wax tablet. Now he held it up:

FORUM OF THE CORPORATIONS?

'What about the Forum of the Corporations?'

Lupus used his two hands to mime a fluttering butterfly, then shaded his eyes, as if searching for someone.

'Good idea!' said Flavia. 'You try to find man with the butterfly birthmark at the Forum of the Corporations. I'll go with Jonathan to the main forum. When the gongs clang midday, men will start coming out of the law-courts on their way to the baths. I'm sure one of us will be able to find that witness.'