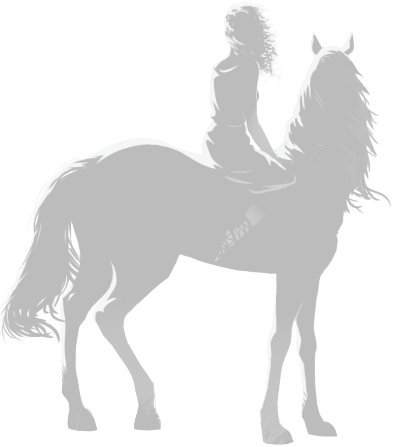
CIRCUS MAXIMUS

Rider of the Storm



ANNELISE GRAY

ZEPHYR
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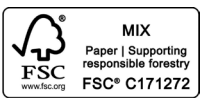
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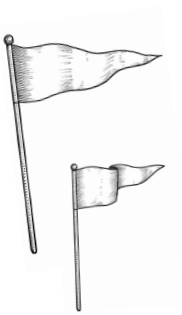


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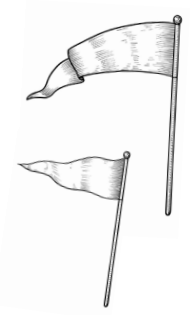
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For Julian Alexander,
with all my love





Cast of Characters



Utica (North Africa)

Dido – a brilliant girl charioteer who formerly raced at the Circus Maximus in the guise of a boy called 'Leon' and also a mysterious young woman known as 'Princess Sophonisba'

Scorpus – Dido's uncle, a racehorse trainer and former charioteer

Parmenion – a one-time charioteer for the Blue faction, now working for Scorpus

Evander – an acrobat rider who once performed with Dido's mother Sophonisba

Antigonus – Scorpus's assistant trainer

Anna – wife of Antigonus

Little Dido – Anna and Antigonus's infant daughter

Hanno – elder son of Scorpus



Rome (Italy)

Abibaal – younger son of Scorpus, in his first year of racing at the Circus Maximus

Atticus – a scout for the Blues racing faction and an old friend of Dido's father Antonius

Danel – lead charioteer for the Green faction and an old track rival of Dido's

Cassius Chaerea – a soldier in the Praetorian Guard

Helvia – a businesswoman and the wife of former Blues owner, Opellius Otho

Corinna – a slave-girl in the household of Helvia

Opellius Otho – Helvia's wealthy husband

Betucius Barus – the current owner of the Blues faction

Marcellus – an acrobat rider in charge of the performers at the Circus Maximus

Fabius – a popular charioteer with his glory days behind him, now racing with the Greens

Darius – a long-serving charioteer for the Green faction

Timotheus – a Greek physician known to Helvia



The Emperor's Household

Caligula – the Emperor of Rome

Milonia – wife of Caligula

Julia – baby daughter of Caligula and Milonia

Claudius – Caligula's elderly uncle



The Horses

Porcellus – Dido's beloved horse, former champion of the Circus Maximus

Jewel – a one-eyed chestnut mare

Ghost – a wild black stallion

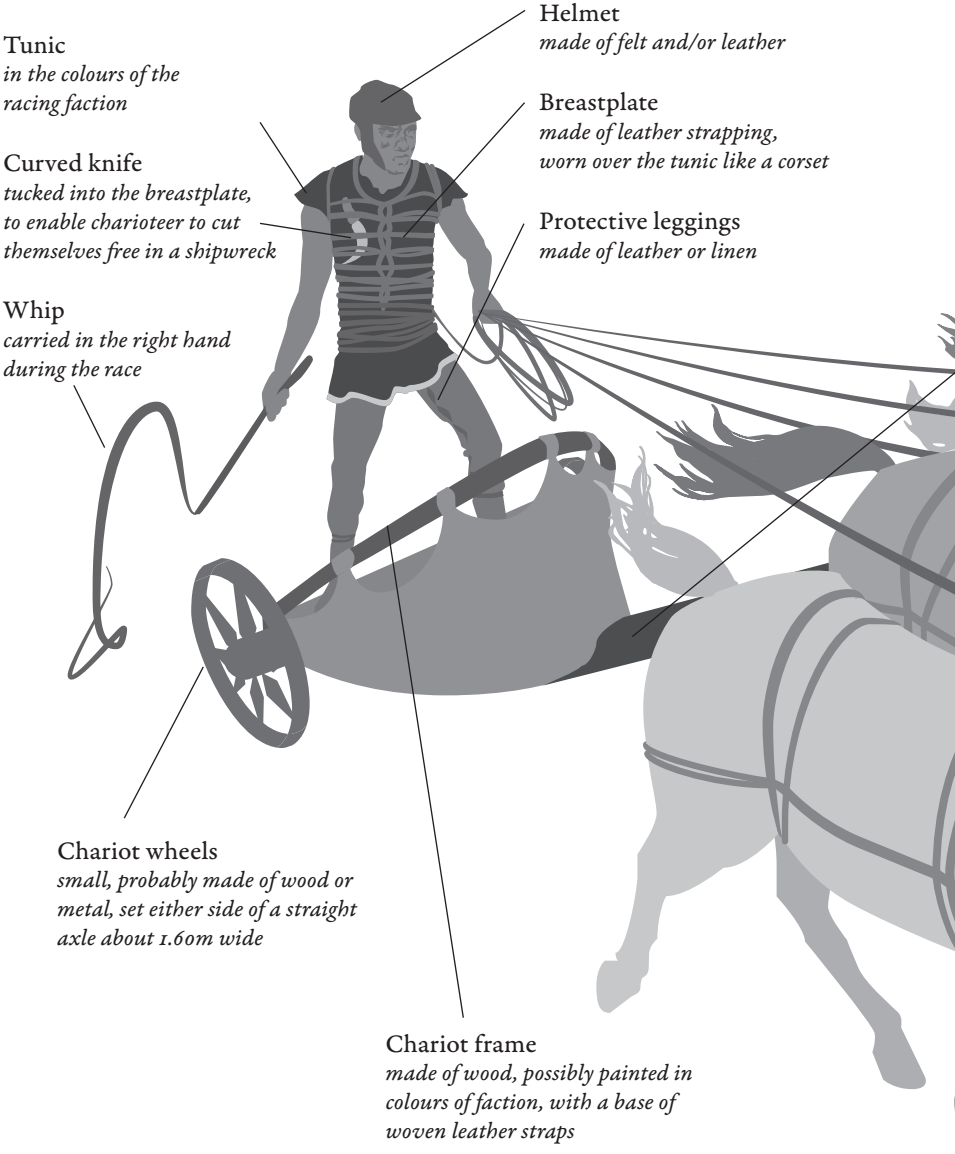
Phoenix – an old grey once ridden by Dido's mother Sophonisba, now belonging to Evander

Centaur – the lead horse in Danel's team

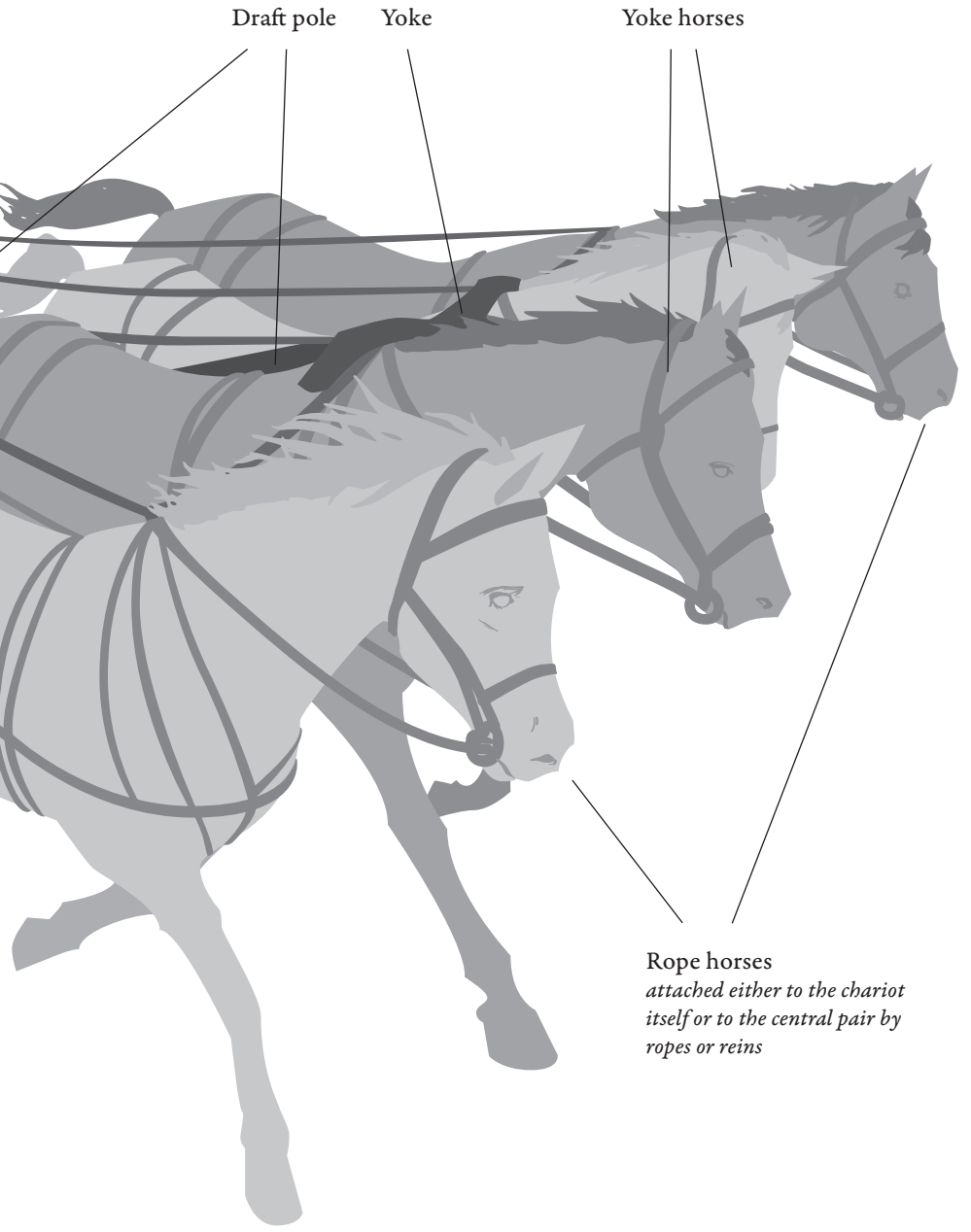
Boreas, Eurus, Auster and Zephyr ('the Four Winds') – a great four-horse team, driven by Dido when she raced as 'Princess Sophonisba'

Spider – Abibaal's lead horse, trained at Scorpus's stable

And one dog, Issa – Evander's faithful companion



No racing chariot remains have survived the journey through time from the Roman world. This sketch is based on research into images of chariot racing in ancient art and literature.


Draft pole
Yoke
Yoke horses
Rope horses
attached either to the chariot itself or to the central pair by ropes or reins



I

A whip crack of thunder split the stillness of the afternoon, tearing through the valley. Scorpus glanced at the darkening sky. Sunlight glinted at the edges of the massed grey clouds. But it was fading fast, like water slipping through a drain.

'It'll be here soon,' he said. 'We'd better stable the horses.'

'You finish this. I'll go.' I put down the hammer and nails I'd been using to help him patch up the barn to make sure water couldn't get in.

'Wait for Parmenion and Antigonus. They should be back from digging those trenches at the practice track soon.'

'Don't worry. I can fetch them on my own.'

Scorpus looked again at the clouds.

'Quickly then, Dido. It's coming in faster than I thought.'

I ran across the stable yard, which was in shadow now, stones spitting out from under my sandalled feet. There was a thickness in the air and I was sweating in my old racing tunic before I'd even reached the pasture. By the doorway to the kitchen of my uncle's villa, I could see Anna laying heavy bricks on the top of her beehives to weigh them down. Her one-year-old daughter, Little Dido, as everyone called her, was sitting in the dust, captivated by flashes of lightning illuminating the surrounding hills.

I reached the big field where most of the horses were grazing. The smell of rain had already driven some of them under the shelter of the trees. In a small adjoining pasture, I could see Porcellus and Jewel side by side, as usual. Jewel was plucking at grass, swishing her flaxen tail against her red-gold hindquarters, untroubled by the noise overhead. Porcellus was upset though, trotting in circles and twitching his ears. I whistled and his black head turned towards the sound at once.

'Come on then!'

With a grateful flick of his hind legs, Porcellus galloped towards me. I stroked his damp neck.

'Easy, boy, easy. It's all going to be fine, don't worry.'

The other horses emerged cautiously from the trees as I called them. Jewel, who never liked

abandoning a feed if she could help it, was the last to respond. She took a final tug at the grass before ambling towards the gate, only breaking into a trot as the first beads of warm rain began to fall.

The last glimmer of sunlight had vanished and a fresh breeze was whipping my tangled hair across my face. The horses followed me like ducklings shadowing their mother. As we reached the yard, there was a loud bark from the sky. Porcellus reared in terror. The soft pelt of rain became a torrent.

Scorpus emerged from the barn and Parmenion and Antigonus came running from the practice track. Soon, we were all soaked to the skin, shouting to make ourselves heard as we tried to calm the bedraggled horses. At last, we managed to shepherd them into their stalls. The sound of rain hammering on the clay roof tiles was deafening. But the horses were comforted by the dry straw under their feet and full troughs of feed. Scorpus wiped his brow with the sleeve of his tunic.

'Well. That'll have to do. I've made sure there are no loose nails on the partition walls in case any of them start charging around and injuring themselves. Antigonus, you and Anna and your little girl should come and stay in the main house tonight. If a lightning strike catches the thatch on your cottage, it'll go up quickly. Have Hanno

and Abibaal's old room. Their mattresses are still there.'

Antigonus nodded.

'Parmenion, you can sleep inside too, if you like.'

'Much obliged,' said Parmenion, using his fingers to rake water from his tawny hair. 'I think I'll ride it out here. If any water comes through those tiles, I can deal with it.'

'Shouldn't do. I've patched the roof pretty well. But I appreciate the offer. This is going to be as bad a storm as I've seen in a long time. Come on, Dido.'

I shook my head.

'I'm staying here. I can sleep in Porcellus's stall.'

'Have you lost your senses? You're soaked through and this storm could last all night.'

'You know Porcellus hates thunder. If he starts getting upset, the other horses will too,' I pointed out.

My uncle looked exasperated.

'You coddle that animal like a baby. But have it your own way. Parmenion, see if you can find something dry for Dido to put on. And don't open that main door until the storm's passed, either of you, whatever you do.'

He and Antigonus disappeared into the deluge. I went into Porcellus's stall, which was next to Jewel's, and talked to him until his thumping heartbeat

settled. Parmenion came back from the roof space where he usually slept. A tunic landed on my head.

'Thank you,' I said, using Porcellus as cover to change out of my wet clothes. 'Where are you going?'

'Back up the ladder.'

'You can stay here with me and Porcellus. If you want.'

Parmenion raised an eyebrow.

'Do *you* want me to?'

'I don't mind.'

Parmenion gave a sigh of relief.

'Thank Jupiter for that,' he said. He eased himself into a straw-filled corner of the stall. 'I'd have been petrified by myself.'

'You're such a fraud,' I said, settling down near Porcellus and stroking his muzzle as he put it close to my face. 'Making out to Scorpus that you're so brave. What would you have done if I hadn't stayed?'

'Hidden under a blanket and prayed, probably. But I knew you'd stay behind with Porcellus,' said Parmenion. He grinned and produced a handful of dates from the pouch on his belt, which he divided between us. I gave most of mine to Porcellus, which distracted him nicely from the rattle of the rain on the rafters.

After we'd eaten, we huddled into the warm nests we'd made for ourselves in the straw. The storm had worked itself into a frenzy and the wind was ripping at the barn like a dog tearing scraps of meat off a bone. Gusts slipped through the cracks in the masonry, making the oil lamps on the walls flicker. I glanced anxiously at the roof.

'Do you think that really will leak?' I asked Parmenion, who was idly blowing a tune on a reed pipe.

'Shouldn't think so.'

I had a sudden, unwelcome thought.

'Abibaal's letter!' I searched in the folds of my discarded wet tunic. 'He sent it after he arrived in Rome. I hope the rain hasn't got to it.'

'Why are you carrying it around with you?'

'Scorpus wants me to practise my reading and this letter is a lot more interesting than that boring history of farming he gave me.' I extracted the crumpled papyrus, examined it and was reassured. 'No. It's dry, although the ink's run a little here.'

Parmenion put down his pipe.

'Let's hear you then,' he said.

'You want me to read it aloud?'

'Why not? It's either that, or listen to me play.'

'If you like,' I said. 'Just remember, I'm not very good yet.'

I smoothed the yellow papyrus, still marked by its broken wax seal. The words weren't in my cousin's own hand. Abibaal had never learned his letters well enough for that. But the chariot-racing factions in Rome had scribes to whom letters home could be dictated and thanks to the education that my uncle was insisting on – despite my protests that I neither needed, nor wanted it – I was now confident enough to decipher it.

Slowly, I began to read aloud, the neatly inscribed words echoing through my head in my cousin's excitable, boyish voice.

'I finally made it, Dido. I'm here in Rome. The city is as big as you said it would be, and the Circus Maximus is even better than I imagined. The track, the crowd, the lap counters, the turning posts. It all makes the Utica circus look like a fishpond. And I can't believe the noise. You feel it through your feet when you're sitting in the pit with the other drivers. The Green spectators are the loudest, though there's more of them of course, and their drivers are dirty, like you warned me. But I'm not scared. From what I've seen, you've got to play them at their own game.'

Parmenion chuckled. 'Listen to him, sounding like an old racing veteran, instead of a pimply kid not long arrived at the Circus.'

'The next games aren't for another month, so that's when I'll have my first race. Atticus says I shouldn't expect anything. But I so want to win. I wish we had some better horses at the Blues. There are a few good ones. The Four Winds who you told me about are still racing. But most of the best teams belong to the Greens, because they've got Emperor Caligula's money behind them. And they've got Danel as their top driver. He brought Centaur and that team of gold horses with him and, at the moment, no one can beat him. The Green supporters have written his name all over the city. They follow him through the streets and throw money at him.'

'Let's hope they don't leave a scar on that pretty face of his,' murmured Parmenion.

'Oh, come on, that's unkind,' I said, looking up. 'Danel's a great driver. He fought fair at the games in Thugga, when he had the chance not to.'

'Very gracious. But you don't fool me, Dido.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Because despite what Abibaal says, there *is* someone who could beat Danel. Even if she's not in Rome at the Circus Maximus where she should be. She's sitting here in this stable.'

I shook my head, even though the crash of the thunder outside had briefly become the exhilarating roar of wheels in my head.

'My racing days are over. I've made my peace with that.' Parmenion looked sceptical, so I added, 'Really, I have.'

'If you insist. Go on. What else does the little runt say?'

'That's about it,' I said, squinting at the letter. 'He says to tell Anna he misses her cooking and to tell you that he's learned some dice tricks from the other drivers and he'll show you when he comes home.'

'No message for Scorpus?'

I shook my head.

'No. I thought Abibaal might write to him. But the only letter was for me.'

'Still festering then,' said Parmenion, picking up his pipe again.

'I know. I wish they hadn't said goodbye the way they did. It's so sad. They got close for a while after Abibaal's accident. Then they started having the same old arguments, Abibaal thinking Scorpus was treating him like a little boy, not wanting to let him go to the Circus Maximus.' I shrugged helplessly. 'They've never known how to talk to each other.'

'Don't worry,' said Parmenion. 'Abibaal's young, he'll grow out of it. I was pretty stupid at his age, if you remember.'

'I do. You tried to put a dead mouse down my back.'

'No, no. That was Nicias. I was never as bad as him, you have to—'

'Ssh.' I sat up, raising my hand to silence him. 'There's something outside.'

We sat in the darkness, listening intently to the howl of the storm. By his pricked ears and wide eyes, I knew that Porcellus had heard the same thing I had.

'There!' I cried. 'Did you hear that?'

Parmenion shook his head. 'No.'

'It's a horse.' I leaped to my feet. 'That's a distress cry. Maybe one got left behind in the pasture somehow.'

'Well, we can't rescue it now. That storm's right over us.'

But I'd already unlatched the door of Porcellus's stall. The idea of leaving a frightened animal alone in conditions like this was unthinkable.

'Dido, wait, don't be stupid!'

A blast of wind almost knocked me off my feet as I hauled open the main door. As I staggered outside, the rain hit me in the face.

'Dido, come back!'