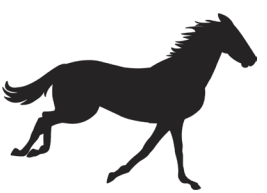
CIRCUS MAXIMUS

Rivals on the Track

ANNELISE GRAY



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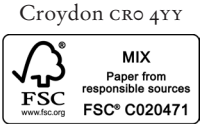

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I

'Faster, come on boy, faster! We've got to get inside them at the turn!'

Porcellus's black ears were braced against the wind like shields raised for battle. His neck was tense, his bright eyes wide with excitement.

'Come on!'

The gap to the lead chariot was closing. Porcellus's flying hooves ate up the ground and my opponent looked fearfully over his shoulder.

Thought you had the beating of us, didn't you? I smiled. *But you underestimated me, my friend. Just like they all do.*

The other charioteer lashed his team's tiring rumps with the leather tongue of his whip. But it was too little, too late. Porcellus slid past them, curling around the turning post like a serpent. I felt the wind dragging through my hair as we galloped down the last straight. The finish line was in sight.

The Circus crowd was on their feet, roaring us home.

'Dido!' they chanted. 'Dido, Dido, Dido…'

'Dido!'

The roar faded from my ears and the excited faces lining the walls of the Circus Maximus disappeared along with the great stadium itself. It was just Porcellus and me on the practice track at my Uncle Scorpus's stable, racing for glory against an imaginary rival. But a lone voice was still calling my name.

'Dido!'

Scorpus was marching across the pasture. He looked furious and I knew why. I hauled back on the reins and Porcellus obeyed the command to slow down, snatching at the bit in his mouth. The wheels of my light training chariot crunched to a halt as Scorpus reached us.

'What do you think you're doing? Do you want people to see you?'

He pointed to the top of the valley, above the stables, where travellers passed along the coast road on their way to the nearby town of Utica.

'No one's going to get a good look at us from up there,' I said. 'Calm down, Scorpus, I was only giving Porcellus a run.'

'You're not even wearing a helmet! Has it slipped your mind that the emperor probably has

half the Roman army out there, looking for a girl charioteer? And that you're driving a stolen horse?'

My hackles went up.

'Porcellus isn't stolen. He's mine, my father gave him to me.'

'I'm not sure that's how the emperor would see it.'

'You know how much I love Porcellus.' I was getting angry now. 'I'd never do anything to risk losing him again. But it's not fair to keep him locked in his stable all day. He's not even allowed to join the other horses when they come for training. It's like when he was racing for the Greens, with Emperor Caligula keeping him chained up as if he was a pet dog.'

'So you're comparing me to Caligula now?'

'No. You're a bit less of a tyrant. But only a bit.'

I saw a reluctant smile tugging at the corner of his mouth and I felt better. I hated it when we argued.

'Honestly, Scorpus, where's the harm? It's been two months since Porcellus and I escaped from Rome. In that whole time, no one has come here looking for us. No one.'

'Well, that's where you're wrong. They just did. That's why I came out to warn you.'

Fear bubbled in my stomach.

'What do you mean? Who?'

'A messenger. He came from Rome. Bringing this.'

It was a picture, roughly painted on a square of yellow papyrus. Scorpus handed it to me and I studied the image of a female figure in a white tunic trimmed with gold. Her long dark hair flowed from under the helmet and in her raised hand was a whip. She was driving a chariot pulled by a galloping black horse with a white star clearly visible on his forehead.

'It's me at the Circus Maximus,' I said. 'When I raced for the Blues as Princess Sophonisba. And that's Porcellus.'

'Yes. And it came with this letter from Otho.' Scorpus held up another piece of papyrus. The red wax seal on its edge was broken. 'Get Porcellus back to the stable, then come inside and I'll read it to you.'

'What does it say? Wait, read it to me now – what does it say? Scorpus!'

'Horses first,' he said, walking back across the pasture towards the house.

I unhitched Porcellus from the chariot, leaped on to his back and galloped him to the stables. We passed Scorpus's one-time apprentice, now his assistant trainer, Antigonus, who gave us a brief wave. As soon as we reached the barn, Scorpus's old favourite, Sciron, ambled over to the gate. He'd already been retired from the circus track a

long time when I first met him and his dark brown muzzle was heavily speckled with grey. Porcellus whickered at him in greeting. Sciron was the only friend he'd made since he got here.

Quickly, I rubbed Porcellus down before putting him in his stall. More horses had come up to the pasture fence, and although I was in a hurry to find out what was in Scorpus's letter, I went and gave their noses a rub. The red roan, Cupid, tried to hold me up by gently nipping at the pouch on my belt, where I sometimes kept sticky dates as a treat. From his stall, Porcellus screeched in protest. He regarded those dates as his special privilege.

Parmenion limped around the corner from the feed room, a bucket in his hand. He was still suffering with the leg injury from his crash in the Circus months before and couldn't manage much more than stable duties. His tawny hair was sticking up as usual and his sun-bronzed face was shiny with sweat. Porcellus's mood changed at once. His ears flapped forward and he kicked his door in excitement.

'Hello, you impatient viper. And hello to you too, Porcellus.' Parmenion grinned at me as he opened the door of Porcellus's stall.

'Very funny. Did you remember to put some olive oil in with his feed?'

'I certainly did, Princess.'

I rolled my eyes.

'Haven't you got tired of that joke yet?'

'I don't seem to have done, no.'

'Why that girl at the bakery likes you, I will never understand. You won't forget to fill up Porcellus's water, will you? It's hot in there and he's not going to get out again until nightfall.'

By the door which led into the kitchen, my young cousins, Hanno and Abibaal, were lingering beside the domed baking oven. A delicious smell of warm bread filled the air. Anna was making lunch for everyone. I could see her through the open door, her black hair escaping from its long plait and her teeth clenched as she heaved a vast pot towards the fire.

'Offer to help, you idiots,' I scolded the boys. 'She's got a baby inside her, remember. Antigonus would be furious if he saw you letting his wife lift a heavy thing like that on her own.'

I found Scorpus in the room where he did his accounts. He was sitting at a table, studying the square of crumpled papyrus. I saw the worry in his black eyes. My heart thudded uncomfortably.

'Is it… bad news?' I asked.

He sighed and started to read.

'My good friend, I write this in haste. Helvia

and I leave Rome tonight and there is little time, but much to tell you. You need to know, first of all, that I have sold the Blue faction and therefore our business relationship – though not, I hope, our friendship – must come to an end, for now at least. Betucius Barus will be the new faction master. I've told him you're the best trainer in the empire and that he'd be mad not to continue to buy horses from you. But Betucius favours the Spanish breeds over the African and I fear you may see fewer scouts from the Blues coming by than you used to. I know this will affect your livelihood and I am sorry.

'The reasons for our sudden departure will not surprise you. The emperor is in ill humour. Ever since the humiliating defeat of his favourite driver at the Circus Maximus by the mystery charioteer known only as Princess Sophonisba, Caligula has brooded with all the petulance of a child who has lost his favourite toy. He can never stomach the Green faction being defeated of course. But he was keen to make the girl their new star so that he could fawn over her as he once did your former apprentice, Nicias. That she should flee Rome rather than accept the honour of that invitation, he regards as an insufferable insult.

'Caligula's advisors try to divert his mind. There is talk that the Greens have recruited a new driver,

a precocious young talent who will arrive in Rome soon and hopefully restore some of the emperor's good humour. But the emperor nurses a grudge like a bloodhound guards a bone. He is determined to discover the princess's true identity and force her to return to Rome, along with the racehorse she took from under his nose. To that end, he sends the Praetorian Guard almost daily to the Blues' clubhouse to intimidate me. The water is a little hot for my liking. It seems prudent to remove myself from Rome.

'Please, my friend, do not be concerned for me. I have many friends around the empire and I shall build my fortune again elsewhere. Helvia is here now and tells me the boat is about to leave and I must finish writing. She bids me pass on her fond wishes to the princess.

'I trust we will meet again. Until then, may the gods protect you.

'Your friend, Opellius Otho.'

Scorpus finished reading and looked up. I sank on to a low stool. Scorpus came around the table and squatted in front of me.

'They'll be safe, Dido, I promise.'

'You don't know that. What if Caligula finds them and kills them?' I was struggling to speak. 'It'll be because of me, because they were protecting me.'

'He won't find them. They've got Otho's money and Helvia's cunning. That'll be more than enough to keep them out of trouble.'

My breathing steadied.

'What about you, though, Scorpus? How are you going to make a living if you can't sell horses to the Blues any more?'

'You can let me worry about that. I'll think of something. There's always the Red or White faction, although they don't send so many scouts this way. I'd rather not sell to the Greens, what with them being the emperor's favourite team. But, if there's no other choice, we'll see. It's you I'm worried about.'

He picked up the picture of me and Porcellus.

'This is a reward poster,' he explained. 'The emperor's offering ten million sesterces to anyone who can find you and Porcellus and bring you back to Rome.'

'Ten million?' I was astounded. 'That must be more prize money than the Greens win at the Circus in a year!'

'Probably. Just shows how much you're worth to him, Dido.'

'What do you think he would do to me? If I had to go back?'

Scorpus hesitated.

'I can't be sure. He might want to punish you for taking Porcellus. Caligula thinks of the horse as his own, even if he belonged to you first. But my best guess is he'll try to make you race for the Greens, as he intended before.'

I shook my head violently.

'Never. I won't ever do that. Not while the emperor's their biggest supporter. He's the reason my father's dead and he killed Icarus and I'll never forgive him. Never.'

'Well, now you know why I wanted you to stay out of sight.'

I hung my head. Scorpus squeezed my shoulder.

'I know, Dido. I know it's not been easy. You're a charioteer in your blood. You want to be out there, tearing around the track at a circus again. There is an obvious solution, you know.'

'You mean go back to being Leon.'

He nodded. I sighed in frustration.

'That means starting again at the beginning, competing at the local games in Utica.' I tapped the poster in his hand. 'I won at the Circus Maximus, Scorpus! I had hundreds of thousands of people screaming my name! Well, not *my* name. But they were cheering for me all the same.'

'They also cheered for you at the Circus when you raced for the Blues as Leon.'

'I know. But when I was Princess Sophonisba, I was allowed to be a girl so I was a little bit myself. When I'm Leon, I have to be a boy, somebody completely different. I have to keep my hair short and put on that dye Anna makes for me and not speak too much. It's not fair. Why can't I be Dido?'

'You know why,' said Scorpus gently. 'I wish it was different, Dido. But chariot racing is a man's world. Always has been, always will be.'