

## Chapter 1

Julius looked up from his desk when Milo, his door slave, announced the arrival of Sabinus and Nerva. The scent of ash lingering in the air from Nero's fire blustered through the front door with his friends. No doubt they had come to escort him to Nero's execution of Christians.

"I am not going."

"Yes, you are," Sabinus asserted as both friends strode in across the atrium with the determination of Jupiter and Mars.

Julius lowered the scroll to the desk and met the determination blazing in their gazes. "I will not participate in more of Nero's insanity. Not after what I saw last night at his little garden party where innocent people were being used as human torches and torn apart by dogs. No. I am not going."

Blocking the visions of burning flesh and the sound of horrid screams assaulting his brain, Julius focused on his friends' senatorial togas. "You very well know this is nothing more than Nero's vain attempt to cast blame for Rome's fire where it does not belong."

"We knew you would say that," Nerva quipped. He halted beside Sabinus at the step of the tablinum.

"We could not agree with you more, Julius," Sabinus announced. "However, we cannot allow you to die over something this insidious."

"You know," Nerva continued, "that Nero issued a ruling that he will label any senator failing to attend his latest fiasco as traitor to the state."

"I am no traitor to Rome!"

"Julius, you have to go," Sabinus pleaded, "to protect your family's name and your standing in Rome."

Nerva's chin rose. "I also do not want to lose a good friend over this."

Julius felt the long, familiar rage ignite in his guts. He desperately wanted to defy another obligation to Rome. However, his friends' eyes were resolute as granite. "Once my attendance is noted, I am leaving."

The senators melted with relief. "Then we best be going," Nerva concluded with a grin. "The good seats will be taken by now."

As Julius looked at the gates of Nero's Circus on the Vatican Hill, the memories of racing Seytan around the sandy racetrack consumed him. He remembered his black stallion fighting him the entire race because he had no choice but to let Nero win. If he had not, Seytan would have been sacrificed as the October Horse. This time, however,

Julius was simply another spectator witnessing yet another whim of Rome's belligerent emperor.

His gaze swept the spina, the island in the middle of the racetrack, where the Praetorian Guard had dropped nets for any Christian who may choose to recant their faith and flee for safety.

With hands on his hips, Valerius Proculus stood basking in the hot August day at the end of the spina. His uncle's attention was fixed on the imperial box where Nero sprawled on his throne, resting a flabby cheek on his palm and yawning in boredom. Imperial purple and gold decorated the man from his laurel wreath in the curls of his auburn hair down to the sandal bobbing over the armrest. A gold goblet dangling from his fingertips slopped wine to the mosaic flooring as sunlight dappled everything beneath the ornate canopy. Beside Nero sat the Empress Poppaea gossiping with the senators' wives cooing over her pregnant belly.

To Caesar's right sat the Vestal Virgins, composed as goddesses in their blazing white robes. To the imperial left, and stacked like bundles of shorn wool, milled the restless array of white senatorial togas filling the first rows of the circus. Julius was one of them.

Packed tighter than a slave ship, the crowd of spectators were crammed in the remaining seats. Even distant roof tops bulged with onlookers who hoped the Christians would fail to recant their faith and provide a spectacle that they could later share with any who would listen.

Dread spawned like a disease in Julius' gut. No part of him wanted to witness the murder of friends who had saved hundreds while Rome burned. They had even saved his life a few years ago. Luke. Paul. Peter. Anastasia. Basilissa. Timothy. To the amazement of many, the Christians' fearlessness of death amazed most of Rome because they simply had absolute trust in their savior—this Jesus.

Julius had recently learned that his friend Peter had survived Nero's fire while in the Tullianum, jailed because the man refused to stop preaching that Rome's gods were false, that there was only one true God, and that God was *not* Nero.

He wondered how many Romans believed that Rome's gods even cared one lick about saving anyone's ass but their own. Fewer still failed to share any loyalty to Nero who claimed himself equal those gods. Very damn few. And he was one of them.

Horns sounded, silencing the massive arena. Nero eagerly sat up as the gates opened to soldiers herding a motley crowd of people through the sand. A thunderous explosion of slurs, insults, and tossed garbage filled the air as the prisoners stumbled forward, shoved by the soldiers' lances.

Julius started to his feet. In concert, Nerva and Sabinus clamped down on his wrists to keep him seated. "Do not move, Julius. Do not even flinch. He is watching," Sabinus

whispered. "Everyone knows that the Christians are innocent, and I certainly understand your pain."

Julius glared at him. "I cannot stay here and watch this. I cannot!"

"Julius, think of your son in Britannia," Nerva blurted under his breath.

The prisoners halted before the imperial box as Nero strode toward the railing, his gaze feasting on those gathered below him. "You Christians have been brought here because you do not pay tribute to Rome, nor to our gods," the emperor announced to the world. "Have we not honored your god? Have we not tolerated your disregard for our traditions? Yet, you set fire to our city!" His declaration drew the crowd to their feet, roaring in anger, fists flailing in the air.

"We did not start that fire! You did!" one Christian yelled.

Ignoring the interruption, Nero continued, "But, in my benevolent mercy, I shall forgive you." He waved at the net on the spina where Julius' uncle and the praetorians stood at attention. "Go! Save yourselves! Recant and race to the guards who will lift you up to safety. Stay as you are, and you will die." He waved as if dismissing slaves. "Go. Do it now."

Not one Christian moved. Cheers resounded about the circus.

Guards began digging a hole just below the imperial box as Nero motioned toward the gates. One opened. An emaciated prisoner stumbled forward under the weight of a wooden cross.

"Peter?" Julius gasped. The sound of the crowd's glee froze him in place.

"This man," Nero bellowed, "has insulted Rome with his blasphemy! Yet, should even he recant and honor me this day, I will grant even him my forgiveness."

"He will not," Sabinus grumbled.

"Fool," muttered Nerva.

Silence enveloped the track as the crowd strained to hear whatever Peter was pleading to the guards. Shrugging and shaking his head in disbelief, one guard looked up at the imperial box. "He wishes to be crucified upside down."

Laughter erupted. Nero lifted his eyes to the sky. He shook his head as if receiving heavenly instructions. He then waved dismissively. "So be it."

Feasting on the display, the crowd watched as the soldiers nailed Peter to the wooden beams and dropped the cross into a hole. His screams pierced the arena. Attention shifted to more soldiers shoving a senator through the sand toward Nero.

"Is that Albinus Lako?" Sabinus asked.

“I believe so,” Nerva said as he grinned at Julius, “And that would have been you as well, my friend, had you not listened to us.”

Julius swallowed the sudden reality that had spawned in his throat as the soldiers removed the man’s senatorial toga and tunic, leaving him in his loincloth.

“Albinus Lako,” Nero bawled, “you failed to join your peers as I demanded!” He waved grandly over the senators who had submitted to his request. “Therefore, you have deemed yourself a traitor by defying my imperial command!”

“I want nothing to do with your murderous insanity!” Lako bellowed back. “And I am no traitor to Rome!”

“How dare you defy the gods!” Nero snapped. One of the guards immediately slit the senator’s throat and let his body drop to the sand.

As the crowd howled with amusement, the guards started trotting toward the spina to be hoisted to safety. In that moment, the gates burst open, and everyone’s attention jerked to the lions appearing from the depths.

Smelling blood, the lions bolted out onto the track. In seconds, a male lion claimed Albinus’ body. Lionesses knocked a few soldiers away from the nets and began mauling them. The remaining soldiers near Peter attempted to flee toward the spina. Only two escaped. One lion tore Peter’s body from the cross and dragged it before the Vestal priestesses.

Julius noticed the Christians were easing toward the abandoned cross while recovering the gladiuses now laying in the sand. Women and children began plying the nails from the wood and breaking the cross into bludgeons to pass to their men—the butchers of the Subura. Obviously, this was not going to be a quick blood feast after all, which thrilled the spectators into madness.

“Do something, you fools!” Nero demanded from his guests in the imperial box. Nerva and Sabinus smiled as did many other senators. Even Julius felt pleasure watching each male guest fret beneath Nero’s tirade. His little play was not going as planned, and the audience loved it.

Soon, four wagons drove through the gates. Meandering halfway onto the track, the carts reversed direction as if to flee. Tailgates dropped open to release a load of massive, grunting boars that charged toward the bloody feast. Two boars died at the hands of the Christians, while the other boars dared to claim the lions’ banquets. They failed.

Chants of “Live! Live! Live!” began echoing in the stands. The unexpected demand reverberated throughout the arena as thumbs lifted toward the clear, hot sky. Like all the other senators, Julius remained stoic due to protocol, yet every eye feasted on the reactions exploding in the imperial box.

Radiating with anger and disbelief, Nero braced on the railing, trying to ignore Poppaea who was helpless with laughter. In an instant, he grabbed her by the hair, threw her to the mosaic floor, and began kicking her. The crowd gasped and then burst with even more delight.

As attendants carried the lifeless Poppaea away, Nero confronted his guests again, expecting an explanation. No one offered anything but confusion. Tigellinus, the first centurion of the Praetorian Guard, leaned in to mention something. Nodding, Nero urgently waved the man away.

An eternity passed until the gates burst open to a large unit of Batavian archers on horseback thundering into view. As the riders circled the track, bows were drawn, and arrows flew. Lions and boars dropped along with the men, women, and children.

The crowd roared because Nero had the audacity to ignore their demand that the Christians live. Raging and booing, the onlookers began throwing apples, fruit, and bread loaves at the imperial box, leaving Nero to dodge the objects.

The archers disappeared through the gates as Rome's massive attack dogs dashed into the arena at a mad run. As trained, the black, spike-collared packs began ripping apart anything still living on the sand.

A strange movement in the stands drew Julius' attention. Furious at Nero's merciless disregard for tradition, the Vestals were leaving. That meant the Senate could leave as well. Senators all around Julius stood and began evacuating their seats, some of them smiling as if they had witnessed a most pleasant display.

"I say it was worth coming," Nerva announced as he joined the retreating senators, "if only to see Nero pummeled with rotten fruit."

"I totally agree," another senator said with a grin. "His little charade did not work out so well as he had planned."

More senators agreed. "Who would have thought that the Christians would put up such a fight? Not only that, but Nero never expected the crowd to side with them!"

Another senator snorted, "They made him look like the ass that he is."

Nerva nodded toward the vacant imperial box. "Look. Nero has already escaped!" Sneering, the senators turned their backs to the bloody banquet that was left in the sand.

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