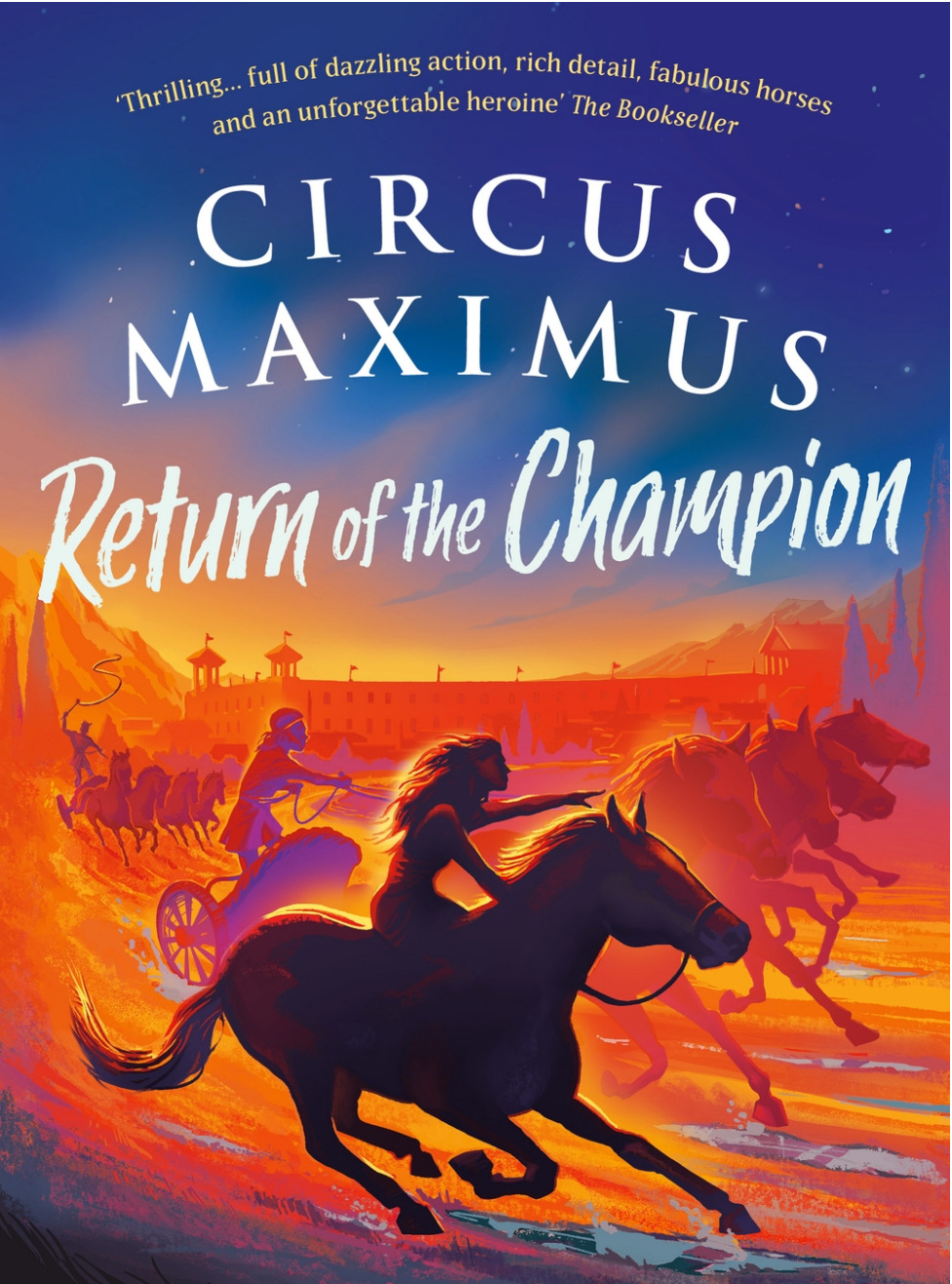
'Thrilling... full of dazzling action, rich detail, fabulous horses and an unforgettable heroine' *The Bookseller*

CIRCUS MAXIMUS

Return of the Champion



ANNELISE GRAY

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I



Utica, North Africa

The rider's shadow flitted like a cloud in a storm gust. It was a hazardous route over steep, rocky ground, with dusk closing in and only the glimmer of a dying sun to light the way. But the rider moved easily with the horse's gallop, shifting their weight, never losing balance.

In the foothills of the valley below, a heavyset man wearing a striped cap was pacing the stable yard, calloused hands clasped at the small of his back. The mournful sound of a creature in pain made him glance into the dimly lit barn. Moments later, a groom hurried out.

'She's struggling, Master Glarus.'

'Keep an eye on things. It shouldn't be much longer to wait.'

As he spoke, the thud of hoofbeats reached them. Glarus nodded to the groom, who retreated as the rider clattered into the yard. The horse, a red chestnut mare with a sunken hollow where her right eye should have been, huffed and flattened her ears. A young woman with wild hair like a lion's mane dropped lightly to the ground.

'You made good time,' said Glarus.

'How is she?'

'Didn't fancy her breakfast this morning, which was the first sign. Everything seemed to be going smoothly but she got into difficulties. That's why I sent for you.'

The woman patted the chestnut mare and murmured to her before following Glarus into the barn. In their stalls, the horses were quiet but watchful. One stable door stood open. The groom was inside, keeping guard over a dark brown mare lying on her side in the straw.

'I tried to help her, but she didn't want any of it,' he said. 'Almost caught me with her back hooves.'

'No wonder, with you standing over her like that where she can't see you,' came the young woman's blunt reply. 'Go on, outside, make sure my horse has water. I'll take it from here.'

As Glarus and the groom withdrew, she crouched in the straw within sight of the mare's head.

'Easy, Selene. Easy.'

The mare flicked her tail. Her belly was swollen and her flanks soaked in sweat. She stretched her neck towards her visitor, who gently rested her palm on the horse's cheek and stroked it.

'You're doing well. Everything's going to be fine. I promise I won't let anything happen to either of you.'

Shedding her cloak, she rolled up the long sleeves of her tunic.

Outside, in the grey glow of twilight, Glarus and the groom waited by a crackling brazier, watching the chestnut mare guzzle from a water trough.

'How many foals is it now, master, that you've bred for her?' asked the groom.

'Eight by my count. This is the third for Selene. Should think it'll be her last.'

'All from the same sire? That wild black stallion?'

'Just because he gave you a nip once don't make him wild. Great chariot horse in his day. Only wish I'd seen him in his prime, when he raced at the Circus Maximus. This foal's going to have a champion's blood… if it survives.'

The groom scuffed his feet.

'Is it true?' he asked, his voice low. 'What they say about her?'

'Depends what you've heard.'

'That she spent half her life living as a boy. That she tricked her way into the Circus Maximus and raced for the Blues. As a charioteer!'

'Not sure how anyone tricks their way into the Circus Maximus. You'd get found out pretty quickly.'

'It happened, then?' The groom shook his head in wonder. 'I was told she drove a great race against the emperor of those days – and defeated him! Dido, Queen of the Circus – that's how she was known. But the city priests said she was a sorceress who had poisoned the emperor's horses and that if anyone in Rome spoke her name aloud, a curse would fall upon them.' He searched the older man's face. 'Is that how she's helping Selene, master? With dark magic?'

Glarus arched an eyebrow.

'You want to get to the Circus Maximus and be a charioteer yourself one day?'

'Of course, master. More than anything.'

'In that case, a word to the wise. Spend less time listening to the mutterings of donkeys and more on learning your craft.'

The groom looked abashed.

'I'm only thinking of Selene, Master Glarus.' He peered into the barn again. 'You trust her?'

'Nobody I trust more when it comes to horseflesh, her Uncle Scorpus aside. That's why

she's in there with that mare and not you. Now make yourself useful by tidying the harness room and sweep this yard from corner to corner.'

The flames in the brazier dwindled to embers. The one-eyed chestnut looked half-asleep. Glarus gazed into the sky, watching the stars spark to life. At last, when he could bear the waiting no more, he ventured into the barn. To his relief, the brown mare was on her feet. Under her belly, in a nest of soaking straw, lay a foal, its damp coat ruffled like silk.

'You little beauty,' he murmured.

Dido smiled. She was rinsing her hands in a bucket of water.

'I had to help her in the end,' she said. 'He was nice and comfortable in there – didn't want to come out, did you, little one?'

The foal sneezed. He stretched a spindly foreleg, attempting in vain to heave himself upright.

'Look at that,' Glarus crowed. 'Trying to find his feet already. Got his sire's spirit.'

'And his mother's,' said Dido.

She watched as the mare licked her offspring's bedraggled coat. He was black all over, save for a small white star in the middle of his forehead and another fleck of white on his hindquarters. Again, the foal made a determined bid to stand. His legs were still weak and kept folding under him but

encouraged by prods from his mother's nose, he accomplished his mission. Swaying like an old man with rickety knees, he looked at Dido and took a tentative step towards her.

'Hello,' she whispered. 'Welcome to the world.'

The foal blinked, nut-brown eyes meeting green as Dido reached and gently tickled his chin. Then he began to explore his surroundings, staggering in the thick straw.

'Are you happy with our usual arrangement?' asked Dido.

'Suits me fine, if you're content to pay for his upkeep,' replied Glarus.

'I don't like weaning them early. Let Selene keep him until he's ready. When he's three, we can begin his training. I'll visit from time to time to see how he's getting on.'

'Sounds a fair deal to me.'

They could see the mare was ready to nurse and went outside. Glarus waited as Dido collected Jewel, her chestnut, who snorted pointedly as if to say that it was about time.

'How's Scorpus doing?'

'Some days are better than others,' answered Dido. 'He tries to do too much and he gets tired. But he always lets me know when he disagrees with something I'm doing.'

Glarus chuckled.

'I can believe it. Give him my best and tell him I'll be over soon to share a jar of wine.'

'I will. Thank you, Glarus.'

She vaulted onto Jewel's back in a smooth, athletic motion and gathered the reins. As she cantered away, the young groom, who had paused in his sweeping, stared after her. Glarus smiled at the boy's expression.

'I know what you're thinking, lad. Feels like you've been visited by some goddess in disguise, don't it?'



'All go well?' asked a tall, glum-faced individual when, sometime later, Jewel ambled into her own stable yard.

'In the end,' said Dido as she dismounted. 'Is Scorpus still up?'

'No, he was looking tired after supper. He said you should go to see him when you get back though. Shall I put Jewel out for you?'

'No, thank you, Antigonus, I can do it. You go home to Anna.'

In the pasture behind the yard, a large shape weaved restlessly in front of the gate. As Dido and

Jewel approached, a whickering shriek shattered the night's stillness.

'Oh, hush, Porcellus, we weren't gone that long.' Dido rubbed the neck of the black horse who was waiting for them so keenly. 'Yes, I know you're annoyed I took Jewel instead of you, but you'd never have had the patience to stand around until it was over. Guess what? You've become a father again. I've just been to meet your son.'

The news appeared to be only of mild interest to Porcellus. He greeted his friend Jewel then touched Dido's shoulder with his muzzle, nibbling affectionately at her hair. With a smile, she took a handful of dates from the pouch at her waist. As she stood there, feeding both horses in turn, someone spoke.

'Dido?'

She turned. A girl, around eight years old, was standing behind her, barefoot and wrapped in a thick blanket. She had curly hair and eyes as bright as beetle shells.

'You should be in bed.'

'I know,' said the girl, clutching the blanket and hopping on the spot to keep herself warm. 'But I heard you come back and I couldn't sleep until I knew.'

'Selene had her foal. A colt. So now you know.'

'Does he have a name? Can I help you choose? What does he look like?'

Dido smiled at the excitement on the girl's face.

'Black with a white star. Just like his papa here. I'll take you over to meet him, and yes, we can name him together. In the meantime, get back to your cottage and into bed, you little terror, before Antigonus and Anna realise you're missing.'

The girl scampered away. Dido soon left her beloved horses grazing side by side and went towards the long-roofed villa a short distance from the stable. In the cool entrance hall, she bent to pat the head of a scruffy brown dog lying half-asleep on a straw mattress and murmured, 'Goodnight, Issa.' The dog wagged its tail feebly.

A curtain was drawn across the entrance to a bedroom. Dido stood outside listening to the sound of deep, even breathing.

Just as well, she thought. *He needs his sleep.*

She headed to the kitchen on the other side of the house and tore a piece of bread from a loaf she found inside a clay pot, eating it hungrily as she went to her own room next door. But she didn't get into bed. There was a restlessness in her eyes and soon she was wandering outside again, using the light from the stars to pick a path around the edge of the pasture. On the far side, beneath tall pines,

two grave markers had been dug into the ground, close to each other. Dido crouched beside the newer of the pair, resting her hand on the pale stone.

'This is the one, Abibaal. I can feel it.'

Over her head, the trees rustled, as if sharing secrets.

'You should have seen him trying to get up,' she went on. 'He's going to be great. As good as Porcellus, if not better, what with Selene's blood as well. The Circus Maximus is going to scream his name. As for our friend from the Greens… he won't know what's hit him. I'm going to make him suffer a thousand cuts of humiliation before I'm done with him.'

She took a breath, exhaling slowly before she spoke again.

'Scorpus says I need to stop. He says none of it will bring you back. I know he's right. I can't help it though. Nothing seems to matter any more except this.'

For a long time, she stayed there, listening to the whispers of the trees in the night.