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Opening extract from

Stravaganza: City Of Stars

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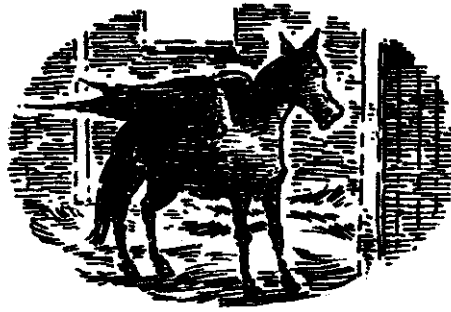
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Prologue: *The Flying Horse*

Cesare had hardly left the stables for days. His favourite mare, Starlight, was heavy with foal and until she gave birth, his place was with her. He even slept in the straw in the empty stall beside hers, with the result that his brown hair was turning blond with strawdust and his clothes itched and prickled.

Now, after bolting his dinner before running back to the stables, he hiccupped as he groomed the grey mare, whistling softly to her between his teeth. Starlight's mane was silver in the twilight and, as he brushed it, she huffed at him through her nostrils. She stirred restlessly in her stall.

Nothing mattered but Starlight. Cesare's family lived near the Ram stables and his father, Paolo, was the Horsemaster for the Twelfth of the Ram. Paolo

had given him the responsibility of looking after Starlight and Cesare was determined not to let him down.

'Not long, now, my beauty,' he whispered and she whickered back at him, seeming to nod her white head in the darkening stables. The other horses were unsettled too. They were all part-Arab and highly strung; the Ram was interested only in racing animals. In a stall on the other side, Arcangelo the young chestnut gelding shifted about in his sleep and twitched his ears as if dreaming of victory.

Cesare settled down to sleep in the straw and his dreams were of victory too. He dreamed of the same thing, by day and by night – to ride the Ram's horse in the Race of the Stars and to win.

A small grey cat twined round the stable door and made her delicate way across to where Cesare was sleeping. Slowly, carefully, she insinuated herself into the crook of his arm and began to purr.

Just before midnight the sounds in the stable changed. Starlight was restless. At the same time Cesare woke up and was aware of his father's presence. It was unnerving the way Paolo did that. He always knew where he was needed and when. He had brought a torch with him which he thrust into a bracket set high up in the wall so that sparks wouldn't set the straw on fire. Cesare sprang lightly to his feet, dislodging the disgruntled cat, who went to wash in the doorway.

By the flickering light of the torch, father and son attended quietly to the mare, whose time had come. It was an easy delivery, not her first. But as the foal slipped out into Cesare's hands, he recoiled as if it had

been burning hot.

'What is it?' whispered Paolo. The whole stable seemed to be holding its breath. 'I don't know,' Cesare whispered back. 'Can't you feel it? Something's different about this one. When I caught it I felt a shock – like a bolt of lightning in the sky.'

Starlight turned her beautiful head to lick her new foal. The filly was not just dark with the wetness of her birth, but black, black as the night outside, where the bells of the city's churches were sounding midnight. She staggered to her feet, her mouth blindly rooting for her mother's milk like any other newborn.

The stable door, left ajar by Paolo, moved in a sudden gust of wind. A shaft of moonlight fell across the stall. Cesare gasped. By the silver light of the moon and the golden glow of the torch, the foal that had just been brought into life was a creature of myth and magic.

The little long-legged filly, pulling at her mother's teat, was rapidly drying in the warm night air. Her coat was a glossy black and she was clearly going to be a first-rate racehorse. But that was not all. As she tried her new muscles, gaining confidence in her spindly legs, she flexed her shoulders and spread out two small damp black wings about the size of a young swan's.

'Dia!' said Paolo on a sharp intake of breath. 'It has happened. Here, in the Ram, the winged horse has been born to us.'

Even the grey cat came over for a closer look. And Cesare was suddenly aware that every horse in the stable, even Arcangelo, was awake and looking at the new foal. A wild feeling overtook him. He didn't

know whether to whoop for joy or burst into tears. He only knew that something magnificent had happened and that from now on his life would never be the same again.



Chapter 1

Families

The winged horse was covered in a layer of fine dust. It was in a corner of the crowded window of a little antique shop, where Georgia had been to look at it every day on the way home from school since it had first appeared. That was a month ago and she had saved up nearly enough money to pay the price on the little white label tied round its neck.

Saving had taken a while because most of her pocket money went on lessons at the riding school, which she could afford only once every two weeks.

'Why does she have to have such an expensive hobby?' her stepfather Ralph had grumbled to her mother, when they first kitted her out with hard-hat and jodhpurs. 'Why can't she be interested in the sort of things other girls like?'

'And you think those are cheap?' Georgia's mother had mocked, in a rare moment of taking her daughter's side. 'Just be glad she doesn't want new clothes every week or make-up and mobile phones and hair dye. Besides, she pays for the lessons herself.'

That had been two years ago, when Ralph had first married Maura and brought his son Russell to live with them. But at the thought of Russell, Georgia's mouth went dry and she felt her palms sweating. Quick, concentrate on the winged horse.

If you could really find a horse with wings in nature, it would be so easy to take off into the sky on its back and ride away for ever. Georgia closed her eyes and imagined the movement of a horse beneath her, the moments of changing up from walking to trotting, trotting to a canter, cantering to galloping and then, yes, why not one more shift? Like feeling fifth gear on a motorway, there would be one more smooth transition and then the beating wings would lift horse and rider away from solid ground and up where no one could reach them.

A rapping on the glass made her eyes fly open. A face with grey hair and glasses was looking at her through the window and making beckoning gestures. Georgia recognised the antique shop's owner – Mr Goldsmith, if his name was the same as the faded letters over the shop window. He beckoned again and she pushed the door open.



Paolo knew that the black filly had to be moved from the city as soon as possible. If news got out of the

miraculous birth, she would be at risk from kidnappers. It was a fantastic piece of luck that this had happened to their ward of the city, the Twelfth of the Ram, and a good omen for this summer's Race of the Stars, but Paolo was adamant that it should be kept secret.

'We can't race her,' he told Cesare. 'We'd never be allowed to get away with such an advantage.'

'But we wouldn't be able to race her this summer anyway,' said Cesare. 'She'll be too young.'

'Don't be so sure of that,' Paolo replied. 'These winged ones are said not to be like other horses. They grow at a different rate.'

Father and son kept guard all night, rubbing down foal and mare with straw and giving them clean bedding and fresh water. It was true that the black filly seemed strong and mature within a few hours of her birth, but horses were like that anyway. It was one of the many things Cesare liked about them, the way that their babies got up and got on with life. Not like his little sisters and brothers, who needed so much of his mother's attention and took such ages to turn into proper people.

He much preferred being in the stables with his father, with the warm smell of horses, to staying in their crowded house which always seemed to be full of washing and bubbling pots of baby semolina. Besides, this was the only place where he could get Paolo to talk, to tell him about miracles like the winged horse.

'Every hundred years or so,' said Paolo. 'That's how often it happens in Remora. It's the first one I've seen – and it came about in our Twelfth.' Paolo was

jubilant. 'It's the best thing that's happened to the Ram in my lifetime.'

'But *how* does it happen?' asked Cesare. 'I mean, we know the sire. You had Starlight covered by that stallion from Santa Fina – what's his name? Alessandro. There's nothing special about him, is there? A great horse, of course, and he won the Stellata in '68, but just a horse – no wings.'

'It doesn't work like that,' said Paolo slowly, looking at Cesare thoughtfully and weighing his words carefully. 'There's no way you can determine the arrival of a winged one by using a stud book. It happens when times are unstable – as indeed they are now – and it is a good omen for the Twelfth where the foal is born. But it doesn't guarantee success. And it carries its own dangers with it.'

They decided to move the mare and her filly the next night. It would be safe to take her to Santa Fina in the dark. Alessandro's owner, Roderigo, was someone they could trust and the filly could be kept hidden while she grew. If word of her presence got out, the Ram's rivals, particularly the Twelfths of the Twins and the Lady, would move heaven and earth to capture her and rob the Ram of their good luck omen. It would be safe enough to reveal her once this year's race was over.

'What shall we call her?' asked Cesare.

'Merla,' said his father decisively. 'Blackbird. May she ever fly true.'



The inside of Mr Goldsmith's shop was the untidiest,

most interesting place Georgia had ever seen. It was a complete jumble of furniture, ornaments, clothes, weapons, books, jewellery and cutlery, all mixed up together. The untidiness intensified in the area behind the cash-desk, where a brass umbrella-stand held two swords, a blunderbuss, a green silk parasol and a pair of crutches. Mr Goldsmith's chair was wedged between tottering heaps of sheet music and scuffed leather-bound books. He peered at Georgia from within his fortress.

'You've obviously taken a fancy to something in my window,' he said. 'I've seen you looking in most days at about this time. So, what's the problem? Not enough cash? Come on lad, spit it out!'

Georgia felt a blush beginning. She was always having this problem. It was her very short hair, plus the fact that she was flat as a pancake in front. It was embarrassing enough in her class where all the other girls were impressively endowed. She had taken to slouching forward and wearing baggy jumpers. And lately she had used the tomboy image as an excuse – as if she didn't *want* to look feminine. Hence the haircut. And the silver ring in her right eyebrow.

Mr Goldsmith was looking at her quizzically.

'It's the horse,' said Georgia. 'The winged one.'

'Ah,' he nodded. 'My little Etruscan beauty. A copy, of course. Probably from a museum shop in Italy.'

'Don't you know?' Georgia was surprised.

'Not for sure,' said Mr Goldsmith. 'Stuff finds its way here by all sorts of routes. I think that was from an old lady's house in Waverley Road. There was only a great-niece, who was in a hurry to sell up and get the money. She brought in boxes of knick-knacks.

None of the furniture, unfortunately. Got a dealer on to that. Still, there was a very nice pair of silver candlesticks that brought in a fair profit.'

Georgia remembered the candlesticks. She had seen them in the window the day the winged horse had appeared. She never went straight home from school – she always dawdled, looking in shop windows and taking long detours. She never wanted to be at home alone with Russell before her mother got in from work.

'It's lovely,' she said quickly, to divert her thoughts. 'It looks old.'

'You're not a chap at all, are you?' said Mr Goldsmith suddenly. It was his turn to blush. 'Sorry. I can't keep up with you young people's fashions.'

'It's OK,' said Georgia. 'I should have said straightaway. My name's Georgia O'Grady. I go to Barnsbury Comprehensive in Waverley Road. I think I know the house you mean.'

'And I'm Mortimer Goldsmith,' said the old man, offering her his hand to shake. 'Well, now that we've been properly introduced, let's get that horse out of the window.'

He reached in and dropped the black horse into Georgia's palm. It was warm from the sun shining through the window, as if it were alive. She took a tissue from her jeans pocket and gently wiped the dust off. Mr Goldsmith was looking at her.

'How much have you got?' he asked quietly and, when Georgia mentioned a sum two pounds short of the amount on the ticket, he took the horse from her and began to wrap it in cotton wool.

'That'll do,' he said. And from that moment

Georgia felt she had found a friend.

By the time she got back, Russell was already at home, playing metal CDs very loudly in his room, so Georgia was able to sneak up to hers without being noticed. She locked the door as soon as she got inside and gave a sigh of relief. This was always the trickiest time of the day. Whenever Russell was there, it was always touch and go whether she'd make it to the sanctuary of her room before he realised she was back and started on her.

Mondays were all right, because he played football after school and on Tuesdays Georgia had a maths tutor. Fridays she went for violin lessons, but that still left Wednesdays and Thursdays with two hours between school and the return of their respective parents in which to avoid Russell.

He was two years older than her and two years above her at Barnsbury. From the moment they had first met, they had loathed one another. 'If you think I'm going to let your poxy mother get her claws into my dad, you're dead wrong,' he had hissed at her behind the grown-ups' backs.

But he hadn't been able to stop Ralph marrying Maura and he hadn't had a say in the matter when both the parents sold their flats and bought a house together. It hadn't helped that both Georgia and Russell were virtually only children. Russell had a very much older sister, Liz, who had gone with his mother when she left him and Ralph. And ever since then he had assumed that it would be him and his dad against the world.

Now it was just him against Georgia. Russell tolerated Maura because she put his dad into a

generally better mood than he had been in on his own. But he resented her for breaking up their twosome and, since he couldn't get away with being nasty to her, he took it all out on Georgia.

Georgia would have loved a proper older brother. She had had a little one once, but he died when he was only a few days old. Not long after that her own dad had left. Georgia had been very young at the time and didn't really remember either of them. She just had a vague memory of her mother always in floods of tears. And then one day, Maura had dried her eyes and said, 'That's that, then. We are just going to have to cope on our own.'

And they had, until Ralph came along. Georgia didn't mind him so much. He loved Maura and he could be quite funny when he was in a good mood. But he worried a lot about money. And he brought Russell with him.

Georgia unwrapped the winged horse and put it on her chest of drawers. Then she went to her computer and logged on. '*Etruscan*', she typed into the search engine, '*Etruscan+horse+flying*.'

987 matching entries, her computer told her, but Georgia was an old hand at Internet research and looked at only the first hundred. The best sites included an American one showing a beautiful little gilt bronze ornament, which had been offered at auction three years ago but not sold. It was only just over three inches long and similar to the one that Georgia had just bought, but its reserve price was between $2,000 and $3,000 – rather more than she had paid.

Another good site told her about a bronze vase

from Monteleone, wherever that was, which had a chariot pulled by winged horses. There was no illustration unfortunately, but Georgia felt she could imagine it.



In the Twelfth of the Twins, Riccardo the Horsemaster was expecting an illustrious guest: Niccolò, Duke of Giglia and head of the powerful di Chimici family. He was staying with his younger brother Ferdinando, who was Pope and also Prince of Remora. Although Remora was the official centre of the di Chimici's growing Republic, it was to the north, in Giglia, that the real power lay, with the Duke and his heirs.

Niccolò, great-grandson of the founder of the di Chimici dynasty, had five living children, four of them sons, and was the most ambitious man in all Talia. Under his direction the di Chimici family had spread their network through all the major cities in the north of the country and now held power in most of them. Only the tiresome city-state of Bellezza off the north-east coast had held out against any alliance with him or his family. And Niccolò had a plan about that too.

But here in Remora, his position was secure. As he walked the few hundred yards from the Papal palace to the stables of the Twelfth of the Twins, he had to stop a dozen times to exchange pleasantries with wealthy merchants or accept the homage of poorer citizens who wanted to kiss his hand. Niccolò arrived at the stables in a very good mood.

Riccardo, the Horsemaster of the Twins, was bursting with pride. The Pope had visited the day

before and now here was the Duke of Giglia, reputed to be the richest man in Talia, coming to inspect the horses. He saved the best animal till last.

'And this, your Grace, is the one we shall run in the Stellata.'

Niccolò looked at the highly-strung bay, who flared his nostrils and bucked slightly in his stall. He stroked the horse's nose with his gloved hand and spoke soothingly to him, then turned to the Horsemaster.

'What's the competition this year?'

'Well, your Grace, you know how secretive everyone is about their horses in the city,' Riccardo began a little nervously.

Niccolò di Chimici fixed him with a cold stare. 'But you are paid not just to tend horses but to find out such secrets, are you not?' he said.

'Yes, your Grace,' muttered the Horsemaster. 'And things will be easier now I have a new groom. He came specifically recommended by your Grace's nephew, the ambassador to Bellezza. Signor Rinaldo tells me this man has done him some great service and is renowned for his ability to sniff out secrets.'

Niccolò smiled. He had heard something of the service done by this man in Bellezza. If it was the same man, he had rid the city of its fiercest opponent to the di Chimici family. And though the Duke's nephew Rinaldo had failed to replace her with a puppet Duchessa, surely the city's new ruler – a mere chit of a girl – would be much easier to influence?

'Does he know anything about horses?' was all he said to the Horsemaster.

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