

1. Am I Brainy? Yes, I Am!

I just love chariot race days. The NOISE! The EXCITEMENT! The sheer heart-banging THRILL of it all! I want to be one of those chariot racehorses, thundering round the bends, eyes blazing, mane on fire, hooves pounding like crazy. Yeah, I want to be a charioteer's horse. I'm fed up with flapping. I want four long-striding legs, not flippy-flappy wings.

Whaddya mean, am I a bird? Do I look like an elephant? A squeaky squirrel? I don't think so. I'm a raven. Got that? A resplendent raven. *Corvus*, to be exact. *Corvus maximus intelligentissimus*. That's me! Go on, give us a biscuit! **Kraarrk!**



Whaddya mean, you didn't know ravens could talk? Are you mad? Where have you been? Obviously not to school because if you had you'd know that ravens are super-intelligent, which is precisely what *maximus intelligentissimissimus* means. It's Latin and it means 'a very smart bird with a brain the size of the Colosseum'. A raven mate of mine – now he *is* bright – he can count up to sixteen. That's almost a hundred.

And don't ask me why it's called Latin either because I have no idea. After all, the French speak French, the English speak English, the Germans speak German and the Romans speak – Roman? No! They call it Latin. Get over it!

Anyhow, let me put you in the picture. We are at the Circus and, before you ask if there are any elephants or clowns, the answer is a big 'NO!' We are talking about the one and only Circus Maximus here in Rome and it's

chariot race day. Or to put it another way it's CHARIOT RACE DAY, WAHEY!! In other words, excitement abounds. Can't you hear the noise? The yelling crowds? The blaring trumpets? The dreadful groans when some poor charioteer gets shipwrecked?

Whaddya mean, why are they racing ships? Of course they're not racing ships. It's an expression – an expression the Romans use: shipwrecked. It means a chariot has just crashed, smashed to smithereens and its rider has been hurled to the dusty ground, quite possibly in front of three other charging chariots, not to mention all the horses and pounding hooves. Urgh – makes me shudder just thinking about it. Get the picture? Good. Stop asking questions and just let me tell you, right?

We're all here, the whole family – Krysis (Dad), Flavia (Mum), Hysteria (daughter) and Perilus (son) – and we've come to see our hero,



Scorcha. He is the greatest young charioteer ever, except Scorcha has a big problem, namely, he doesn't have a chariot. Why not? you might ask, but please don't interrupt me again. Thank you. I shall continue. *Ahem, ahem.* (That's me clearing my throat because there's some explaining to do.)

I look after this kid, Perilus, right? Nice kid, floppy brown hair, hazel eyes, a few spots and a lot of attitude, but generally OK. He says I'm his pet, but am I kept on a chain like a dog? No. Am I shut in a cage? No. I can go wherever I like, whenever I like, whereas HE has to ask his mum or dad for permission to leave the house or walk down the street. So who's the pet, eh? Toasted togas! He even tells his mum and dad when he's going for a wump. That's what you, being a human, call 'going to the loo'. For us ravens it's having a wump. Unlike you humans, we do all that business stuff in one go, so to speak. Bet you didn't know that. See? You're going to learn a lot from me. I am not called *Corvus maximus intelligentissimussimussimuss* for nothing. (It's difficult to get your beak round that word sometimes.) Perilus usually calls me Croakbag for short, which is not very nice, but he is only eleven.

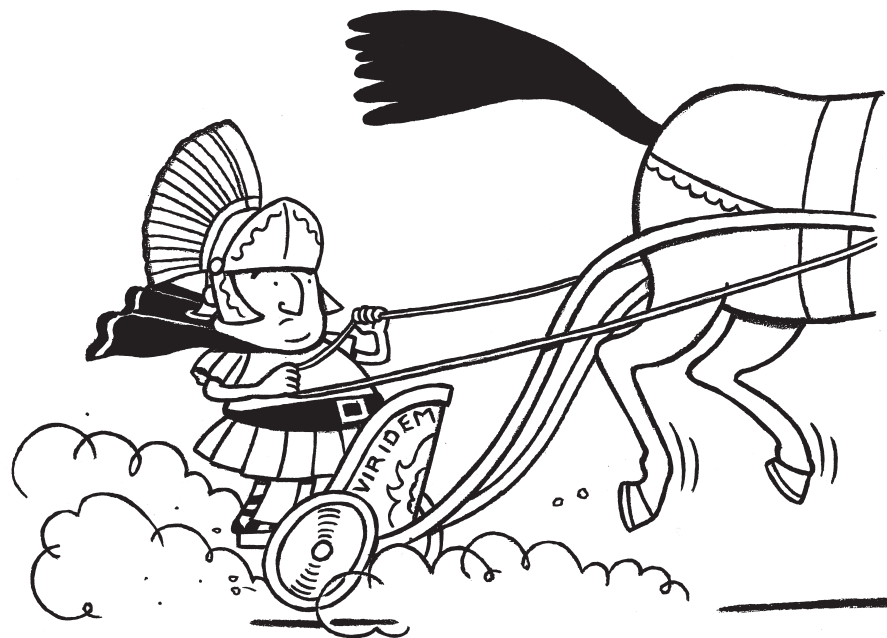
So I am Perilus's pet, he says, and he's teaching me how to speak. Ha ha! What a laugh. I was

speaking Latin years before he was even born!


Now then, where was I? Oh yes. *Ahem, ahem.* So poor young Scorcha is without a chariot and why is that? I hear you ask. It's because Jellus is jealous. Jealous by name, Jellus by nature.

Kraaarrrk! (Raven joke. If you don't get it, it's because you're human. Sad but true.)

Jellus is captain of the Green Team. In chariot racing there are four teams, right? Greens, Whites, Reds and Blues. The Greens are the best. Oh yes! Come on, the Greens! Jellus chooses the riders for the Greens and he's got his eye on Scorcha. Scorcha's young, Scorcha's eager, Scorcha's good! He's also rather handsome in a Roman kind of way; that is to say he has a large conk. Oh yes, Rome is famous for its noses. Flavia and her daughter Hysteria like Scorcha, especially Hysteria. I might even go so far as to say Hysteria, who is fourteen, has a crush on him. Young love, eh? Everyone give a big sigh – ahhhhh!



The problem is Jellus is getting on a bit. He's at least forty and that's OLD for a charioteer. By that age, most charioteers have either retired or been run over by another chariot. Jellus shouldn't be racing. He's too old and too fat and that means he's heavy and that means he slows the horses down and that means HE COMES LAST! Like he did today. I bet Scorcha would



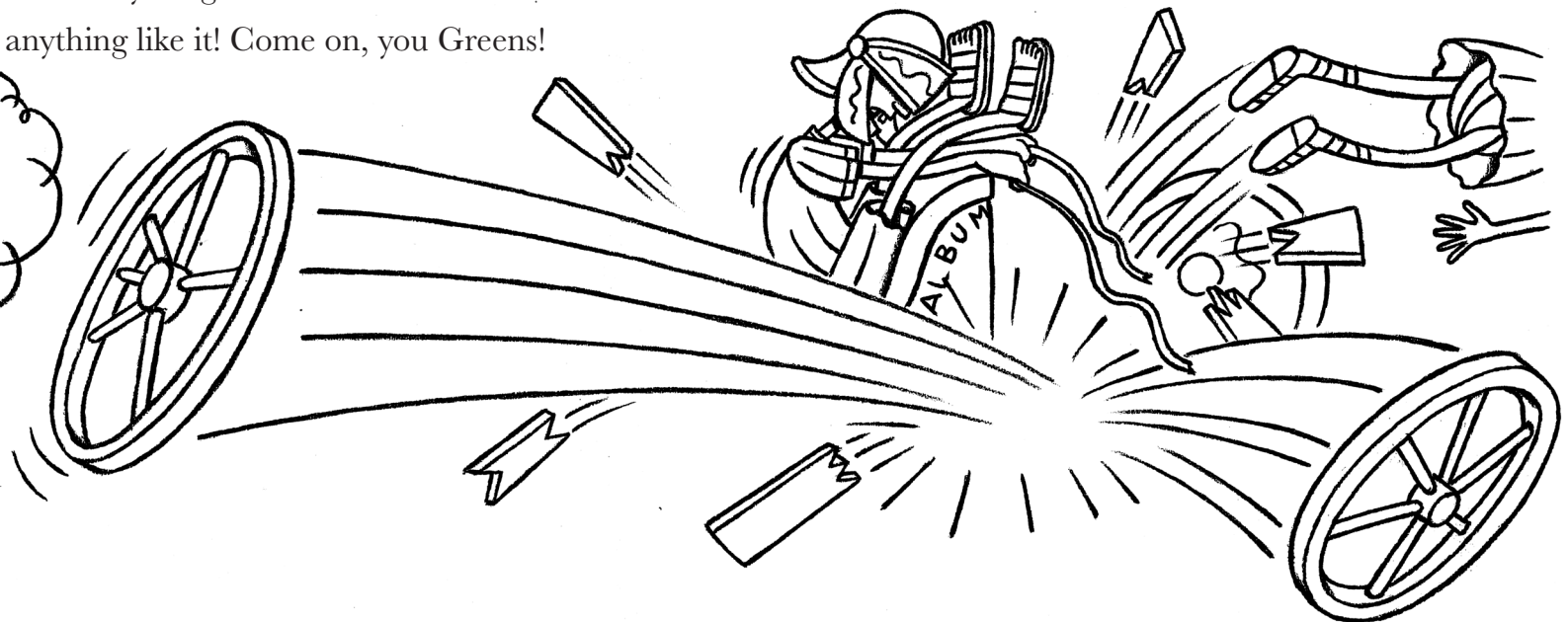
have won if he'd been the charioteer. Personally speaking, I don't think Jellus likes Scorcha, probably because Scorcha to a real talent. Oh yes!

So poor Scorcha is standing at the side, looking miserable, while the next race gets under way. Seven laps round the Circus Maximus! The trumpets blare. The Emperor drops the starter's white handkerchief and they're off! You've never heard anything like it. You've never seen anything like it! Come on, you Greens!

The crowd yells! 'OOOOOH!
AAAAH! OOOHHH!'

**KRACKETTY - KRRASHHH!
SHIPWRECK!**

The Whites' chariot tried to force the Reds' off the track at the bend. That's where all the best action happens. Those bends are DANGEROUS. The Whites' went thundering into the Reds' and BOTH chariots have collapsed, losing their wheels. Well done, Whites, you've knocked yourself out of the competition!



Numbskulls! The riders have jumped clear, cutting the reins so they don't get dragged after the horses which have gone cantering off by themselves.

Daft beasts, horses, if you ask me. Now they're shaking their heads at each other as if they're saying, 'What am I doing? What are you doing? I'm doing what you're doing and you're doing what I'm doing. We're DOING! Oh, where's everyone gone? Hello? Anyone there?' Hopeless creatures. Get over it!

Still, the riders seem to be OK except for the one being carried off with a broken leg. He doesn't look very happy, but at least he'll live to race another day. (Sometimes they don't!) And guess which team won? The Greens? Of course not. And you know why, don't you? One day, Jellus, you're going to have to let young Scorcha show what he can do because, if you don't, I shall personally fly down and peck your knees until they're right down by your ankles. Hurr hurr!
Kraaaarkk! Give us a biscuit!