

# More Than Life or Death

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## Chapter 1

Sabinus (say-be-nus) stood in awe of the sight before his eyes, no matter the life or death situation he'd soon be facing.

His gaze started from the massive walls surrounding the level ground upon which he stood. He raised his eyes, elevated in slow motion. He swiveled his head, panning the spectacle, widening his gaze. Hearing tales of the majesty of the massive structure, only in his most distant dreams, did he picture himself being there. There in front of over two hundred thousand boisterous spectators packed to full capacity.

Unquestionably, the Circus Maximus towered far above any venue of Chariot Racing he had previously experienced. Just the general chatter among the rough and raucous crowd was a roar.

He was a recently scouted member of the Blue Team as a replacement, which was a regular occurrence.

There was a standout on the Red Team named Gallus. His legend of success exceeded only by his brutality and lack of sportsmanship. Meaning *rooster* in Latin, he enjoyed his status as the current best of all four teams.

As if rain slowly poured from the heavens, the crowd noise diminished to the point of a whisper.

All eyes had turned to the grand booth, trumpets sounded, and in strolled Nero Claudius Caesar, the most popular ruler of the masses in recent times. He was the first to not only support the Chariot races; he loved to drive his personal chariot. The Roman elite frowned on the races and avoided them as below their status and breeding, but not Nero. As he took his seat, uproarious applause and cheering followed, welcoming their monarch. The races would start soon.

Part of the excitement of the races was not only cheering on your favorite team, and stars, perhaps better stated, survivors of those races. Only a notch down from Gladiator games, the risks were high and so were the rewards and prestige.

Sabinus patted the knife on his belt that all Chariot racers wore, should their chariot crash, they might have time to cut themselves loose from the leather harness, but it was unlikely before they were dragged to death. Each racer's head covered in a brilliant helmet with plumage of the team colors decked on a row, front to back.

The trumpets sounded; it was time to mount the chariots. The race would start in moments. It was about winning, but surviving was not a small part of this hugely popular spectator event.

## Chapter 2

Sabinus riding for the Blue team, mounted his chariot at the starting gate of the long oval track. The four teams could field three chariots each maximum but rarely did. There would be too much chaos. Today there were only eight racers, two of each color with teams of four horses

each. Sabinus tied the reins of the four horses to his wrist then wrapped the straps around his waist. Double checked his knife at his belt.

He glanced past the adjacent chariot and saw Gallus in Red tying up. He'd won many seven-lap races, and he intended to win today. Sabinus glanced at the dolphin counters, giant stone figures that would drop after each lap, so racers and fans alike knew when the finish lap came.

The crowd hushed as Nero stood to drop the flag, and trumpets sound. Then they were off with thirty-two horses and 128 pounding hooves. The thunder of over two hundred thousand rowdy spectators was deafening. The chaos of the race was exhilarating and just what Sabinus needed. That extra pump of adrenalin was what got him this far in the chariot racing games. It was his friend.

Racing to be first into the divided straight-away, the outside chariot had already been forced against the wall, and it shattered. Its driver now dragged helplessly by his four horses.

To complicate matters, fans of opposing teams threw objects at the racers. Sabinus saw a nail-spiked lead weigh sail in front of his face thrown by a Red team fan at his Blue helmet. It passed and hit a horse for the Green team. It bolted, fell, and they were out of the race. Faster to be near the center, but the sharp turns on either end and being driven against the gigantic center wall was more dangerous.

Sabinus' heart was pounding fueling his fire, and he maneuvered closer to the center and saw the gritted teeth of Gallus as he whipped his horses.

At the next turn, a White team chariot was down, smashing into the center divider. Missiles of various fashions continued to pelt down from the lowest free admission stands of

commoners. Sabinus saw several other chariots burst apart and riders dragged to death or trampled by another team before they had any hope of cutting free.

Only one dolphin standing. It was the last lap. With a bloodied shoulder from a spiked object, Sabinus was third only to Gallus and one other chariot. He made a final effort and whipping the horses, managed to pass the White team chariot. Heading for the finish line, he was closing on Gallus, lacked time, and Gallus was the victor. Sabinus lost, but in a way, to Finish was to Win. He'd race another day.

### Chapter 3

At the previous race where he placed second to the more brutal, Gallus, Sabinus got a surprise.

A beautiful young woman, dressed in delicate veils with hair seen only on the wealthy ladies, gave him a bouquet of flowers.

"These are for you," she said with a wide smile, dimples showing. "You are my hero. I want to know you better."

Her beauty was as radiant as the morning sun coming over the hills of Rome. "My lady, thank you so very much. I am Sa..."

"Sabinus. Yes, I know," she interrupted. "And you almost beat the best of the racers in your very first event in the Circus." She put her hand on his as he took the flowers. "I want to meet you this evening so we can know each other better. My name is Antonia, daughter of Senator Tiberius."

"What would your father say of you associating with a lowly chariot racer?"

“It’s not his business; it’s mine. And I hope you will be mine tonight.”

Astounded by the beauty and the offer, it was much too tempting to refuse.

“You speak the time and place, and I shall be there, lovely Antonia.

Arrangements completed for rendezvous.

After wine and grapes, Antonia nodded to the tavern-keeper, who cocked his head toward the hallway. Antonia led Sabinus down the hall to a bedroom, where they made love until the early hours of the morning. He was in love but wondered if she felt the same.

They enjoyed each other’s company nightly after that. After each day’s training, Sabinus would find Antonia waiting at their private place. A sumptuous dinner was followed by tender embraces, kisses, and much more.

Only once in those days was Antonia not there. In her place was Senator Tiberius who threatened to have Sabinus thrown to the lions if he saw his daughter anymore. He had the power to make it happen.

The couple changed meeting places.

Two days later, it was time for the next race. Sabinus knew Gallus would be his competition.

“I just know you’ll win today,” Antonia said, as she tied a sky-blue silk scarf around his neck that matched the blue helmet plumage of his team.

Nestled in an interior hallway of Circus Maximus, the crowd was already roaring for the race to begin. They kissed.

“I’ll win for you, my love. You give me the strength to beat a thousand chariot racers. Gallus will be no match for me today.”

The race was on, and as last time, several chariots were wrecked, and only one driver had escaped near-certain death, as the laps counted down on the stone dolphins.

Making the final turn on the last lap, Sabinus and Gallus were side by side; one would be the winner. Sabinus pulled even; Gallus drove his team of horses into Sabinus. Sabinus’ bolted, and the outside horse fell, resulting in a disastrous wreck. Gallus won.

Sabinus lay in a broken heap, barely breathing. Antonia immediately there by his side, caressed his battered and bleeding face and removed his helmet.

“Oh, my love, I mourn for it to end like this.”

*She called me her love. It was true, he blissfully thought. A match made by the Gods in heaven.*

Sabinus whispered, “*Vitae est denique. Carpe diem,*” and closed his eyes for the last time.