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opening extract from

The Charioteer of Delphi

written by

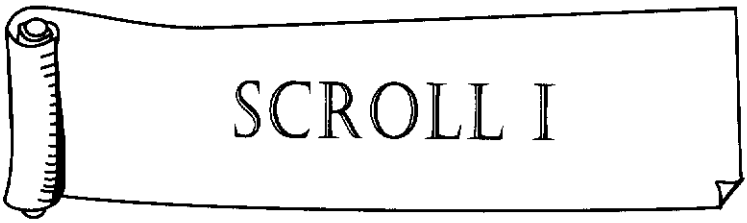
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SCROLL I

The creature comes at night when the full moon is high above the desert. It has the head of a lion, the body of a goat and a snake for a tail. From its mouth comes fire, a blast of hatred that ignites all before it. Now the tents are burning and the only way past the wall of fire is to ride through it. But she is too afraid and she always wakes up screaming.

Nubia had the Blues.

She had wanted the Reds but Porcius the baker's son said nobody in their right mind supported the Reds. So she had agreed to have the Blues even though it was her birthday and she would have been perfectly entitled to her first choice.

As it was, the Reds were winning; Nubia had always been a good judge of horseflesh. Or in this case, mouseflesh. Sixteen mice pulled four tiny chariots round a twelve-foot long model of the Circus Maximus.

The model of the famous racecourse was owned by Porcius, whom Nubia and her friends had rescued from kidnappers earlier in the year. Although Porcius was only eleven years old, he was passionate about racing and knew almost everything there was to know. Two slaves from his father's bakery had carried the wooden

replica of the racecourse into the sunny inner garden of the Ostian townhouse.

Nubia yawned and then smiled. After six weeks of broken nights she was tired. But today she was also happy. All her friends were here to celebrate her birthday.

'Come on, Blues!' cried the girl on Nubia's left, jumping up and down with excitement. Although Flavia Gemina was Nubia's former owner, she seemed more like a sister, even though her skin was fair and Nubia's dark.

Flavia's father, Marcus Flavius Geminus, stood beside her. Tall and clean-shaven, with the same light brown hair and grey eyes as his daughter, he wore his best summer toga as befitted the paterfamilias. On his left stood Jonathan ben Mordecai, their eleven-year-old next door neighbour. Jonathan had curly dark hair and a pleasant face. He suffered from asthma and was wheezing a little with excitement.

'Come on, Greens!' yelled Jonathan, and then cursed: 'Oh Pollux! They've stopped to investigate that leaf. Where did it come from anyway?'

'From up above!' cried Flavia. 'The gods are obviously on our side!'

Jonathan snorted with disgust, then grinned.

'Unnggh!' cried the green-eyed boy beside Jonathan. Nine-year-old Lupus had no tongue but Nubia could understand him perfectly: he was cheering for the Reds, whom he had shrewdly decided to support when Nubia went over to the Blues. Behind Lupus stood the Geminus family household slaves – the big door-slave Caudex and plump Alma, the cook. They were cheering the Whites, who had now overtaken the Greens and were coming up fast on the inside track.

'No!' wheezed Jonathan. 'Not the Whites! That means we're last!'

'Yo, Whites!' boomed Caudex, clapping his meaty hands.

'Look!' squealed Flavia. 'The Whites have taken the turn too fast!'

Nubia gasped. Sure enough, the white team's wooden chariot had overturned, and sixteen tiny pink paws scrabbled at the air.

'Naufragium! Shipwreck!' cried Porcius exultantly. And when the others stared at him he said, 'That's what you're supposed to shout when a chariot crashes.' He reached down and carefully scooped up the four writhing brown mice.

'Hey, Lupus,' said Jonathan. 'Here's a joke. How many supporters of the Reds does it take to light an oil lamp?'

Lupus shrugged, so Flavia obliged, 'Tell us, Jonathan. How many supporters of the Reds does it take to light an oil lamp?'

'Both of them!'

Everyone laughed except Nubia. 'I do not understand,' she said.

'The joke is that very few people support the Reds,' explained Flavia.

'Look!' cried Porcius. 'The Greens are running again. And they're catching up!'

Nubia's handsome young tutor Aristo bent forward to flip down the last dolphin marker in the central island of the racecourse. Nubia had chosen him to be the magistrate and referee of the race. He must have felt her gaze because he smiled up at her. Nubia quickly looked down at the three remaining chariots.

'Last lap!' shouted Captain Geminus. 'They're on the last lap!'

'Come on, Blues!' Flavia's voice cracked with excitement.

But in the end it was the Red team that took first place with the Blues second and the Greens third.

Lupus whooped and did a victory dance around the fountain. His howl of triumph was so loud that none of them heard the door-knocker.

But the dogs did. They had been shut in the store-room during the race, and their excited barks were loud enough to alert Caudex, who lumbered towards the atrium.

Lupus was still doing his victory dance around the fountain, wiggling his hips and whooping. He had plucked a leaf from a fern and was waving it like a palm branch. Presently he realised he was the only one making noise. He stopped and grinned sheepishly at them, then followed their gaze to the entryway of the garden. Standing beside Caudex was a boy in a broad-brimmed straw travelling hat and a dusty blue cloak, with a canvas bag slung over one shoulder. Nubia guessed the boy was a little older than she was: thirteen or fourteen.

'Salvete!' said the boy loudly, in Greek-accented Latin. He raised his arm in an awkward gesture of greeting. 'My name is Scopas. I come from the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. I seek a boy called Lupus.'

From Melissa, a novice priestess of Apollo, to her dear son Lupus.

I send this letter via Scopas, a youth from a village near

here. Although I am learning to read and write, my hand is still not as steady as yours, dear son. So I am dictating this letter to Philia, who is a priestess here and my good friend. I want you to know that I am well and happy here in Apollo's great sanctuary. I trust that you and your friends are also well: this is my fervent and daily prayer to the Far-seeing One.

I have a favour to ask of you, my dear son. I know that you live near Rome and that you know people of great influence there. Could you ask them to help this youth Scopas find a place at one of the chariot factions? The Pythia prophesied that he would be crowned in Rome. He has won the laurel wreath twice here at Delphi, though he is not yet fourteen. Please excuse his strange behaviour. A priest found him aged three, wandering in the sacred grove. His parents were never found, so the priest asked his brother to raise him. If you help Scopas, then it will help me find favour in the eyes of the priest whose brother adopted him, and also of Apollo the Far-shooter, may his name be praised.

NOW SEE! I TAKE UP THE PEN MYSELF TO WRITE IN MY OWN HAND TO SAY BE WELL, MY DEAR SON, BE WELL. AND WRITE TO ME QUICKLY!

Captain Geminus handed the letter back to Lupus. 'Thank you for letting me read the letter out loud, Lupus. And praise the gods your mother is well. We will make a thanks-offering to Apollo tomorrow.'

Lupus had been writing on his wax tablet. Now he showed it to the boy who had brought the letter: HOW IS MY MOTHER? DOES SHE LOOK WELL? IS SHE REALLY HAPPY?

Scopas stared at the wax tablet and muttered something in a strange language.

Lupus frowned and Jonathan said, 'Beg pardon?'

Scopas took a breath. 'Scopas cannot read,' he said, and then loudly corrected himself. 'I cannot read.'

'Lupus wants to know if his mother really is well and happy,' explained Flavia.

'I believe so.' The boy from Delphi gave a stiff nod. He was still wearing his straw travelling hat and he stood as straight as a legionary at attention. Lupus glanced at Jonathan, who raised an eyebrow at him in return.

'Well, young Scopas,' said Captain Geminus, clapping his hands and rubbing them together, 'what do we do with you now?'

'Please may he stay for Nubia's party?' Flavia asked. 'Then tomorrow we can take him up to Rome.'

'Ohe!' cried Captain Geminus. 'Whoa! Of course he may stay for the party and sleep here tonight, and I'm happy to act as Scopas's patron. But I'm afraid I don't have any connections with the racing world.'

'Sisyphus might know somebody,' said Flavia. 'He knows practically everyone in Rome.'

'Who's Sisyphus?'

'Oh, pater! I've told you myriads of times. Sisyphus is Uncle Cornix's secretary and scribe.'

'I know someone in the racing world.'

Everyone turned to look at Porcius, who continued, 'My cousin knows the head trainer of the Greens. His name is Titus Flavius Urbanus. He lost some stable boys in the big fire last winter and he's looking for new ones. You don't get paid and you have to provide your own kit and they work you like a slave, but it's your best chance of becoming an auriga.'

'What is oar rigger?' asked Nubia.

Lupus guffawed.

'An auriga,' said Porcius, 'is a charioteer. I would have applied,' he added, scuffing at the gravel pathway with his foot, 'but my father says I can't go to Rome until I'm thirteen.'

'There, pater!' cried Flavia triumphantly. 'Tomorrow we can hire a mule cart and take Scopas to Rome and introduce him to the trainer—'

'Urbanus,' said Porcius.

'—to Urbanus. It could be part of Nubia's birthday present. Nubia loves horses, don't you, Nubia?'

Nubia nodded and Lupus saw Scopas turn his whole body to face her.

'After what happened last time you went to Rome?' said Captain Geminus. 'I wonder if that would be wise.'

Lupus glanced at Flavia. He knew she hadn't told her father half of what had happened to them at the Inaugural Games in Rome.

'My father's going up to town tomorrow or the next day,' said Porcius, 'to visit his sick aunt. He could take Scopas to the Stables of the Greens. They're located in the Campus Martius.'

'Excellent!' said Captain Geminus. He turned to Porcius. 'Tell your father that if he agrees to take Scopas up to Rome, I'll pay for the mule-cart as well as the lad's kit.'

'Oh pater!' cried Flavia, 'that's so kind of you! Isn't that wonderful, Scopas? Tomorrow you'll be in Rome. Maybe even in the stables of a chariot racing faction!'

Everyone looked at Scopas, who was muttering something under his breath. Lupus was not sure, but it sounded like: 'Zip q'nee, zip q'nee, zip q'neeee!'

*

Including Scopas, there were eight people attending Nubia's twelfth birthday party that afternoon. Although Captain Geminus did not usually allow the children of his household to eat reclining, this was a special occasion. Nubia lay in the place of honour on the right of the middle couch, with Flavia and Porcius stretched out next to her. Captain Geminus occupied the host's place at the fulcrum of the couch on her right, with Aristo beside him. Jonathan, Lupus and Scopas took the couch on Nubia's left. Scopas had taken off his straw hat to reveal short dark hair, but he still wore his dusty travelling cloak, even though it was a hot afternoon.

Nubia reached up and touched her birthday present. Her friends had given her a fine gold chain for the cherrywood flute she always wore around her neck.

As Alma removed the plates of the main course, Nubia noticed that Scopas had scraped away the sauce from his stew. He had only eaten the chicken pieces and had arranged the olives and raisins in a circular pattern on his plate.

No one else noticed, for Porcius had been telling Scopas about his rescue from slave-traders in Rhodes.

'So then,' concluded Porcius, 'Lupus appears in the ship's hold with Ostia's junior magistrate and Flavia's father and a muscular man who looks like Jason, and they say, "You're all free. We're taking you home to Ostia." Isn't that amazing?'

Scopas gave a single nod. 'You have had many adventures and solved many mysteries,' he stated.

'Tell Scopas about the games at the new amphitheatre in Rome,' said Porcius. 'Nubia, tell him how you saved—'

'The games were very exciting,' interrupted Flavia, with a nervous glance at her father. 'But your life must be interesting, too, Scopas. After all, you're an auriga. Racing chariots must be very thrilling.'

'That's right,' said Aristo. 'They say it's the most dangerous job in the world!'

Scopas looked at them. 'This is correct. It is very dangerous. But Scopas is not afraid.'

Nubia studied Scopas. She had never met anyone like him. He had wide hazel eyes and a pleasant face, but it betrayed no expression. His voice was flat and loud, and his movements stiff and clumsy. Strangest of all was his occasional habit of referring to himself by name.

'How did you become a charioteer, Scopas?' asked Captain Geminus, taking a sip of wine.

'Zip q'nee,' muttered Scopas. Then he took a deep breath and spoke quickly and without inflection, as if reciting a prepared passage. 'The man who raised Scopas has a stable in Delphi village. Scopas grew up with horses. During the sacred games Scopas helped harness the horses to their chariots and drove them to the starting gates. One day an auriga became yellow so Scopas took his place.'

'Became *yellow*?' said Jonathan, raising an eyebrow. 'What does that mean?'

'Yellow. Unwell. One day an auriga became unwell, so Scopas took his place. I do not like yellow,' he added.

'And you won?' prompted Flavia, after a pause.

'Yes. I won,' said Scopas. He reached down to stroke Tigris's head and Nubia saw Jonathan raise his eyebrows in surprise. Tigris didn't usually allow strangers to touch him.

'Was it a biga or a quadriga?' asked Porcius, and

turned to Nubia. 'A biga is a two-horsed chariot and a quadriga is four.'

'It was quadriga,' said Scopas flatly.

'You don't seem very excited about racing,' said Jonathan.

'I am good at racing,' said Scopas, and added, 'Scopas does not understand people but Scopas understands horses.' He seemed to be quoting someone.

Nubia heard Lupus snicker, and she saw Flavia and Jonathan exchange a glance. Even Captain Geminus and Aristo were raising their eyebrows at each other.

Nubia caught Scopas's eye, and she gave him an encouraging smile. The others might think he was strange, but the animals liked him, and so she did, too.