CIRCUS MAXIMUS

Race to the Death

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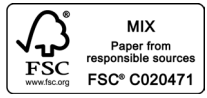

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I

'Ready?'

My spit left a mark in the soft red earth. Teres grinned and waved towards the boy perching in the olive tree on the far side of the plain. The boy raised his arm and Teres's friends sitting on the fence started to clap. I kept my eyes on the white cloth rippling from the branches of the tree. It swooped suddenly and there was a crack as Teres's whip came down.

'Get up!'

I slapped the reins across the backs of my two roans. Their rusty bellies were swollen from a long day out in the pasture, and it took seven or eight strides to get them into a canter. We lumbered along the strip of track, my chariot's wheels bumping over the churned earth in Teres's wake. *Keep your head*, *don't push too early*. Teres's greys were rounding the olive tree. He shouted at me as he accelerated past in the other direction.

'You see? I told you those two weren't that fast!'

I pulled hard on the left rein to make my inside roan chop his stride as we took the turn. The twine at the nape of my neck flew off and my hair whipped across my face like straw. I could see my father, Antonius, hurrying down the sloping side of the valley from the stable yard.

'Dido, stop!'

I didn't look at him. At the opposite turn – round an old fence-post – Teres was careless, veering wide and losing some of his advantage. What had I heard Antonius tell the Green charioteers a thousand times? *The turn is the most important part of the race*. I steered the roans on the quickest line possible, then let them have their heads as we tore towards the olive tree. Their muddy necks flexed like a pair of catapults. The vibrations shaking the chariot made my knees buckle. I tried hard not to think about what would happen if one of my wheels suddenly went over a rock. I'd seen broken charioteers before, their necks at a strange angle, their skin shredded to the raw red below. My mother's silver charm danced in the hollow of my throat. Dust spun by Teres's wheels drifted back down the plain. I closed my eyes against the oncoming rush of warm sand.

When I opened them again, I could see the sweat coating the ends of Teres's dark hair. His greys were

tiring badly after being driven too fast on that first lap, their necks dipping lower. We were coming to the olive tree for the second and final time. Teres sensed the threat behind him and lashed the greys with his whip. His chariot slid wide around the tree, throwing up a fan of earth. He swore loudly as I stole the inside line.

'I told you those two wouldn't last the distance!' I shouted at him.

Teres's friends were standing on the fence, cheering him on. Neck and neck, we raced towards the finish. My eyes were streaming and my legs on fire with the pain of keeping my knees bent. The boy who had started our race from the olive tree was now standing on the old fence-post, holding the white cloth in the air once more. I brought up my arm.

One flick of the whip ought to do it.

Startled by my sudden strike, the roans lifted their tails and their heads came up. I streaked past the boy waving the cloth and punched my fist in the air.

By the time I managed to get the roans under control, I could see Antonius waiting for me, the sun glinting on his golden head. Alongside him was Teres's father, Marius. The boys were swarming around Teres, laughing and patting him on the back.

'You lost to a girl,' one of them was saying and they all started repeating the insult.

Antonius came forward.

'Did you see, Papa? I won!' I tried to sound as though I expected him to share my enthusiasm.

'I saw. Get down from there. What do you think you're playing at, Dido? You could have killed yourself!'

I stepped down, running my hand along the inside roan's flank as I approached his head.

'Don't get angry, Papa. You know I've driven lots of times at the practice track back home.'

'That's not the same thing as risking your neck in a real race!' Antonius's green eyes were blazing. 'You want to die before your thirteenth birthday? Or end up like Lepidus, after he got shipwrecked? Is that what you want, Dido? To see your bones breaking through your flesh?'

'No,' I muttered. 'But it's not as if we were driving fours, just pairs. Teres said I could pick whichever horses I wanted from their yard. I knew he'd go for fast ones and push them too hard. All I had to do was keep to a good line and control the pace.' I patted the ponies' damp necks. 'I thought if I did everything the way you taught me, I'd do well.'

To my relief, Antonius's face relaxed a little.

'You did do well. If I hadn't been so terrified,

I might have been able to enjoy it.' He put a hand on the back of my head and made me look at him. 'But never ever frighten me like that again, you hear me?'

My beaten opponent approached, his friends now crowded on to the axle alongside him. The greys were blowing their flanks in exhaustion. Teres had lost some of his swagger though he was still grinning.

'Good race. What do you say, best of three?'

'Forget it. We had a deal, now you have to pay up.'

'Stop right there, Dido,' said Antonius. 'If you think I'm going to let you make money out of doing something so stupid, you can think again.'

'No, you don't understand, Papa. We weren't racing for money.'

'I see. What, dare I ask, *was* the stake?'

I hesitated.

'If I won, she'd have to give us all a kiss,' said Teres. '*All* of us.' He jerked his thumb back to his friends who beamed.

Antonius raised an eyebrow at me.

'And if *you* won?' he asked.

I turned and pointed.

'I get *him.*'

Antonius looked up at the little black horse grazing alone in the field above the plain. He was

a young stallion, about four years old, with a white star in the middle of his forehead. His long tail swished as he plucked at the few patches of green. Encouragingly, I could see Antonius assessing the fine head, powerful shoulders and sturdy fetlocks, ideal for withstanding the break-neck turns of a chariot-race.

'Look at him, Papa! Isn't he beautiful? Teres says he was a gift from his father, but he doesn't want him any more. He's made to be an inside horse, don't you think? I can just see him taking the turns at the Circus Maximus.'

Someone snorted with laughter.

'The Circus? Sure, sure, if you can get him in the starting gate.'

Marius was waddling over with a bucket of water. Setting it down for the roans and greys to dip their greedy muzzles into, he wiped the sweat from his broad forehead.

'Well done, Dido. You've taught this boy of mine a lesson in race craft, one I hope he'll remember if he ever gets to the Circus.' He gave Teres a friendly slap on the head. 'But it's a poor stake he's offered you.'

He nodded at my father.

'Don't get me wrong, Antonius, there's good blood in that animal. Sired him out of a Libyan stallion I put with one of my best mares. I expected

to get a fortune for that little black horse whenever you or the next lot of faction scouts came by. That was before I knew his temperament. Broke three chariots when we first tried to get him in harness, not to mention my groom's arm. I thought it might teach Teres something, trying to bring him on. But he can't handle him, none of my boys can.' He put a hand on my shoulder. 'Don't lose your heart to that horse, my girl. He's a Fury.'

'But he isn't! Watch.'

I ducked under the fence and climbed the slope to where the black horse was grazing. He lifted his head, watching me with nostrils flared, ears twitching. Slipping my hand into the pouch pocket of my old green tunic, I extracted a dusty handful of grain. Holding it on the tips of my fingers, I whispered and cooed as I shuffled forward. A squeal escaped the horse's throat and he tossed his mane, dancing on the spot. I stopped a few paces short of his head, arm still outstretched, and made the same squealing noise he had made. The little black horse stared. Then he stretched out his nose, sniffing at the grain. Blowing softly, he took a few cautious steps towards me. His upper lip brushed against my palm and he began snaffling the grain, tickling my fingers with his whiskers. He flinched slightly when I began stroking his cheek.

'I don't believe it,' I heard Marius say to Antonius. 'Can she talk to horses, that girl of yours?'

The fence creaked as someone climbed over it. The little horse's ears flattened against his skull. I tried to soothe him by combing his long mane with my fingers. Antonius stopped a short distance away. I knew what was coming.

'Dido, we didn't come all this way to Hispania to buy an untrained horse.'

'We're not buying him. I won him.'

'I have my orders from Ruga. The Greens need to start winning races again. If we're to have any chance of beating the Blues, we need fully trained animals, horses that have experience of the local circuses.'

'I'll train him. You can help me. Please, Papa.'

'And what do I tell Ruga when he asks why I've wasted a place in the boat's cargo on a horse that has never run a race? A horse whose upkeep he'll have to pay for?'

'Tell him he had too much promise to leave behind. Tell him what Marius said about his sire, tell him…'

I stopped. Even to my ears, it sounded unconvincing. I knew the master of the Green faction as well as my father did. Ruga was as tight-fisted as he was wealthy.

Antonius held out his hand. The lump in my throat had swollen to the size of a stone. I buried my face in the horse's neck, breathing in his warm, sweet smell. Then I let my father take my hand and lead me back to the fence. Through my tears, I could see Teres looking at me curiously.

'Dido and I have a long journey ahead of us. We should set off tonight if we're to make it to Tarraco in time for the morning boat. My thanks for your hospitality, Marius. Superb choice of horses as always. I think Ruga will be especially pleased with those new chestnuts. You'll send them on?'

'Of course, Antonius, my old friend. They'll be on the next transport over. I hope they help revive the Greens' fortunes.'

'I hope so too. Or Ruga may start looking for another trainer.'

There was a pause. I felt Antonius's hand tighten on mine.

'Out of interest, what would you take for the little black horse, Marius?'

My eyes went to my father's face. What I saw there made my heart almost burst with love for him. Marius chuckled.

'I'd say you're welcome to him, Antonius, and good luck to you if you think you can make

anything of him. I won't take your money, you're too good a friend for me to cheat you. But the horse is Teres's to give.'

I looked at Teres, who glanced in turn at the little black horse. I knew that he was wondering whether he was making a mistake in giving up something someone else wanted so badly. Then his teeth gleamed white.

'You earned him. Take him if you want him.'

He leaned forward and pointed to his cheek.

'Now what do you say?'

I wavered. Then I planted a quick kiss on his brown jaw. The boys behind him cheered.