

THE CLEOPATRA CURSE

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extract from chapter 3

It was now or never. With trembling hands, Zeuxis tied Cleo's rein to a tree and left her grazing. He slipped through the bushes to the far side of the park, his mouth dry with excitement and terror. There was another audience down this end – curious members of the public, who had heard the commotion and come to see what was happening. The other charioteers walked their teams up and down while they waited for the circuit to be cleared. They seemed to be enjoying the spectacle of the queen's prize charioteer made to look a fool.

Clytius was in a bad way. He flopped over the front of his chariot, making little attempt to do much except keep the horses from crashing into trees. The exercise chariot was more solid than a racing one, or it would surely have turned over by now. The horses were getting tired, and the slack reins actually did him a favour. Without him hauling at their mouths, they calmed down a bit and dropped back to a trot.

Lady Wenero's spell couldn't have worked more perfectly. As the chariot came abreast of Zeuxis, Clytius toppled gently out the side into the grass. The horses sprang forwards again with the unexpected change in weight. Before he had time to think about it too much, Zeuxis ran alongside them, judged the distance, and jumped in.

He gathered up the reins, his heart pounding so hard he was sure the horses would sense his terror and play him up. But he'd driven stubborn donkeys for so long, the reins felt natural in his hands. By the time he'd reached the trees, his nerves had steadied. Gently, he took up the pressure of the horses' mouths. At first the platform felt strange, jolting under his feet. But he'd imagined this so often during his nightly visits to the Hippodrome, he soon gained his balance.

Feet spread... legs slightly apart... knees bent... reins taut, the horses leaning against his hands and using his weight to balance themselves. The stallion was pulling off to the side still, but the colts were listening to him.

Zeuxis tightened the stallion's rein a little, and called to the horses in a soothing voice. "There, I've got you, steady, steady round the turn, that's it, you're all right, I won't let you fall..."

The words were nonsense, but it didn't matter. The colts' ears flickered back to catch the sound of his voice, and the stallion gradually calmed and arched his neck and snorted. Zeuxis' mouth stretched into a grin. He raised his chin, feeling the wind in his hair, the powerful horses tugging at his arms, the chariot alive beneath his feet. It was every bit as wonderful as his dream, and more. The trees became the marble pillars of the Hippodrome. The track shimmered and turned into the famous racecourse.

The finish post flashed past in a wild surge of cheering, and he drove the black team on a victory lap, smiling and waving at the crowd as they threw rose petals into his hair—

The horses shied as the chariot jerked sideways, nearly throwing him out. Zeuxis stumbled against the front plate, bruising his knees, as the queen's Master of Horse grabbed the stallion's bit with a thunderous expression on his face. He hadn't realized he'd driven so far so quickly. The colts skittered to a halt, blowing and snorting as they recognized their master's smell.

Zeuxis' nerves returned with the enormity of what he'd done.

"Get out of that chariot at once, boy!" roared the Master of Horse. "What do you think you're trying to do? These are the queen's most valuable racehorses!"

Zeuxis untangled himself from the reins and staggered off the platform, his cheeks burning. His knees wobbled, and his arms were trembling. He'd driven half a circuit of the park at a mere trot, and he could barely stand!

But this was the chance he'd been waiting for. All his life.

With an effort, he stood straighter. "I... er... the charioteer fell out round the back, and I thought they would bolt, so I just thought I'd bring them round to you. I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean any harm."

The Master of Horse frowned and gave him a closer look. "You just thought you'd bring them round...? Who are you? I don't remember seeing you training with the other boys."

"Zeuxis, sir."

"I didn't ask your name. I asked who you are."

"He's the lighthouse boy, sir," one of the guards called. "Comes to collect the muck from the stables." He nodded to the cart Zeuxis had abandoned.

"An islander." The Master of Horse lost interest and flicked a hand at the guards. "Get the boy out of here. He shouldn't be allowed to hang around the royal park like this."

"But sir! I thought if I proved I could drive them, you would—"

The Master of Horse was already in the chariot, trotting the subdued black team round the circuit to pick up Clytius, the muscles in his back bulging as he held the horses in check.

"Please!" Zeuxis protested as one of the guards put a hand on his arm. "Let me stay a bit longer. I want to tell your queen something. It's very important."

Queen Cleopatra, who had been giggling at something Mark Anthony had said, turned her attention to Zeuxis. She looked him up and down with a haughty expression, reminding him a bit of Ahwere. "Well?"

Desperate, Zeuxis said the one thing that might interest her.

"Y-Your Majesty," he stammered. "I think I know what made your charioteer ill."

The queen glanced at the envoy. "You know what's wrong with Clytius?"

"Not exactly, but I think I know why it happened."

Mark Anthony watched this exchange with an amused expression.

Queen Cleopatra scowled as she realized how unregal it looked to be seen talking to a common slave boy. "Is this some sort of joke?" she snapped. "Will someone get this boy and his donkey out of my park before I lose my temper."

"A curse, Your Majesty!" Zeuxis shouted, as the guard took his arm again. "I saw your brother Prince Ptolemy plant a curse in the Hippodrome!"

Why did the prince plant a curse to strike down his sister Queen Cleopatra? And will Zeuxis ever fulfil his dream to race a chariot around the famous hippodrome of Alexandria? Find out in "The Cleopatra Curse".