

Julia's Flight - by Imogen Fewster

Julia scowled. Her best stola had a rip in it. No doubt it was from Wednesday, when she and her brother Flavius had been climbing the trees that had overtaken the courtyard of the empty house next door. Gnarled and twisted, they were perfect for climbing although they had some dangerous spiky branches, not unlike a soldier's gladius.

"Oh, the young mistress does look good tonight," simpered a voice behind her. "All ready for her stepmother's arrival. Lucky you."

Without even turning round, Julia knew who had spoken. Grrr! It was Marcia, the slave girl. Marcia was the most annoying girl in the empire - always flattering Julia in a fawning tone. The slave girl herself was a plain, greedy character, obviously only flattering the household because she wanted a rise in position.

"Out! Marcia," Julia snarled. She was in no mood to receive insincere comments.

"But surely the young mistress must need Marcia to ... "

What the young mistress needed Marcia for was never revealed as there was a loud battle cry downstairs.

"Pollux!" Julia cursed. 'That will be Flavius.'

With Marcia and her fawning completely forgotten, Julia slipped on her second-best stola and rushed down to the atrium. Her older brother seemed to love mock fighting, and all too frequently knocked a stone bust over in the atrium. Today, of all days, that could not be allowed to happen.

As she had guessed, Flavius was already there, a gladiator dummy at his feet. A typical well-off Roman boy, he had tanned skin and light hair. With his natural good temper, he greeted his younger, less-good-tempered sister. Although they chatted easily, both of them were tight with nerves, for it was today they would be getting a new mother!

Julia and Flavius' real mother had died from a fever - died when Julia was still a baby. Even Flavius, who had been two when she died, had never really known her. So they were especially nervous when their father announced he was getting married again. What was their new mother like?

After a few tense minutes, Marcia peeped through the window and announced the 'big master and the new mistress' were travelling down the street with 'all due decorum'. Will my new mother like me? Julia wondered. She was neat enough, but, as everyone knew, she was quick-tempered and her attempts to play music were ... unfruitful, to say the least.

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A few hours later, Julia reflected that not many girls of her birth could claim to having done work fit for slaves. Within minutes of her arrival, Avita Procola had changed everything.

"And it all started so well," Julia sighed. Avita, her new mother, had swept through the door like an empress in her palace. She was beautiful! Friendly was another matter. Avita had raven-black hair piled back on her head in the latest style, and her skin was like snow, as pale as the natives of

Britannia. Her stola was a pale, singing pink, making her look like the newest, most noticeable flower in the empire. But when Julia murmured "Mater" shyly and stepped forward to embrace her flower-like stepmother, Avita was as cold as the marble bench that stood in the courtyard.

After a brief, celebratory meal, Avita demanded that Julia washed the dishes as well as Marcia.

"I won't wash up," Julia had interrupted, shocked. "Washing up is a slave's job. I never do it."

"You will do what your mother says, no matter what you have done in the past." Avita had continued, frowning. "It seems that you have been allowed a loose rein, but I won't allow that."

A bitter argument followed, after which Julia had to wash up every meal, on her own. Julia sulked.

Meanwhile, Avita told Flavius off because of the way he asked for things from slaves, which she said was 'absolutely disgraceful', considering that he was the heir to 'this marvellous estate'. In Julia's opinion this was quite exaggerated. Surely this wasn't a 'marvellous estate'? Her house, she had been told gloatingly by Octavia, the old Consul's daughter, was just average. Normal. Typical. Any Roman had one like it. Any and every. Born with the arrogance natural to her generation, Julia assumed that everyone was as lucky as her. She had never even bothered about what a slave had.

Over the next few days, life got steadily worse for Julia and Flavius. Once, Flavius was beaten because a slave spilt milk all over the floor. He had never been beaten before. Apparently he should have been supervising the slaves, as the heir. The slave, Marcia, was not even told off. Julia wondered if Avita even knew, or cared, that Marcia had spilt the milk.

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"I've had enough!" Julia declared to Flavius, one miserable, rainy afternoon. "How can we stand more? I will complain to Pater."

However, this course of action did no good to Julia and Flavius. Julius, their father, had just stared blank-eyed while Julia complained, and, when she ran out of breath, he just absent-mindedly ran his hand through his hair and said fondly, "I'm sure Avita is a very good mother to you both."

Avita! The soppy tone with which her father spoke that. .. name ... made Julia cry out in frustration. It was like he was under a spell. Or maybe he honestly didn't know anything about Avita's behaviour...

"Huh." snorted Julia. He'd have to be blind to miss what was going on.

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And so the time dragged on, day after day, chore after chore, punishment

after punishment. When it seemed Julia's life could get no worse, Avita became pregnant with her first child. Of course, this meant she couldn't do the few of the daily tasks she used to do. Typical, thought Julia as she swept the floor, her back aching.

On the night the baby was born, Julia was turning restlessly in her bed, unable to get to sleep. It was the hottest night of the year and that would have kept her awake even a year ago, when Avita was a distant figure courting her father. But now ...

A sudden wail startled Julia. The cry was followed by another, and another, until the street was echoing with them.

"Flavius? What's going on?" she called.

"It's Avita," was the answer. Flavius appeared in her room, looking grimmer than Julia had ever seen him. "She's having her baby. Our half-brother." He spat out the words bitterly.

Once Avita had her own heir, the baby boy, she stopped looking at Flavius with loathing: she started treating him like a slave who had the cruellest mistress possible. Meanwhile, the baby, whose name was Artorius ('that horrible soppy name'), was spoilt more than a prince and was given anything he wanted, which was quite a lot considering he couldn't speak yet.

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"I hate her!" Julia snarled, viciously. She and Flavius were hiding in the trees next door, which had become a regular retreat for them. There, they were safe for an hour or so, until they were discovered and were sent off to work again. "I hate her, I hate that soppy little baby and I even hate Pater!"

"Be careful," Flavius, hunched up on the branch next to her, warned her. "It's not wise to talk like that - who knows what Avita might hear of?"

"I don't care!" Julia almost screamed. "I don't care! I hate her!" Suddenly footsteps sounded on the ground beneath them ...

"Now, Julia, do you want to take that sentence back?" Avita smirked. Julia was shocked into silence. For all her bravado, she wasn't eager to get into an argument with her stepmother, who could easily turn nasty.

"Come down here, then. I'm sure you're longing to find out what happens to naughty little children who don't do as their parents say."

Maybe they would have to come down ... Maybe all was lost. ..

"Flavius! Julia!" It was their father's voice. "Come down and run! I'll hold Avita!"

Breathing a strong sigh of relief, Julia slid down the tree, ignoring the stabbing, brittle branches that tangled her hair and snapped off with a crack. That was until she realised the flow of encouraging words was coming from Avita's mouth.

"Ha!" the horrible lady ran forward, triumphant, ready to capture Julia. But before her victim's eyes, Avita crumpled. Someone had leapt from the tree, had landed on her - Flavius - and he held out his hand to Julia. She took it without hesitation, and together they ran out of the house, off the street, onto the Decumanus Maximus, and finally onto a street Julia didn't even know, out of the reach of Avita's grasping hands.

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Drip ... drip ... drip ... On the dark, dank dripping Street of the Craftsmen, a well-brought-up, rich, Roman girl was begging. Her nose was runny, her clothes were torn and her name was Julia. Next to her was Flavius, looking just as out of place as Julia. Neither of them had any idea how to beg. More than once, they had been turned away by hard-hearted craftsmen and threatened by rough, tough street children. Finally, they had ended up by the door of a bakery through which came a glow of warmth and contentment. It looked like they would spend the night there.

At last, stomachs rumbling, Julia and Flavius settled themselves down for a restless, nightmare-haunted night. Tomorrow they would make for Naples Port, and start their new life as stowaways. It would be hard, but they couldn't stay in Naples ... Not with people like Avita Procola around!

Midnight.

Gaius the baker was going to bed. He was up late: business had called. Luckily, he had a small flat above his bakery, unlike some people who had to trek across town, when the moon ruled and robbers roamed the alleys.

Quarter past twelve.

Looking out of his window, Gaius saw two dark figures at his door. He snorted - they were beggars. He would send them on their way, with a sesterce or two. That was all they came for, money. Gaius knew he was too soft on them. Probably there was a message going around the gangs of Naples - sleep at Gaius the baker's and you'll make a living.

Half past twelve.

Standing on the threshold of his bakery, Gaius noted with pity they were no more than children. Very well, he would take them in for the night: youngsters had no place on the street.

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Rising up from a well of sleep, Julia was surprised to find herself on a small chair in front of a bread oven. The chair was made of roughly cut wood but it was polished to a shine. Where was she? Her mind travelled back to yesterday's events, of Avita, the escape, the streets ... She'd gone to sleep with a runny nose and a grubby boy - had someone taken her away?

Suddenly the strangeness overwhelmed Julia. She snuggled down again and let the tide of sleep take her away. Julia was almost there; almost. She was just about to let go and sleep when she realised she was hungry. Not just hungry - starving. And the enticing aromas of freshly baked bread, which, Julia's hunger-sharpened mind had just noticed, were lingering around her pervasively. They were enough to tempt anyone out of bed.

Opening her eyes with an air of finality, Julia slid out of her chair and tentatively approached a jolly red-faced man who was bustling around, like a bee in the consul's garden, in front of a roaring fire. He was pushing something light and creamy into a miniature drawer above the fire - bread dough! Then he clucked busily and bustled over to another fire and, pulling on a wooden handle, he grabbed

a fully risen, golden, sweet-smelling loaf of bread off a wooden bread board. Staring at it hungrily, Julia almost forgot her troubles.

"Yes, miss, that's for you and your brother over there," rumbled a jolly voice.

"And from what I see, it's very welcome to you and my effort wasn't wasted after all."

Julia raised her head like a startled rabbit to see where the voice was issuing from.

"Don't worry, Julia," came a more familiar voice. "This is Gaius the baker. He found us on the street last night." "Flavius!" Julia squealed.

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Julia went to sleep contented that night. When Flavius had turned up, the day had quickly transformed into a day of joy and laughter. Flavius would be taunting her for years about when she forgot to add yeast to a loaf of bread. However, when Gaius had added a herb and garlic sauce to this new creation, the flat circular bread was an instant sell-out.

Finally, Gaius had announced that his friend in Ceres Tavern would take them in for 'the duration'. Ceres was Julia's favourite goddess - as soon as she had realised that she and Flavius were not going to starve on the streets, she had made an offering to Ceres of her new creation. So her happiness was not tainted at the news she could not stay with Gaius, especially as his bakery was opposite Ceres Tavern.

There was no figure in the bed opposite hers but Julia was not bothered by this. Flavius had gone to return Gaius' bread knife which had got caught up in his robes somehow. When he returned, however, his face was as pale as the sacred geese which protected Rome. "Julia, we've got to leave," he whispered.

"Leave?" Julia was aghast. "We've only just got here and Mistress Regina is so nice!"

"We have to," was the only answer. "Let's pack."

"But ... "

There were a lot of 'buts': leaving would mean leaving Gaius; the wife of the man who ran Ceres tavern was the nicest woman Julia had ever met; and she didn't want to return to the streets. Surely Flavius did not mean this ...

But he did. One look at his set face told Julia that. Almost in a daze, she packed her few possessions. A few sesterces dropped by a kind metal-worker, a cheap stola Gaius had bought for her and a wood shaving shaped like an elephant, an exotic animal from Africa. All of these were now treasured, simply because they were all she had.

"Some thieves intend to waylay us on our way to the baths," Flavius was explaining, talking in little jerks. "I overheard them joking about it. If we go away tonight, we can escape." Again Julia was lost for words.

"Even if we don't have anything, they'll take something," Flavius continued.

"You don't know these people so you don't understand. They live to do wrong."

They live to do wrong. The sentence echoed around Julia's head. They live to do wrong.

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Once again Julia and Flavius were on the streets, but this time they had a plan. Up the Street of the Craftsmen they fled, avoiding the Medusa Tavern, the lodging place of the thieves. Not one sestertius of their precious hoard was thrown to needy beggars. Finally, flushed and coughing, they made their way to Harbour Street. It was dawn. A red glow was spreading over the consul's house behind them and in front of them was a blazing blue sky and the sea!

Lined with galleons, Harbour Street was filled with shouting men and sea-battered, brown-skinned sailors. A red-faced, frustrated man bawled at a resting slave to take a load of spices to the nearest warehouse, and a haughty centurion led a troop of muscly Gauls to the barracks. Flavius strode over to a sausage seller to buy four of his salty, sea-smelling goods. Together, they munched on one of these each as they discussed their plan to escape.

Flavius and Julia would pretend to be slaves loading goods onto a ship when they would swing onto it and stow away. If that didn't work, they would work their passage until they came to land. What would happen next was unclear but they assumed that it would all work out eventually.

As they were about to put their plan into action, a pompous slave started shouting, "Way for the Consul! Way for the new Consul and his wife, home from the country of Spain! Move aside, please!"

In the following bustle, Julia was pushed aside by a large woman with a sulky boy in tow. Then the woman's big straw basket dug into her ribs and all of a sudden Flavius' hand was wrested out of her grip. Vaguely, Julia felt herself swept along with the tide of swarming people. Eventually, she found herself right at the back of the parted crowd, with nothing to see but a pressing force of nameless, faceless, feelingless creatures.

Julia turned and fled. All her plans were ruined, so what was the use of staying behind? In her hurry, she forgot about Flavius - right now he was just one of those pressing, squashing waves of people. Darting back into the dank cool streets, Julia had just one thought - to run and run and run and run, run until she could not run any more. So that was why she did not hear the cries of 'Escaped slave!'; that was why she did not hear the shouts of surprised merchants; and that was why she did not see a grubby boy blindly running across the path of the new consul's litter, searching for his sister Julia.

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"They escaped," spat out the old man with a patch across his eye. His voice was like a rusty sword grinding against a boulder. "They escaped in the crowd, and where does that leave you, Arturius the guard?"

"How could I have stopped them?" sulked the boy with a scar on his face. The gang of thieves, the ones who had planned to steal from Flavius and Julia, called him Arturius or Art when they were in a good mood. But he was really called Obsteterix, because he was an escaped Gaulish slave. "One minute they were here; the next minute they weren't."

Obsteterix was the least valued of all the thieves, even though he was nimble and stealthy. He took a bite of his bread but it was gritty and so stale it had probably been baked years ago. Obsteterix spat his bite out.

"Should have thought about it, shouldn't you? Never crossed your mind that people don't want to be robbed?" jeered another thief.

And so it went on. Finally, Master Rex, the chief, got bored as a cat gets bored of toying with a mouse. "Get out of my sight, Gaul, and don't come back until you have ten sesterces."

Obsteterix stomped off. This was not his lucky day.

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On the dampest, darkest street of Naples, two things happened at once.

Obsteterix started stealing and Julia came dashing down towards Gaius' bakery.

Fortunately for the Gaul but unfortunately for Julia, two sesterces came tumbling out of her grip. Obsteterix speedily recognised her as easy pickings. Within seconds,

Julia was trapped.

"It's a Roman," though Obsteterix. "Good."

Obsteterix had a particular loathing for Romans. Romans Those wicked soldiers who had burnt down his home, who had killed his father the chieftain, who had taken his little sister, barely five years old, into slavery. He still thought of Laterix at night -he didn't know what had happened to her.

Dragging Julia behind him, Obsteterix marched up to Medusa Tavern. In one hand, he held a pouch with eleven sesterces in. In the other, he held Julia. He showed no mercy: had the Romans showed any mercy to his noble father? To his mother Leretta? To Laterix? To him?

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"Good boy, Art. Good boy!"

Master Rex had been drowning his sorrows, it had seemed. There was no talk of 'Gauls' or of going away tonight.

"Keep the money, Art. A little reward from your good friends."

"Indeed," the other thieves echoed. "A little reward from your good old friendsh,"

"As for the girl ... "

Julia felt a shiver of fear down her spine. What would they do to her? But it seemed she was lucky. Master Rex decided on her fate - she would stay alive, if only as a pickpocket.

Obsteterix scowled: what happened to 'no mercy'? However, it made sense. Julia was nimble, her fingers were long and thin, and she looked like a hundred other Roman girls. Nobody would suspect her of any crime worse than falling over.

Later in her room at Medusa Tavern, Julia glanced at the cracked mirror. She did not recognise the street girl who glanced back at her. With her straggly brown hair and a kind of hollow, despairing look in her large brown eyes, nobody from the house on Fountain Street would recognise Julia.

Suddenly she felt a sense of *deja vu*.

Had she been there before, done this, been the dejected street girl she was now? She was all alone ... three days ago she had been living in a house with a woman she disliked ... no, hated ... two days ago she had escaped, escaped onto a street which had thieves and sadness. One day later had brought her Gaius, but today had not given her anything - it had taken away all she had.

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Time passed, slowly it seemed to Julia. She was slaving away each day for nothing - Master Rex had allowed her her life, but nothing else. Gone were the days when she had slaves to order about - now Julia was a slave in everything but name.

It had been summer when she set out, a blazing, fiery summer of flies. Now it was winter, and the few that ventured outside were as cold-hearted as the weather itself. That day it was colder than ever, and there was hardly anything to eat.

Light-headed, Julia darted away from Medusa Tavern. Felix, the owner, threw a fish at her; she caught it and gnawed hungrily, even though it tasted days old.

A few minutes later, on Decimanus Maximus, Julia dipped her hands into a leather pouch held lightly in a brawny man's hand. With a small tug, it flew into her grasp and the pickpocket wiggled through the crowd - but not fast enough.

"THIEF!" her victim yelled. "Get her!"

All of a sudden, the crowd turned on Julia. With a shallow gasp, she turned and fled into the middle of the road, the space reserved for wagons and carts. The next thing she heard was the whinny of a pony and a shout of surprise, then she was falling ... falling ... falling ... Falling into a long dark tunnel from which there was no return.

As she fell onto the road, Julia struck her head on a stone and, in front of a fair-haired, tan-skinned Roman boy called Flavius, she was knocked, knocked into a world of dreams.

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When she woke up, Julia was in a room draped all over with curtains, fine red silk from China. She herself was lying in a couch as soft as a cloud, surrounded by highly polished tables with bowls of fruit and honey biscuits. By her side there was a beautifully carved marble bust of Ceres, carefully placed with loving hands. Surely this was luxury? Julia had never felt so relaxed before.

Where was she? This room alone was the size of the Shrine of the Crossroads. The owners were as lavish as possible: there were countless busts of smiling gods and goddesses; the walls and floors were decorated with exquisite mosaics; the pillows were soft and decorated with beautiful designs; and the fruit, Julia thought, reaching her hand into a bowl of ripe, purple grapes, must be from the

Emperor himself. But suddenly, as she was about to select the largest of the bunch, her head ached and dizziness overwhelmed her. Again she fell unconscious for how long she did not know.

Presently, Julia became aware of a gentle hand washing her forehead.

Opening her eyes just a little, she saw a kind but determined face, framed by thick blonde hair - probably a Gaul's. Julia decided she could trust this firm personage with blue eyes that twinkled humourously.

"Where am I?" she asked quietly - four months as a lonely, impoverished street child had changed the hard, self-opinionated Julia. "Do you know?"

"Yes, the Consul's house, missy," the lady answered without pausing from her tasks. "And I am Lenerix, the Mistress's personal servant, and you are Julia."

"How do you know that? Why? I mean why am I here? Who is 'the Mistress'?" There were so many questions that Julia eventually ran out of breath.

"Your brother's here - that's for the first two questions - and the Mistress is the Consul's wife, you see. But the Consul said not to excite you so all you need to know is I'm Lenerix, you're Julia, and there's nothing to worry about."

On Lenerix went, talking gently about silly little things like flowers, weather, and the new boy in the Consul's kitchen who seemed to be the clumsiest, most forgetful and the funniest in the Empire.

"Why, only today," Lenerix was saying, "I said to him, you get the bread from the oven, then you can go to the Carver's shop, and not before - but what does he do? He walks up to me, all innocent, and says "Here's the bread, ma'am," and in his hands were the leftover grapes from the Master yesterday! But for all that, he's a good boy, that Marcus, and he can work when he tries!"

When the sun was at its highest point the next day, Lenerix brought Julia down to see the Consul and his wife. Both were tanned but they couldn't have been more different in looks. The Consul was small, coal-haired and energetic. He talked and talked and talked. He talked about art, he talked about his time in Spain and with his talk he smiled at Julia.

His wife was another person altogether. Gentle, quiet, she didn't say much but left it to her husband. She was beautiful. There was no doubt about that. There was no other way to describe her - she was just too beautiful.

As the Consul was talking about one of the soldiers he had commanded

("Terribly disrespectful, you know. Wanted to rest every night and never bothered to go on watch ..."), shouts were heard outside the villa. "Gaia! Julius! I'm back! My

tutor was awful about Greek grammar and is Julia any better now?"

The voice was achingly familiar to Julia, but before she could answer it, the

Consul's wife broke in with a voice suddenly stern: "Flavius! I told you I want Mater and Pater and I expect nothing less. About your tutor, if you practise your Aristotle, he would have had no need to

complain about your appalling grammar. Julia is here with us so I think, if you would care to come in, she would like to have an explanation of recent-events."

Julia was so happy, it seemed she wouldn't be afraid or lonely ever again.

Although Lenerix had told her Flavius was living at the Consul's house, it had seemed like a dream -it had been too good to be true. But here he was, healthier and happier than she had ever seen him. Everything surrounding him seemed radiant with unseen sunlight and he was radiant too.

Hidden in the inevitable chatter, Julia discovered the story of what had happened. It seemed that when she had been separated from Flavius, a ship's master had seen him try to sneak onto a boat -"I thought that you were already on it," Flavius explained. This man had decided that Flavius was an escaped slave -and the punishment for this was crucifixion. So he had been handed over to the Consul. After intense interrogation, Flavius had been cleared of this crime and had lived for six months as the Consul's son. The Consul's wife had always longed for children and when she had heard about Julia, a search party had been organised at once.

However, after three months, the search party had given up hope. Julia was missing, presumed dead. Then had come the day when she had fainted in front of a delivery of bread which had been supervised by Flavius.

The gang of thieves was very elusive. The Octopus Thieves, as they were known, stretched their tentacles across Naples but were quick to snatch them back into different positions when needed. "We've got them all on the run now, though," the Consul said. "We've imprisoned Master Rex and his accomplices today, all except a boy known as Arturius."

Yes, Obsteterix was on the run ... On a mission ...

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One golden Friday, Julia and Flavius were relaxing in the beautiful courtyard of the Consul's house, surrounded by newly sprouted flowers. Julia was reading a scroll, one of Pliny's Natural Histories. At her old house, the only scrolls were solemn, boring and locked in her father's study. Now, Julia had developed a passion for reading. Nothing, from the most exciting scroll of the Aeneid to Flavius' hated Aristotle was 'safe from Julia', as the Consul put it.

Flavius, on the other hand, was doing nothing at all, as his tutor had been taken ill the day before and he had been given an unexpected holiday. He lay on his back, whistling, looking up at the blue sky and feeling the slightly humid wind on his cheek.

On this particular day, the Consul was away in Rome, and Flavius had been left in charge of the house. So when Marcus came to say there was a lady at the door asking for the master of the house, it was Flavius who stood up, looking important, and started towards the door.

However, before he had even passed Julia, the door flew open with a crash, and the intruder marched in. When the dust cleared, the woman's beautiful, cruel face came into sharp relief ... Just when Julia and Flavius thought they were safe, Avita had come to shatter their lives again.

"My lady," Marcus protested. "There was no need for that. I told you that although the Consul is not currently present, his son would attend to your needs." To Flavius, he added apologetically, "I did ask her to wait, but it seems as though my lady was not. .. disposed to do so."

Avita completely ignored Marcus. She was looking, with evil in her eyes, at her terrified stepchildren. To them it seemed the blazing sun had gone in, or that Avita's cold shadow had gripped it and quenched its light. What did she want with them? Surely she knew they were under the protection of the most powerful man in Naples?

"You don't realise who I am now," Avita claimed. "But one day you will know me as Avita, wife of the Consul, and another as the Empress. After that, I will be the ruler of the world."

Julia looked at Flavius, dumbfounded. What did Avita think she was talking about?

"I can see you staring at me," Avita went on. "You think, 'It can't be true! What is she saying?' But I can assure you, all this will happen, and then you will be sorry you crossed Avita Procola!"

Avita paused. Finally, her plan was coming together. She had been waiting for this, for so, so long.

"At last, I will have my revenge!"

"Revenge?" Julia couldn't help asking. "Revenge? What did we do that you want revenge for?"

"Everything! You may not realise, but I courted your father long before you were born. He was the only person that could get me what I want. Then your mother came along, and spoilt all my plans. Why? But now it doesn't matter. I will have my revenge!"

Suddenly, the day, which had been so enjoyable, became dark and gloomy. Great grey raindrops came slicing down, and the growing puddles reflected the cheerless sky. Lightning tore apart the black clouds, and each time thunder echoed around the courtyard Avita laughed. It was a terrible laugh, joyless yet victorious, and although the thunder was loud, Avita's laugh was louder. Step by step she approached Flavius and Julia and Marcus; they were cornered.

They backed up against the cold stone wall that had seemed so warm just one hour ago. It seemed they had lost. They had rolled the dice of fate, time and time again, but now they had no dice to throw.

The last thing Julia saw was lightning striking the tree in the courtyard, which burst into flames, and Avita's triumphant smile.

She closed her eyes, and waited.